

Richard III and the Woodville Faction: The Events Surrounding 1483

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Abstract

This paper examines the Usurpation of Richard III in 1483 and the events leading up to it. England had experienced increasing violence and loss of law and order starting in 1399; the forced removal of a king and the power of the barons. War in France drained the treasury and made the monarchy financially strained. The Wars of the Roses saw violence between the Yorkists and Lancastrians, which resulted in the rise of Edward IV as king. His rule and marriage to Elizabeth Woodville, a lower class noblewoman. Edward elevated her abundant family, creating strife with his brother Richard and the nobles of the realm. Upon Edward IV's death a power struggle ensued to determine who would continue to hold power, wealth, and honor in England.

Keyword: Keywords: Richard III; Bosworth Field; Woodvilles; Usurpation

On 22 August 1485, the armies of King Richard III and Henry Tudor met at Bosworth. In this climactic battle the superior forces of Richard III were defeated by Henry Tudor. Richard III was slain and Henry Tudor was proclaimed king of England. This epic clash was the climax of Richard, Duke of Gloucester's decision to usurp the throne coupled with his connection with the disappearance of Edward V and his brother. Traditionally, Richard III has been viewed as a monster who had envied the throne for years. Closer investigation of Richard III's actions instead reveals a man loyal to his brother, King Edward IV, but a man who at some point succumbed to the influences of the time and his own ambition. Richard III's ambition was not the sole factor in the convulsive events of 1483—the history of England, the actions of previous kings, the power of the nobility, and court factions were all contributors. Ambition was probably the chief, but not the sole catalyst in Richard's actions.

Historiography

Public perception of Richard III as a usurper to the throne driven by ambition has largely been shaped by three authors. The most influential and possibly least accurate is William Shakespeare's play *Richard III*. Shakespeare, in this brilliant and entertaining work, turns Richard III into the arch villain. This play has shaped the popular conception of this king since it was first seen on stage. The primary historical account that has been most influential has been Polydore Vergil's *English History*. It provides a great amount of information about the reigns of Henry VI, Edward IV, and Richard III. Vergil sees in Richard a prolonged, villainous intent for the throne and portrays him as quite devious. This unflattering view of Richard coupled with Vergil's skills as a humanist writer and historian greatly shaped perception of Richard III and his reign.

Sir Thomas More's unfinished *The History of Richard the Third*, written after the events of 1483 in excellent prose, is a Tudor version of the year. Although it does provide some information and in certain aspects matches up with other accounts, it lacks complete authority due to its unfinished nature and the fact that most of More's sources were men who benefited from Richard III's defeat. More's skills as a writer resulted in a highly entertaining account that was influential in creating the dark history of Richard III.

Primary sources that have influenced the more modern debate surrounding Richard III are Dominic Mancini's *Usurpation of Richard III* and the *Second Continuation of the Croyland Chronicle*. Mancini, a visiting Italian, recorded his perspective of the events

of 1483. Published in 1936 by C.A.J. Armstrong, this brief work is an excellent primary source. Mancini clearly states his belief that from the beginning Richard had plans for the throne. *The Second Continuation of the Croyland Chronicle* is “the most authoritative contemporary source for the history of the reigns of both Edward IV and Richard III.”¹ This author is the most knowledgeable and provides a more balanced view of Richard III. *The Second Continuation of the Croyland Chronicle* is vital for understanding Richard’s usurpation of the throne and the events and motives surrounding it. It also provides a measure against which Polydore Vergil and Dominic Mancini can be checked. Modern scholars debate the extent of Richard III’s villainy. The historian James Gairdner largely followed tradition and the version of events put forth by Polydore Vergil and popularized by William Shakespeare. Other writers such as Horace Walpole, Sir Clements Markham, and popular writers of fiction have tried to rehabilitate him. This has resulted in the following twin conclusions about Richard:

Richard does not appear much better or worse than many other political figures of his harsh era. On the other hand, it has become clear that the main charges leveled against him by the Tudor historians do not (as his defenders have traditionally maintained) stem simply from the eagerness of Tudor partisans to blacken his name, but originated in his own time and are supported by the earliest and best sources on the usurpation.²

The debates have resulted in a more balanced view of Richard III. While Richard III’s actions are not unique to his historical milieu, this does not remove his culpability.

Events of 1483

On April 9, 1483, Edward IV died. He had come to the throne through violence and held it by force, enduring the vicissitudes of medieval kingship. Upon Edward IV’s death, his son Edward V became king and the tumultuous events of 1483 were set in motion.

When Edward IV died his brother Richard, Duke of Gloucester, was in the north. Edward V, rightful heir to the throne, was in Wales. In London, the queen, her family, and many of Edward IV’s chief advisors mourned and buried the king. After Edward IV was buried, they met in council to determine what further action should be taken because

¹ Thomas More, *The History of Richard the Third*, ed. George M. Logan (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), xxvii.

² *Ibid.*, li.

Richard, the Duke of Gloucester, had been appointed to rule. While they were in council, Richard wrote a letter reminding them of his loyalty to his brother Edward and his previous service to the Crown. He pledged to do the same for the Prince. When the commoners heard of it, they “began to support him openly and aloud; so that it was commonly said by all that the duke deserved the government.”³ Those in the council did not agree and resolved that “the government should be carried on by many persons among whom the duke, far from being excluded, should be accounted the chief.”⁴ Hastings, an advisor to Edward IV and enemy of the Woodville family, kept Gloucester informed of these events. Meanwhile Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and the young Prince Edward V headed separately towards London where the coronation was to take place.

On his journey to London, Richard stopped in York and swore loyalty to the inherent king and demanded those in the area do the same. Then Richard gathered his retinue and continued on his way. Earl Rivers, the king’s uncle, and his nephew Lord Grey, the new king’s half-brother, met with Richard in Northampton. They were greeted cheerfully and dined with him. Later that night the Duke of Buckingham arrived. Buckingham had great grievance with the Woodvilles. The focal point of the grievance lay in the fact that he, a noble, had been forced to marry a commoner, Elizabeth Woodvilles’ sister. He believed his wife’s common origins brought dishonor upon him.⁵ He therefore had motive to cooperate with Richard. In the morning, the Earl of Rivers was arrested along with Richard Grey. Before the news could reach the Prince, Richard and Buckingham swiftly marched to Stony Stratford, placing the Prince under Richard’s rule, and took prisoner some of Edward V’s other servants. Paying the proper respect to Edward V, Richard defended these actions with self-defense.⁶ Polydore Vergil marks this as the turning point when Richard III had intentions upon the throne, for Richard “from thencefurth determynd to assay his purposyd spytefull practyse by subtyltie and sleight.”⁷ Richard, however, did not seize the throne at this time. He continued to pay the proper respect and deference to the boy who would become his sovereign.

³ Dominic Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard III*, trans. C.A.J. Armstrong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 73.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶ *Ingulph’s Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland with the Continuations by Peter of Blois and Anonymous Writers* (New York: AMS Press Inc, 1968), 486-487.

⁷ Polydore Vergil, *Three Books of Polydore Vergil’s English History Comprising the Reigns of Henry VI., Edward IV., and Richard III.* (London: John Bowyer Nichols and Son, 1844), 174.

Afterward, the Prince was brought into London. The magnates of the kingdom, ecclesiastical and secular, were forced to take an oath of loyalty to the Prince. "This, as being a most encouraging presage of future prosperity, was done by all with the greatest pleasure and delight."⁸ Meanwhile the queen and her children took shelter in Westminster, which due to convention and religious sentiment was considered a sanctuary.

Although he had the Prince in his hands, Richard still had to secure his own authority in England in order to become king. The path to power led through the barons whose support was essential. Lord Hastings, one of the chief men of the realm, was an impediment to Richard's quest. Hastings "was most vehement and earnest to have the Prince Edward once crowned king."⁹ He was an obstacle who had to be removed. Hastings, along with Rotherham and Bishop Morton, men loyal to Edward IV and his son, went to the Tower of London. When Hastings, Rotherham, and Morton had entered the Tower of London, where rulers customarily resided before a coronation, and were in meeting with Richard, he gave the signal and the three men were seized. Hastings "was, by order of the Protector, beheaded."¹⁰ Rotherham, Ely, and Lord Stanley were not executed but placed in prison.¹¹ In seizing these three men, Richard removed three of the Prince's most loyal supporters. Richard could proceed unhindered to secure the throne for himself. The people became suspicious of Richard, for "now perceavyd they well that duke Richerd wold spare no man so that he might obtain the kingdom, and that he would convert the regall authoritye into tyranny."¹² Richard's actions served dual purposes: He removed powerful lords who could have opposed his designs upon the throne. He also frightened other nobles into obedience through Hastings' execution.

With the elimination of the Prince's potential supporters, Edward V and his brother Richard of Shrewsbury remained obstacles to Richard's rise to power. Elizabeth, his mother, was still in sanctuary in Westminster. Such a state of affairs could not exist for Richard; he had to have all the blood royal under his control before taking any further actions to seize the throne.

Richard began to undermine the character of the queen. He disparaged her actions as typical for a woman and described them as reflecting poorly upon the laws and

⁸*Croyland Chronicle*, 487.

⁹Vergil, *English History*, 179.

¹⁰*Croyland Chronicle*, 488.

¹¹ Vergil, *English History*, 181 .

¹² *Ibid.*, 182.

authority of the kingdom. Her behavior, he asserted, would lead people to “think that all majestie of lawis is already violated.”¹³ Richard III then commanded some of the lords to persuade the queen to release young Edward’s brother (Richard of Shrewsbury) into the custody of the king. They persuaded her to give up the boy, although no doubt Richard’s willingness to use force was also a factor. Even though she gave her son into Richard’s hand, she and her daughters remained in sanctuary. The *Croyland Chronicle*, the most objective source for the period, records, “From this day, these dukes acted no longer in secret, but openly manifested their intentions.”¹⁴ Once Edward V’s supporters were eliminated and he had the entire blood royal in his hands, the situation became grim indeed. The boys were gradually seen less and less. “All attendants who had waited upon the king were debarred access to him.”¹⁵ The rumor was widespread that Edward “had been done away with.”¹⁶ With the elimination of Edward’s supporters, Richard was able to act without fear of serious opposition. By gaining control of Edward’s brother, Richard also prevented the possibility of further dynastic struggle with Edward IV’s heirs. By this point Richard’s ruthless actions clearly exposed his duplicitous ambitions to become king. The disappearance of the boys, however, would create serious problems for his short reign.

Even with the elimination of support for the Prince and his gaining control of the male heirs to the throne, Richard still needed a façade of legality with the populace in order to seize the crown for himself. He found it in the voice of the church. On June 22, 1483, Dr. Shaw preached, “the progeny of King Edward should be instantly eradicated, for neither had he been a legitimate king, nor could his issue be so.”¹⁷ If Edward IV was illegitimate then both of his sons were also. The throne should legally pass to the next heir, Richard. Dr. Shaw concluded by exhorting, “the nobyltie, seein they presently wantyd a king, to make their king Richard duke of Glocester, the trewyssue of the royallbloode, and to forsake all others basely begot.”¹⁸ This speech was the opening gambit for Richard’s usurpation of the throne and a foreshadowing of what followed.

¹³ Ibid., 177.

¹⁴ *Croyland Chronicle*, 489.

¹⁵ Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard the Third*, 93.

¹⁶ Ibid., 93.

¹⁷ Ibid., 95.

¹⁸ Vergil, *English History*, 184.

The commoners did not respond well to this sermon, being ashamed and doubtful of its truth.¹⁹ Richard by this time had eliminated those who could offer serious opposition to his plans. He sent orders to execute those he had earlier captured: Earl Rivers, Richard Grey, Vaughan, and Sir Haute.

Richard's right to the throne was simultaneously strengthened at the precise time important powers of the realm were gathered in London for the Prince's coronation. At that strategic moment, the Duke of Buckingham addressed them about the issue of Edward's bastard children reigning on the throne of England and the necessity for Richard, Duke of Gloucester to rightfully rule in their stead. Fearful of the power of the dukes and what the cost of disagreeing might be, those gathered assented.²⁰ In 26 June of 1483, Richard Duke of Gloucester assumed the throne and became King Richard III. Vergil sums up the situation, writing, "Thus Richered, without assent of the commonaltie, by might and will of certane noblemen of his faction, enjoyned the realme, contrary to the law of God and man."²¹ Like his brother Edward IV, Richard came to the throne through force. He would be unable to retain power, but would be quickly be dethroned, becoming a casualty of his own actions and the ability of Henry Tudor.

Factors of 1483

It is impossible to properly understand Richard III's rise to power apart from the preceding factors of the fourteenth century which markedly influenced the events of 1483. The previous ineffectiveness of Richard II had created chaos and weak government in England. His seizure of Henry Bolingbroke's land violated English law and custom and set a dangerous precedence for what lay ahead. When Bolinbroke returned from exile and landed in England to secure his rights, the nobles and those dissatisfied with the government of the realm looked to him to correct transgressions. In the end Henry Bolinbroke supplanted Richard II and assumed the throne, becoming Henry IV and making the Lancastrians rulers of England. This set a precarious precedent for the usurpation of the throne when a king was weak, ineffective, and the nobles along with Parliament wanted a new ruler. These same factors would be in effect in Edward IV's later seizure of the throne from Henry VI.

¹⁹ Ibid., 184.

²⁰ Ibid., 185-186.

²¹ Ibid., 187.

Henry IV's rule was not an easy one. He had to put down several rebellions and maintain the authority of a crown he had won through force of arms. He did, however, manage to retain the throne and pass it to his son. When Henry IV died, the crown passed to Henry V. To distract the over powerful barons and increase the prestige of England, Henry V invaded France. His early successes in battle gave the English immense pride and an overblown conception of their might. Henry V's victories in battle allowed a treaty to be signed that would make his son the dual monarch of France and England. Alas, he died too early to ensure that this occurred. What he achieved was committing England to a war it did not have the resources to win.

At Henry V's death, the crown passed to Henry VI. Too young to rule, his uncles and other powerful barons ruled in regency for the boy. This system of government, although it remained loyal to him, was ineffective. Numerous fights within the council and English ineffectiveness on the Continent lost England most of its land in France, allowed the breakdown of law, and created dissatisfaction with the government.

The young king himself was unsuited to rule a kingdom, especially a medieval one where personal rule and warrior prowess were prerequisites for effective rule. Under Henry VI the power of the English throne was further weakened by his other perceived defects: he was easily manipulated, childless, and he suffered from periodic bouts of insanity. During his mental incapacitation his wife, Margaret of Anjou, attempted to rule in favor of her court faction and her son. During this time English people looked to Richard Duke of Gloucester, the strongest magnate in the realm. Lancastrian government became the preserve of barons determined to preserve their power and wealth and a queen determined to see her son rule as king of England.²²

The deposition of Richard II, a costly war in France which ended in defeat, Royal debt, and the weak rule of Henry VI resulted in the Wars of the Roses. The war was caused by powerful barons, magnates of the realm of great local influence in different parts of England, who were fighting for greater influence and power. This was still true in 1483, after years under Edward IV's rule. Powerful families still fought for local dominance and the support of the king. This constant struggle for power weakened and divided England and set the context into which a strong leader like Richard, Duke of Gloucester could rise to power.

The Wars of the Roses had the effect of further destroying what remained of law and order, exposing the weakness of the crown and the need for strong leadership.

²² Lacey Baldwin Smith, *This Realm of England* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1966), 20.

During this turmoil, the Yorkists prevailed over the Lancastrians and Edward IV secured the throne through force of arms. It is important to remember that the bloody, violent Wars of the Roses and the power of great nobles to depose and enthrone kings are a significant part of the context in which Richard Duke of Gloucester rose to power.

The Woodvilles and the Rise of Richard III

The greatest factor in Richard's usurpation—aside from his personal ambition—was the Woodville family. The behavior of Edward IV and his companions greatly shaped how the Woodville family was perceived. Edward IV was known for his immoderate actions. "In food and drink he was most immoderate... he was licentious in the extreme... he pursued with no discrimination the married and unmarried the noble and lowly."²³ Such behavior was unbecoming in a Christian but intolerable in a ruler, who set the tone for the entire realm. Edward's position and power enabled him to get away with such immoral behavior. Queen Elizabeth's relatives, "her two sons and one of her brothers," were the chief companions in these sinful activities.²⁴ Thus, the Woodvilles contributed to the moral failings of Edward IV and were held in strong disrepute.

Edward V's age made him liable to being unduly influenced and controlled. Polydore Vergil portrays Edward's youth, describing him as "but a child in yeares not hable to rewle hymself, lay the same tme within his princypalytie at Ludlow, under the tuition of his uncle Anthon earle Ryvers."²⁵ When Edward IV died, the councilors who met and debated the size of his retinue also determined "that the guardianship of so youthful a person, until he should reach the years of maturity, ought to be utterly forbidden to his uncles and brothers by the mother's side."²⁶ This decision is clear proof that the family was considered to be a baneful influence and that he was considered impressionable. Edward's youth and impressionability, coupled with the influence that his maternal relatives had over him, determined that he should not be left to the influences of the Woodvilles. Richard Duke of Gloucester would later convince himself he had to remove the Prince to protect himself and those loyal to him.

The Woodvilles' influence on Edward IV was achieved not by merit nor wealth but through marriage. He married Elizabeth Woodville, the widow of a Lancastrian. This

²³ Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard the Third*, 67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁵ Vergil, *English History*, 174.

²⁶ *Croyland Chronicle*, 485.

act elevated their lowly, yet large family to prominence and power. Elizabeth's low family status weighed more heavily than two other factors; she was not a virgin and she was the widow of a Lancastrian with two sons. When Edward married her, the magnates "disdained to show royal honours towards an undistinguished woman promoted to such exalted rank."²⁷ In wedding Elizabeth, Edward married beneath his status, something the magnates abhorred. They respected neither Elizabeth nor her family. She was very conscious of this slight.

Edward IV's brother George, Duke of Clarence, was one of the most vociferous critics of Elizabeth and her family. He "vented his wrath more conspicuously, by his bitter and public denunciation of Elizabeth's obscure family." George's criticism of the queen would powerfully sway her concern over the succession, inciting her to use her influence to secure the throne for her son. George's criticism not only prompted the Woodvilles to act swiftly, it also would in time cost George his life. Edward was continually plagued by this brother and conflict arose between them. The cause was Mary, the daughter of Charles Duke of Burgundy. Margaret, George's sister, was endeavoring to wed him to Mary. Edward IV opposed the marriage and "threw all possible impediments in the way."²⁸ The Duke of Clarence's situation was worsened by his vocal criticism of the queen, who he thought her beneath his station. Elizabeth was aware that "according to the established usage she was not the legitimate wife of the king."²⁹ George's eloquence, which he could put to great use in damning the queen, also made him a threat. No doubt Duke Clarence's previous treachery when he allied himself with his father-in-law, the Earl of Warwick in rebellion (he was pardoned by his brother) played upon the Queen's fears as well. To remove this threat, Clarence was charged with "conspiring the king's death by means of spells and magicians."³⁰ Tried before Parliament, he was found guilty, and "drowned (as they say) in a butte of malmsey."³¹ Dominic Mancini records that Richard vowed revenge upon the Woodville's for their role in his brother's death.³² Elizabeth's determination to retain power and ensure that her son sat upon the throne would create strife, dissension, and bloodshed in the realm.

²⁷ Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard the Third*,

²⁸ *Croyland Chronicle*, 478.

²⁹ Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard III*, 63.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

³¹ Vergil, *English History*, 167.

³² Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard III*, 64.

Elizabeth was not only disliked by Clarence and other magnates of the realm, she also had several family members the king had to provide stations for commensurate with their position as the queen's relatives. After the execution of Clarence, "the queen ennobled many of her family."³³ Those ennobled were Thomas, Marquess of Dorset; Lord Richard Grey; Sir Edward Woodville; and Lord Rivers. As members of the nobility and the king's court, they had the opportunity to amass wealth and power.

Elizabeth also had sisters who needed husbands. This upset the nobility for two reasons. First, their social rank was too low to succeed to such prominent positions. Second "they, who were ignoble and newly made men, were advanced far beyond those who far excelled them in breeding and excellence."³⁴ Elizabeth's relatives were displacing men of long standing and superior talent. This upset the balance of power among the old nobility and shifted it to the Woodville faction.

Elizabeth not only made certain the male members of her family received positions of power and the females married into the nobility, she also "attracted to her party many strangers and introduced them to court, so that they alone should manage the public and private business of the crown, surround the king, and have bands of retainers, give or sell offices, and finally rule the very king himself."³⁵ In essence, the queen was creating a power-base that owed their position to her and who would have influence and power in the kingdom, ensuring her own power and control and the succession of her son. This displeased the nobility because it displaced them from the positions of power from which they could reward their own supporters. All this set the stage of Richard's usurpation of the throne.

Even with this litany of factors allied against Edward V—the power of the barons, history of the Wars of the Roses, incompetence of Henry VI, and the power of the Woodville family—Edward still might have come to the throne had it not been for Queen Elizabeth's actions in 1483. Elizabeth and her faction began to move after the death of Edward IV, instructing those in charge of Prince Edward, "to conduct the prince forthwith to London, that after the funeralls of his father solemnized, he might, after the maner of his auncesters, be crownyd king."³⁶ Such action would have enabled them to arrive in London before Gloucester. However, there was disagreement in council over

³³ Ibid., 65.

³⁴ Ibid., 69.

³⁵ Ibid., 65.

³⁶ Vergil, *English History*, 174.

the number of men who should accompany the Prince. Elizabeth's faction was in favor of a large retinue; those opposed to the Woodville faction's power favored a smaller number. In the end Prince Edward was told "not to exceed an escort of two thousand men."³⁷ This satisfied Lord Hastings, for "he felt fully assured that the dukes of Gloucester and Buckingham, in whom he placed the greatest confidence, would not bring a smaller number with them."³⁸ Edward and the Woodvilles would be dominated by Gloucester and Buckingham's superior forces. It was now a race to see which force would reach London first.

Bringing the Prince to London swiftly would keep him within the scope of their power. By crowning him before Gloucester arrived, they would greatly limit Gloucester's power and influence. Achieving both of these aims would have enabled them to either continue increasing their power or to at least hold on to what they had achieved.

The Woodville faction also tried to curtail the power of Richard Duke of Gloucester in council. There were two opinions on the rule of Gloucester. Some members of the council believed "the duke of Gloucester should govern, because Edward in his will had so directed, and because by law the government ought to devolve on him."³⁹ This resolution, which would have given Gloucester power instead of the Woodvilles, was not accepted. Instead it was decided government would be by council with Gloucester still chief. It was thought that this decision would give him the prestige that was his due while also protecting against the possibility of tyranny. The queen's supporters "were [also] afraid that, if Richard took unto himself the crown or even governed alone, they, who bore the blame of Clarence's death, would suffer death or at least be ejected from their high estate."⁴⁰

The council's decision went against the last will of Edward IV, for "upon his death-bed constytute and appoint me [Richard] Protector of the Realme."⁴¹ Charles Ross, in his excellent biography of Richard III, writes that "Richard of Gloucester was the natural and inevitable choice to be given the custody of the young king, and to act as Protector during his minority."⁴² The Woodvilles attempt to crown the young Prince early and before

³⁷ *Croyland Chronicle*, 485.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 485.

³⁹ Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard the Third*, 71.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴¹ Vergil, *English History*, 176.

⁴² Charles Ross, *Richard III* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 40.

Gloucester arrived was their bid to regain control as soon as possible. Limiting his power would reduce the harm he could cause while he was in charge of government.

The Woodvilles prepared for conflict with Gloucester, bolstered by the large amount of wealth Edward IV had managed to amass. This “royal treasure, the weight of which was said to be immense, was kept in the hands of the queen and her people at an impregnable citadel beside the town.”⁴³ In addition to control over the treasury, the Woodvilles had also managed to gain control of the English navy by having one of Elizabeth’s brothers appointed admiral. They thus had military and monetary power to not only oppose Richard, but also to increase their own influence. The strength and influence of Elizabeth Woodville and her family made it paramount that Richard Duke of Gloucester unearth a means to curb their meteoric ascent. This factored into his usurping the throne.

The enmity of powerful lords also played a significant part in the events of 1483. During the Woodvilles’ council, Lord Hastings had been in contact with Gloucester. Hastings had a grudge with the Woodvilles because of Elizabeth’s son, the Earl of Dorsett. They had both fought for the same mistresses. This had reverberating effects in 1483, for “an important factor in this revolution appears to have originated in the dissension of these two.”⁴⁴ Hastings was afraid “if the supreme power should fall into the hands of the queen’s relations, they would exact a most signal vengeance for the injuries which had been formerly inflicted on them by that same lord; in consequence of which there existed extreme ill-will between the said lord Hastings and them.”⁴⁵ Lord Hastings, a man loyal to Edward IV, acted to insure the Woodvilles did not gain complete power and thereby be able to harm him or his interests. Hastings’ support would prove vital to Gloucester.

The Duke of Buckingham was another great lord of the realm who disliked the Woodvilles. His was an old family of the nobility and he had the mindset and behaviors of his social class. Unfortunately, he was forced to marry one of the upstart Woodvilles, “whom he scorned to wed on account of her humble origin.”⁴⁶ This hatred would make him an excellent ally for Gloucester.

The response of the Woodvilles to Edward V’s capture did not endear them to Richard. Determined to retain her authority, the queen began to gather an army with the

⁴³ Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard the Third*, 71.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁵ *Croyland Chronicle*, 485.

⁴⁶ Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard the Third*, 75.

help of her son. Unfortunately for Elizabeth, she did not have the support of the majority of the lords or common people. She was forced to seek sanctuary at Westminster while Edward Woodville took the fleet to sea. While the Woodvilles attempt to raise an army was unsuccessful, they did retain control of the Navy. This made them a formidable threat to Richard's power and safety. The Woodville's endeavors at executing an armed response to Richard clearly revealed they would not abide his new power and would have to be dealt with.

Richard, Buckingham, and the Prince entered London May 4, 1483. When they arrived in the city, they continued to show the proper respect to the Prince who was to be their king. The Prince was placed in the Tower of London for his security and according to custom while Richard was made Protector, "with the consent and good-will of all the lords"⁴⁷ to rule as he saw fit.

Although as Protector he had great power, he had a limited time to use it. According to Ross, "Gloucester's tenure of power, limited as it was in terms of real authority, could last only for a few weeks."⁴⁸ He had to find a way to extend his rule to protect himself from the Woodvilles who no doubt would heavily influence the King once he assumed the throne. In order to prolong his rule, he needed to ensure the support of the nobles. The chief obstacle to this lay in the person of three men: Lord Hastings, Archbishop Rotherham, and John Morton Bishop of Ely. All three men had been loyal to Edward IV and were likely to be loyal to his son.⁴⁹ They therefore had to be removed from power. On June 13, 1483, the three of them were detained in the Tower of London. Richard had Hastings executed and the other two imprisoned. From this moment it was but a few short days until Richard became king. Richard summoned the judges and magistrates of London on June 25th, sending the Duke of Buckingham to speak to them. Buckingham made the same point Shaw had earlier made in his sermon— Richard deserved to be king because he had been defrauded of the kingship.⁵⁰ The lords, fearful for their lives after witnessing Richard's power to take lives, assented to his demand. On June 26, 1483, they gathered together and petitioned Richard to become king.

⁴⁷ *Croyland Chronicle*, 487-488.

⁴⁸ Ross, *Richard III*, 75

⁴⁹ Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard the Third*, 89-90.

⁵⁰ Vergil, *English History*, 186.

Results

The usurpation of the English throne in 1483 was the result of the island's history, weak kingship, court factions, and the ambitions of the great and powerful. In 1399, the throne was taken by force by Henry Bolinbroke, setting a precedent for Richard III. Under Henry V, England became involved in a costly war in France that the English would lose after investing great sums of money and many men in the endeavor. After the strong kingship of Henry IV and Henry V, the throne passed to Henry VI. He was a weak king who suffered from bouts of insanity, a man totally unsuited to be ruler of a medieval kingdom. As a result, law and order deteriorated while the barons enriched themselves and bent the law to suit their ends. Because of the weakness of Henry VI, Richard, Duke of York became the most powerful magnate of the realm. War between the Yorkists and Lancastrians began in 1453 for control of the government. The balance of power swung from one faction to the other, contributing to the breakdown in law and order.

After the death of Richard, Duke of York the claim passed to Edward. Through victory in arms, he succeeded to the throne in 1461. Although his reign was not easy, he remained on the throne except for a brief period in 1471. Edward's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville, the elevation of her family, factions in court, and the strength of his brother Richard in the north of England would set the stage for 1483.

In 1483 Edward IV died and the throne passed to Prince Edward. In order to preserve their power, the Woodvilles took many self-centered actions that included seizing the treasury, gaining control of a sizable part of the fleet, attempting to crown Edward early, and trying to raise an army to retain their power. To prevent this and protect himself Richard acted with Buckingham, taking control of the Prince. Multiple factors (the later actions of the Woodvilles, the youthfulness of the Prince, and the ambition of Richard) combined to lead to the execution of those loyal to Edward, the bastardizing of the brothers, and Richard's seizure of the throne.

Conclusion

As can be seen throughout this train of events, there were many constituent components at work in Richard's actions. It is impossible to place the responsibility solely on his ambitions. The many actions of others and past history conspired with his ambition in 1483. An informed grasp of these contributing factors makes clear that it was not just Richard III's singular covetousness for the throne that was the cause of the usurpation. Richard found the events and forces of history pressed upon him. He responded to those

events as a baron mindful of his own interests would. This does not clear him of responsibility for his actions nor make him any less a usurper. The basis of his claim to the throne was weak, resting on his momentary power. He also is held responsible for the murder of his two nephews. Instead, a more thorough knowledge allows for a more balanced view of the man than Vergil, Shakespeare, or Thomas More would leave with readers. It also shows the great importance of the Woodvilles, their low status, ambitions, and actions played, significant contributors to the usurpation. The year 1483 attests to the fact that history does not occur in a vacuum and that the unique situation of previous events and the actions of people create our history.

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