

## The Background of Shakespeare's History Plays

After the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, the kings of England always had interests in France. In the twelfth century the kings of England controlled more territory in France than the French kings. Shakespeare's first History, *King John*, is set at the beginning of the 13th century, when the English were losing this position.

In 1340 Edward III of England claimed the throne of France through his mother, but the French insisted it could not pass through the female line. This started the Hundred Years' War and a traditional rivalry between England and France which lasted until the 19th century.

The next History, *Richard II*, is set after Edward's death. Because Edward's son, the Black Prince, died before his father, his grandson Richard became king. The play centres on the relationships within the royal family. Richard banished his cousin Henry Bolingbroke and took the estates belonging to Bolingbroke's father, the Duke of Lancaster. Bolingbroke returned to claim his rights and then deposed Richard and made himself king as Henry IV.

The two parts of *Henry IV* are about the rebellions against his rule, particularly by the Percy family, the Dukes of Northumberland, who had helped Henry to become king, and the relationship between Henry and his son Prince Hal, who preferred the low-life company in London taverns to life at court.

However, when he became king, he started the war in France again. *Henry V* shows how he invaded France and, trapped by much larger French forces, defeated them at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. As a result, the French King agreed that his daughter should marry Henry and that their child should be the next king of France and England, which meant his son, the Dauphin (usual heir to the French throne) would not inherit.

Henry VI was only nine months old when his father died in 1422, and when he grew up he was weak and mentally unstable. During the early part of his reign his uncles ruled the kingdom. During this time the French were inspired by Joan of Arc, who had the brother of the old Dauphin crowned at Reims as King of France. When Henry came of age he married Margaret of Anjou, on condition that he gave two provinces back to France. Gradually all the English possessions in France were lost, except Calais.

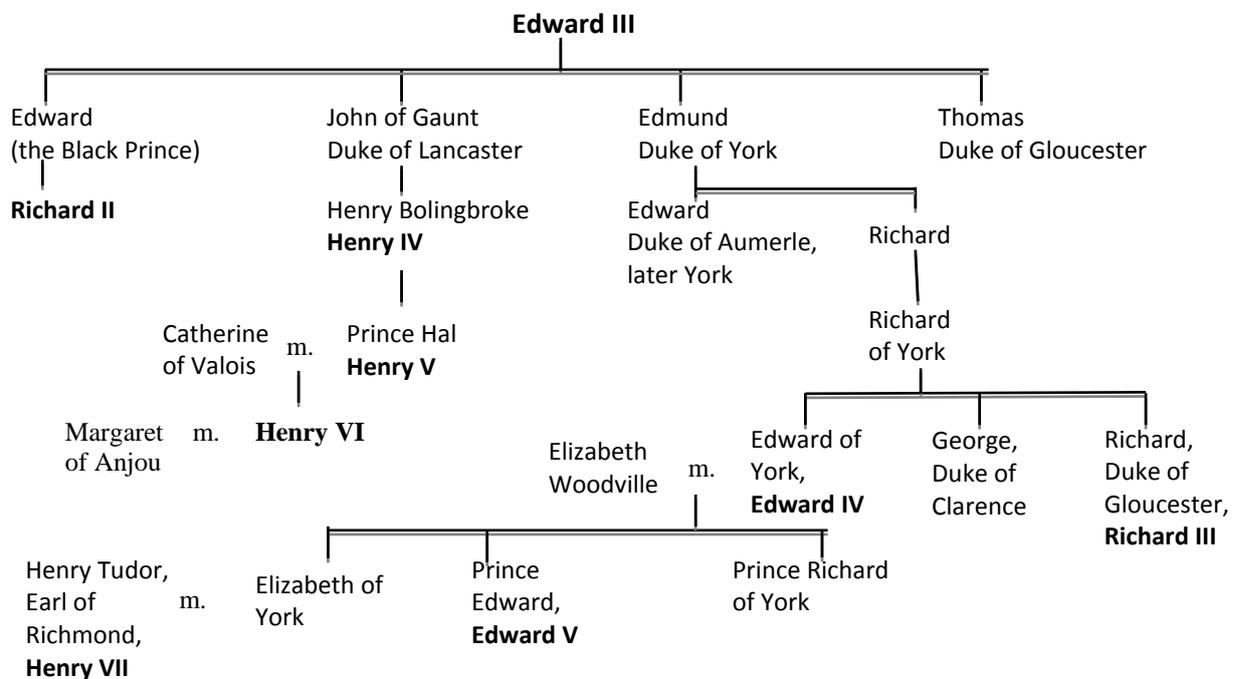
In England, disorder in the country and the increasing power of Margaret and the King's favourites led to discontent. The York family, whose emblem was a white rose, became the centre of rebellion against the King, whose family of Lancaster had a red rose. Soon a civil war broke out, called the Wars of the Roses.

With the help of the powerful Earl of Warwick, the Yorkists defeated Henry, and Edward of York became Edward IV. However, after Edward had married a commoner, Elizabeth Woodville, Warwick rebelled and put Henry back on the throne. Edward returned with a fresh army and defeated the Lancastrians again. Warwick was killed, as well as Henry's son. Henry VI was murdered soon afterwards. The events in Henry's reign in France and England are the subject of the three parts of *Henry VI*.

Edward IV died soon after regaining power, and his sons Edward and Richard were too young to rule. Their uncle Richard, Duke of Gloucester, became their guardian. They were taken to the Tower of London and mysteriously disappeared. With the help of the Duke of Buckingham, Richard took the throne himself as Richard III. A Lancastrian descendant of John of Gaunt, Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, sailed to England from France with an army. The nobles who had become discontented with Richard, including Buckingham, rebelled against him, and Richard was defeated at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. Henry became Henry VII, and married Edward IV's daughter Elizabeth, joining the families of Lancaster and York. The emblem of the Tudors was a combined red and white rose. Henry VII was the grandfather of Elizabeth I. Shakespeare's *Richard III* deals with these events.

Shakespeare's last history play was *Henry VIII*, which is about Henry's divorce from Katherine of Aragon and his marriage to Anne Boleyn, the mother of Queen Elizabeth I

A simplified diagram showing the family relationships during the time of the Hundred Years' War and the Wars of the Roses:



[Michael Mitchell]