

RICHARD III AND THE DARK AGE MYTH

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RICHARD III AND THE DARK AGE MYTH

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I. Abstract

The Dark Ages are not the Middle Ages or any true period or era of history. They are the “Mythical Middle Ages,”- a fictional period of history constructed by post medieval writers ranging from the Renaissance to the present. Like all myths, the myth of the Dark Ages is a myth that is a combination of fiction and half-truth that forms part of an ideology. Some aspects of the Dark Age myth are more undoubtedly fictional than others, such as the legend of witches and dragons. Other aspects of the Dark Age myth are clearly more based on truth, but a truth that is often over-elaborated and emphasized, such as the incidents of leprosy, medieval warfare, and torture. This thesis explores the myths of the Dark Ages in William Shakespeare’s play *Richard III*. It examines the myths of medieval grotesqueness and spells and prophecies. The thesis also examines how England in the fifteenth-century was not a place of “darkness,” but a place of glorious advancements and innovations.

I. Introduction

The “Dark Ages” as a term has undergone countless evolutions and changes throughout history.¹ Historically speaking, the term the Dark Ages applies to the early medieval period in Western Europe from approximately 476 -750 CE.² Many modern historians agree that the historic period known as the Dark Ages lasted for roughly three hundred years, beginning in 476 CE with the fall of the Roman Empire and ending around 750 CE. The powerful and influential Roman Empire, whose death spawned the birth of the Dark Ages, lasted for nearly five hundred years. Through its climb in power, the Roman Empire grew to massive proportions. At its peak, the empire had expanded to include parts of Asia, Northern Africa, and even Great Britain. After centuries of rule and supremacy the Roman Empire finally collapsed in 476 CE, when the Roman Emperor Romulus Augustulus fell to the Germanic troops led by Odovacar. Western Europe was tremendously impacted by the collapse of the Roman Empire. The three hundred years that followed the fall of Rome became known as the Dark Ages. During the Dark Ages Europe experienced a period of economic and cultural decline.³

While the three hundred year period known as the Dark Ages experienced a decrease in literacy rates, a barter economy, and societal deterioration, progress during the entire medieval period did not come to a halt. To the contrary, the next seven hundred years that comprised the remainder of the medieval period were full of advancements in

¹ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as a Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 57-58.

² Theodor E. Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the Dark Ages" *Speculum* 17 (1942): 226. JSTOR. accessed November 20, 2009, <http://www.jstor.org/pss/2856364.html>

³ Clayton Roberts, David Roberts, and Douglas R. Bisson, *A History of England*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), 34-36.

literature, art, and technology.⁴ While the majority of the medieval period was a time of advancements and growth, the medieval period is often overshadowed and misconstrued by the “Mythic Dark Ages.” The “Mythic Dark Ages” are a fictional period in history that starts the same time as the “Historic Dark Ages” with the fall of Rome in 476 CE. While the “Mythic Dark Ages” start the same time as the “Historic Dark Ages”, the “Mythic Dark Ages” last nearly seven hundred years longer, spanning the entire medieval period up until the Renaissance. Throughout history many negative aspects of the “Historic Dark Ages” such as intense superstition, savagery, and the corruptness of the Church have been added to the “Mythic Dark Ages” and often cast as being major issues through the entire medieval period, instead of the first three hundred years that comprised the Dark Ages¹ In addition, the “Mythic Dark Ages” contain negative fallacies such as dragons, witches, and spells.

If the “Historic Dark Ages” lasted only a relatively short time and were not completely “dark”, where did the “Mythic Dark Ages” originate? In order to understand where the “Mythic Dark Ages” originated, it is important to understand the definition of the word “myth.” A myth is a fiction or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology.⁵ The “Mythic Dark Ages” greatly misrepresent the medieval period in history. The myth began in fourteenth-century Italy.

The creator of the Dark Age myth was an Italian named Francesco Petrarca.² Known as Petrarch, the famous scholar of the fourteenth-century is often referred to as the

⁴ Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 3-4.

⁵ "Myth," *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary Online*, accessed May 7, 2010, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/myth.html>

“Father of Humanism.” Petrarch idolized the ancient Roman Empire and placed it on a pedestal. He resented medieval society because he believed it did not value Roman literature and culture. Despite the medieval period having achieved significant innovations in literature, art, and technology, Petrarch believed that the medieval period was worthless, simply because it could not live up to his high expectations of Rome. When Petrarch began using the term “Dark Ages” to refer to the medieval period, he created the Dark Age myth, and cast the whole medieval period into utter darkness.²

While Petrarch coined the term the “Dark Ages”, he was not the only person to build up the myth of the Dark Ages. Throughout history, countless events, people, and sources have added to the “Mythic Dark Ages.” One major movement in history which greatly contributed to the “Mythic Dark Ages” was the Renaissance. The Renaissance began in the fourteenth-century and lasted into the seventeenth-century. Renaissance is the French word for “rebirth.” During the Renaissance, there was an emergence of Latin literature, art, and culture in Western European society. Many humanists, writers, and philosophers in the Renaissance felt similarly to Petrarch, believing that since the medieval period did not have the “classicism” and “essence” of Rome that the medieval period had no culture. They began referring to the entire medieval period as the Dark Ages.⁶ As a result, Renaissance society undermined, distorted, and misconstrued many of the achievements and advancements of medieval society.

In addition to the Renaissance contributing to the “Mythic Dark Ages”, the Reformation also added a great deal to the myth of the Dark Ages. The Protestant

⁶ Mommsen, “Petrarch’s Conception”, 226.

Reformation was a Christian reform movement that took place in Europe.⁷ As a result of the Reformation, Protestantism as well as Catholic Christianity, was established. While Protestantism would eventually become an accepted branch of Christianity across Europe, there was still significant bitterness and tension between the Protestant and Catholic factions during the Reformation era. Both the Protestants and Catholics began to view and write about the medieval period in different ways. During the Reformation many of the Protestants began to look back and regard the medieval Catholic Church as a corrupt church. They wrote about the intense fraudulent hierarchy of the church and the immorality of the papal authority. Protestants attempted to recreate a purer form of Christianity, void of the “dark” Catholic ways. As a result of religious conflict, witchcraft, superstition, and prophecies became part of the “Mythic Dark Ages.”

The “Mythic Dark Ages” greatly overshadow and misrepresent the medieval period. While Europe in the first three hundred years of the medieval period known as the “Historic Dark Ages” experienced a decline in society and culture, the remainder seven hundred years of the medieval period experienced growth and advancement. Since the creation of the Dark Age myth, the medieval period has been negatively stereotyped as a period of intense barbarism, superstition, and political instability. While these elements did exist in medieval society on a small-scale level, many of these elements have been altered and blown up to epic proportions, distorting the medieval period. One famous Elizabethan playwright who helped perpetuate the Dark Age myth in British history was William Shakespeare. This paper will be investigating the Dark Age myths in

⁷ Roberts, 262-267.

Shakespeare's play *Richard III*, with focus on the myths of medieval grotesques and spells and prophecies.

II. Historic England in the Fifteenth-Century

Before exploring the myths behind Shakespeare's play *Richard III* it is essential to take a look at the historical context. The play is set in England in the fifteenth-century during the late-medieval period. England is often misconstrued as being a barbaric, corrupt, and culturally sterile nation during the late-medieval period. Many of these depictions of England are misconceptions derived from the rhetoric of the "Mythic Dark Ages." In actuality, the historic England of the fifteenth-century is a far cry from say, 650 CE England of the "Historic Dark Ages." In actuality, literature, education, and architecture flourished.¹

One of the most popular forms of literature that blossomed during the period was the narrative ballad. The narrative ballad was usually a sung tale of folklore. One popular narrative ballad of the fifteenth-century was the tale of Robin Hood. In addition to the popularization of narrative ballads, books also became increasingly popular in the century. As a result of William Caxton bringing the printing press to England in the fifteenth-century, various tales and important texts could be published in mass quantity and distributed throughout England. Perhaps one of the most well-known tales of British legend and folklore to become popularized during the fifteenth-century was the tale of King Arthur. Another popular form of literature to arise during the fifteenth-century was the morality play. In the morality play the central character often experienced an internal struggle between good and evil. The morality plays often contained allegorical characters that depicted the soul's struggle to achieve salvation. The morality play often ended with an ethical lesson. Of all of the morality plays to surface during the medieval

¹ Roberts, 208-212.

period, the most famous morality play to arise emerged out of fifteenth-century England. The play *Everyman* was a British masterpiece of the fifteenth-century and has become the epitome of the morality play.

Popularity of printed literature naturally suggests that more people were reading, and this is true as the foundation of grammar schools were established throughout England in the fourteenth-century.³ As a result, literacy rates would sky rocket in the fifteenth-century. While many of the schools were primarily for the wealthy noblemen and upper-class, the fifteenth-century saw the foundation of grammar schools for men and women of lesser ranks. By the end of the fifteenth-century between five and six hundred schools were established throughout England. While reflecting on the fifteenth-century, Sir Thomas More “estimated half the population could read.”⁴ In addition to the founding of hundreds of grammar schools across England, educational advancements were also instituted on the collegiate level. During the fifteenth-century four great Inns of Court were established on the north bank of the Thames between the city of London and Westminster. The four great Inns of Court to be established were Gray’s Inn, Lincoln’s Inn, The Inner Temple, and The Middle Temple. The Inns of Court were institutions where lawyers could receive their legal education. As a result of the establishment of the Inns of Court, an ever increasing number of professional lawyers emerged into society.⁴

In addition to advances in education, the fifteenth-century also saw innovations in a variety of other realms, including architecture. The erection of parish churches became extremely popular in fifteenth-century England. While the upper-class and nobility

³ Roberts, 210.

⁴ Roberts, 210.

⁴ Roberts, 211.

funded the construction of great cathedrals and abbeys that dominated the construction of early centuries, the parish churches of the fifteenth-century were funded by the clothier and woolman of the rising middle class. The parish churches were built in the spectacular English Perpendicular style. The English Perpendicular style was characterized by having “large porches, timber roofs, richly carved choir stalls, and rood screens (screens separated separating the nave from the chancel), and square towers crowned with pinnacles at the four corners.”⁵

“Mythic Dark Age” England is cast as being sterile and barren. However, as we have seen the “Historic England” of the fifteenth-century was a place of growth and innovations. It was a place of a rising well-educated middle class, a place where rational thought and logical argument in schools and law courts prevailed, a place where the upper classes prided themselves on the clothes and beautiful public buildings. It was the place where Richard III grew up.

⁵ Roberts, 209.

III. The War of the Roses

While England experienced abundant amounts of growth, innovation, and advancement in the late-medieval period, there were some aspects of fifteenth-century England that were not as sanguine. One serious conflict that afflicted England during the fifteenth-century was the War of the Roses.¹ The War of the Roses took place between 1455 and 1471 and was a dynastic battle between two royal factions. The two royal factions were the House of York and the House of Lancaster. For sixteen years both houses fought over which faction had the rightful claim and legitimacy to the throne. Shakespeare's play *Richard III* is the tale of Richard III's journey and accession to the throne of England in 1483. When Richard III succeeded to the throne in 1483, the War of the Roses had been over for nearly twelve years. While the War of the Roses had long ended, the effects of it would ultimately plague Richard III's reign as King of England. In order to understand the historic Richard III and the Dark Age myths created in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, it is essential to understand the War of the Roses.

While the War of the Roses took place between 1455 and 1471, the seeds of the dynastic conflict were planted over a century earlier during the reign of King Edward III of England.² In 1328, Edward III married Philipa of Hainault. During the medieval period it was important for married couples such as Edward III and Philipa of Hainault to produce several children. The duty of a married couple to produce multiple children was incalculably magnified when it pertained to royalty. The more children a King produced, the more heirs there would be to the throne. With any monarch of the time, it was

¹ Lacey Baldwin Smith, *This Realm of England: 1399 to 1488* (Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1971), 51.

² Roberts, 199-201.

specifically important to have male heirs. It was vital to produce male heirs, because the male heirs are the ones who will ensure that the King's royal line will continue for future generations. When the king died the throne would be passed on to his first born son. If the King's first born son died, the line of succession would pass on to the dead son's descendants. If the King's first born had died with no descendants, the line of succession would move on to the King's second born son and so forth. The more heirs there were to the throne, the less likely would be the danger of a King leaving the throne empty. In the past, an empty throne almost always meant a battle over the succession of the throne.

Edward III and his wife Philipa had no problem reproducing. Throughout their forty-year marriage Edward III and Philipa produced twelve children. Of the twelve children, five were male. When Edward III passed away in 1377, the line of succession was structured so that the throne would go to his first born son, Edward Prince of Wales. However, Edward Prince of Wales passed away before his father. Edward Prince of Wales had one son named Richard, who was therefore next in the line of succession. In 1377, Richard became King Richard II. Richard II reigned as King of England for twenty-three years. During his reign Richard II became corrupt and attempted to gain absolute power over England. While Richard II enjoyed possessing absolute power over the British monarchy, the British citizens did want an absolutist monarch. In 1399 Richard II was deposed. As a result of Richard II's deposition, two royal factions emerged and fight over the throne in what would become known as the War of the Roses.³

³ Roberts, 188-189.

After Richard II died in 1399, the line of Edward III's first born son had been completely eliminated. According to the line of succession, the next to be King of England was Edward III's second son of the York family. However, things did not go according to plan. When Richard II was deposed, Edward III's third son of the Lancaster's immediately took the throne. Henry Bolingbroke claimed the crown becoming King Henry IV of England. Henry IV established the Lancastrian dynasty in England. When the Lancastrian family took the throne, they skipped over the rightful heir to the throne of the York family. While the skip in the line of succession did not immediately affect England, it would eventually come to haunt the country in the next century.

For the first half of the fifteenth-century the Lancaster King's Henry IV (r. 1399-1413) and Henry V (r.1413-1422) ruled England. Both Henry IV and Henry V proved to be strong and able-bodied kings.⁴ However, the Lancastrian King Henry VI proved to be a disappointment. Henry VI was a "pious, gentle, well-meaning recluse, with no capacity for politics."⁵ Henry VI's poor decisions throughout his reign threw England into economic despair. By 1455, the English nobility and population saw that the Lancastrian King Henry VI was endangering the British nation. As a result, the Yorkist faction began to gain momentum and support in their claim to the throne. In what would become known as the War of the Roses, the House of York, led by Edward of York began to fight for the throne against the House of Lancaster, led by King Henry VI in the fight for the throne. In 1461, the House of York won their battle for the throne and Edward of York became King Edward IV of England. After the Yorkist King Edward IV's coronation,

⁴ Roberts, 192-196.

⁵ Roberts, 196.

the former Lancastrian King Henry VI was placed in seclusion. While the Lancastrian king was sequestered under seclusion, the Lancastrian faction still remained a threat as long as Henry VI and his descendants were alive. In 1470, the Lancastrian faction seized the throne and sent the Yorkist King Edward IV into exile. When the Lancastrian troops released Henry VI from prison and restored him to the throne, his mental health had deteriorated so greatly that he had reached the point of becoming a permanent imbecile.⁶ When the Yorkist's saw Henry VI's deteriorated state, Edward IV swiftly retook control of the throne. Edward IV and the Yorkist faction now realized from experience that the Lancastrian faction would always remain a threat if Henry VI remained alive. The Yorkist King Edward IV then had Henry VI and his sons murdered. By doing this, Edward IV had ended the War of the Roses by eliminating the Lancastrian line. The York's were now unarguably the legitimate ruling family in England.⁷ King Edward IV of England started the Yorkist dynasty of England. Edward IV would prove to be a successful King of England. King Edward IV had two younger brothers. The youngest of his brothers was named Richard of Gloucester. Unbeknownst to the young Duke of Gloucester, Richard would become the future King Richard III of England.

⁶ Roberts, 202.

⁷ Smith, *This Realm of England: 1399 to 1688*, 53-54.

IV. The Historic Richard III

Richard III was born on October 2nd 1452 at Fotheringhay Castle in Northamptonshire, England.¹ He was the youngest surviving child of Richard, the third Duke of York and Cecily, the Duchess of York. Richard III had two older brothers, Edward, the future King Edward IV of England (b. 1442), Edmund, Earl of Rutland (b.1433), and George, Duke of Clarence (b. 1449). During the first half of Richard III's life, the turbulent dynastic struggle over the throne that would become known as the "War of the Roses" was taking place in England. When Richard III was born, Henry VI of the Lancastrian dynasty was the reigning King of England. As a result of Henry VI's long reign that was full of poorly made decisions, many people in England began supporting the rival House of York and its claim to the throne.² Richard III's father, Richard the Duke of York was head of the Yorkist faction. At the age of seven, Richard III and his elder brother Clarence were in the care of the Archbishop, Thomas Bourchier. While Richard III and his brother Clarence were in the care of the Archbishop of Canterbury, his father, Richard, Duke of York, and two brothers Edward and Edmund were away fighting against the Lancastrian faction.

By 1460, the political situation in England turned in favor of the Yorkists when they won a victory over the Lancasters at Northampton.³ Richard III's mother, Cecily brought her two sons Clarence and Richard to London to await the arrival of her husband. The Duke of York asserted his claim to the throne, but was soon faced by the rival

¹ Rosemary Horrox, "Richard III (1482-1485)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, Oxford: OUP, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23500> (accessed October 10, 2010).

² Roberts, 196-199.

³ Horrox, "Richard III"

Lancastrian forces of King Henry VI's wife Margaret of Anjou. On December 30th, 1460 the Queen's forces crushed and killed Richard the Duke of York and his second eldest son Edmund. After the death of his father, Richard III's eldest brother, Edward, was now the head of the House of York. As head of the House of York, it was important for Edward to have a strong strategic marriage. However, Edward IV fell in love with an English widow and commoner, Elizabeth Woodville. While many Yorkist allies objected to the idea of Edward marrying Elizabeth, Edward proceeded with his plans, making Elizabeth the first commoner to marry an English sovereign.⁴ Despite Edward's relationship, and future marriage to Elizabeth, the Yorkist allies vehemently supported Edward as head of the House of York.

While the Duke of York and his son Edmund were killed, the Yorkist faction remained strong in England. After the death of the duke and Edmund, Richard III and his brother Clarence were sent to Burgundy as a precautionary measure for safe-keeping. By early 1461 the Yorkist faction had gained authority over England.⁵ King Henry VI of England was captured, stripped of his title, and placed in seclusion. In June of 1461, nine-year-old Richard and his brother Clarence were invited back to England for their brother Edward's coronation as King Edward IV. After Edward IV's coronation, Richard was given the title "Richard, Duke of Gloucester." For the next several years until he came of age, he lived on his estates in Northern England under the care of his cousin, Richard

⁴ Rosemary Horrox, "Edward IV (1442-1483)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8520> (accessed October 10, 2010).

⁵ Horrox, "Richard III"

Neville, the earl of Warwick. During the period that Richard lived with his cousin, he received excellent schooling and education.⁶

By 1468, Richard was sixteen years of age, and was deemed an adult in English society. At this time Richard was allowed to manage his own estates. Also during this time, his cousin, the Earl of Warwick and his brother Clarence began leading an opposition force against Edward IV of England. While Richard was under the care of Warwick during his adolescence, Richard's loyalties remained with his brother Edward IV. Richard even assisted his brother in the treason trials of Henry Courtenay and Thomas Hungerford. Both Courtenay and Hungerford were supporters of the rebel faction led by Warwick and Clarence. As a result of his loyalties to his brother, Edward IV was granted further properties in Northern England. By 1469, Richard clearly had gained a regional sphere of influence over Northern England.⁷

In September of 1470, Warwick and Clarence received support from the French and invaded London in efforts to restore Henry VI. King Edward IV and Richard narrowly escaped London, and fled to exile in The Netherlands. Once in The Netherlands, Edward IV, along with Richard assembled the Yorkist factions to retake the throne. By early 1471, the York brothers and their army sailed back to England and defeated and killed Warwick at the Battle of Barnet. Shortly after the victory over Warwick, the Yorks had one more obstacle in the way between them and the crown; the Lancaster army. On May 4th, 1471, Richard commanded the Yorkist vanguard in the battle against the Lancastrian army at Tewkesbury. The Yorkist faction defeated and finally won victory over the

⁶ Horrox, "Richard III"

⁷ Horrox, "Richard III"

Lancastrian faction at the Battle of Tewkesbury.⁸ During Edward IV's first years as King, he avoided executing Henry VI, by keeping him locked away. However, after Edward IV was sent into exile by the Lancastrian rebels, Edward IV realized that the only way to fully secure the House of York was to do more than depose of the Lancastrian King. Shortly after the Yorkist victory at the Battle of Tewkesbury, Edward IV had Henry VI and his male heirs were executed. The House of York was now unarguably the legitimate dynasty and heir to the throne in England. The War of the Roses that plagued England from 1455 to 1471 was finally over.

Richard became a national hero after his troop's victory at the Battle of Tewkesbury.⁹ As a result of his lifelong loyalty and dedication to his elder brother King Edward IV, Richard was granted the properties of his deceased cousin Neville, and other financial awards. Shortly after Edward IV was restored to the throne in 1471, Richard returned to the North to manage his estates. In 1472, Richard married Warwick's second daughter, Anne. In 1473, Richard and his wife Anne had a son, Edward of Middleham. Throughout the next ten years of Edward IV's reign, Richard remained a loyal subject to the King. During these years Richard acted as a constable and admiral for his brother Edward. In 1475, Richard further showed his loyalty to England and to the crown by traveling abroad and leading the largest private entourage in the campaign against France. After being in jail and awaiting trial, Richard's brother Clarence was found guilty of treason against his brother Edward IV and executed in 1478. Richard stood by his elder brother Edward IV during the trial and the trial's verdict and Clarence's execution. In the next few years of Edward IV's reign, the long standing war between England and

⁸ Horrox, "Richard III"

⁹ Horrox, "Richard III"

Scotland once again resumed. When Edward IV was unable to leave London to lead the troops in Scotland, Richard led the British troops in 1482. On April 9, 1483, Edward IV died. Edward IV's death would forever change the life of Richard.¹⁰

Edward IV's death in 1483 came as a complete and utter surprise to the English people. Edward IV died at the age of forty-one, and had lived a relatively healthy life. During his years as King of England, Edward IV had restored political, as well as economical stability to England. When Edward IV died, he had two sons. The eldest of his sons, Edward the Prince of Wales, was next in the line of succession for the throne. Edward, Prince of Wales was still a young child when his father Edward IV died. While the main Lancastrian line had been wiped out by the Yorkist faction, weaker Lancastrian forces did exist in England. In addition to Lancastrian alliances existing in England, it had been only twelve years since the War of the Roses. While Edward IV brought peace and prosperity to England, not enough time had gone by for the English people to feel completely secure. After the death of Edward IV, many Yorkists were worried that the Lancastrian forces would see a young child king as a sign of weakness on the half of the Yorkist dynasty. They feared that the Lancastrian forces would try and overthrow the boy king and that dynastic war would once again break out in England. Many Yorkist allies saw Richard as an ideal candidate for king of England. Richard was a war hero, and beloved by much of England. He was extremely pious and a loyal follower of his brother Edward IV. Many Yorkist supporters believed that placing Richard as king would be a strategic move that would help prevent the Yorkist dynasty from appearing

¹⁰ Horrox, "Richard III"

weak and vulnerable to the Lancastrian factions.¹¹ The only problem with Richard becoming King was that his eldest brother Edward IV had two sons, both of whom came first in the line of succession.

At this point in history things get a little bit cloudy. We do not know one clear reason why Richard chose to take the throne of England. One theory that has become widely popular among historians is that Richard was pressured and finally persuaded to take the throne by Yorkist allies, in order to save the legacy of the Yorkist dynasty.¹² We know that during the first few weeks following Edward IV's death that the plans for the coronation of Edward, Prince of Wales, were proceeding. Edward Prince of Wales's coronation as King of England was scheduled for June of 1483. As the sole surviving brother of Edward IV, Richard would be designated as Lord Protector while Edward Prince of Wales was a minor. Plans for Edward's coronation continued as scheduled until another issue arose that concerned the Yorkist allies. Many Yorkist allies became concerned with the position of Edward IV's wife's family, the Woodville's. While Edward IV was an extremely popular and beloved King of England, his wife Elizabeth and her family were not so beloved. During Edward IV's reign, Edward had elevated many members of the Woodville family to high positions in English society. Many of the Yorkist allies were worried that if Edward Prince of Wales was made King that the Woodville's would try and conspire against Richard, the Lord Protector, and gain rule

¹¹ Horrox, "Richard III"

¹² Horrox, "Richard III"

over the crown.¹³ This may have very likely added to the reasons that the Yorkist allies backed the movement of Richard taking the crown.

By June of 1483, two months after the death of Edward IV, the Yorkists fears and worries over the succession greatly escalated. As the fears of allies of the House of York grew, Richard too became concerned over the fate of the House of York, and the rising position of the Woodville family. By June 16, Richard had the coronation of Edward Prince of Wales postponed until November. Most likely driven by political pressure and concern for the Yorkist dynasty, Richard took the throne of England. On June 23, 1483 Richard was crowned and became King Richard III of England. Richard's two nephews and heirs to the throne were sent to the Tower, where they were murdered.¹⁴ Whether the murder of the two boy princes was one of Richard's orders, or an order of one of one of the Yorkist forces, remains a controversial mystery to this day.

Regardless of whether or not Richard III ordered the death of his two nephews, the murder had a huge impact on England's opinion of Richard III. While Richard III had previously gained a reputation as a war hero and was revered by many, the murder of Edward IV's children turned many people against Richard III.¹⁵ Prior to Richard III becoming King of England, many Yorkist allies supported and possibly persuaded Richard in taking the throne because it would secure the safety of the Yorkist dynasty. Ironically, Richard III's usurpation of the throne and murder of his nephews did just the opposite. Within months of Richard III's coronation, a man by the name of Henry Tudor claimed legitimacy over the throne. Henry Tudor was the Earl of Richmond and a distant

¹³ Horrox, "Richard III"

¹⁴ Roberts, 212-214.

¹⁵ Roberts, 212-214.

relative of the Lancasters. Richard III undisputedly held a better title to the throne than Henry Tudor. However, the murder of his nephews greatly clouded the reputation of Richard III, and allowed Henry the opportunity to gain popularity and support in his rebellion against the King.

For a short time, Richard III and his allies were able to suppress the rebellion of the Tudors. However, by winter of 1483 many members and close friends of Edward IV who had initially supported Richard III began to reconsider their position.¹⁶ In addition to Richard III's supporters shifting their alliance toward the Tudor faction, Henry Tudor made a strategic move that further tipped the scales in his favor. At Christmas of 1483, Henry Tudor announced that he promised to marry Edward IV's daughter, Elizabeth if he were to gain the throne. By announcing his plans to marry Elizabeth, the Tudors further won the support of the Yorks.¹⁷ To further weaken Richard III's position as King, Richard III's sole son and heir to the throne Edward of Middleham died in April of 1484. The following year, Richard III's wife Anne died. Richard III was now left without a wife and heir to the throne. As Richard III lost his wife, son, and allies, he began to seek an understanding between him and the Woodville family. Richard III was quickly able to gain the support of the Woodvilles. Soon after Richard III gained the support of the Woodville family, further rumors began to spread that would further injure Richard III's reputation. These rumors, possibly started by the Tudor faction stated that Richard III planned to marry his niece Elizabeth Woodville. While Richard III fervidly disputed the rumors regarding his plans to marry his niece, he continued to lose popularity with the English people.

¹⁶ Roberts, 213.

¹⁷ Horrox, "Richard III"

On August 22, 1485 Richard III would lead the Yorkist troops against the Tudor troops in the Battle of Bosworth Field. Despite having lost many of his supporters and popularity, Richard III had the bigger army and was favored to win the battle against Henry Tudor. While the Yorks came close to success, the Battle of Bosworth Field ended in bloodshed with the death of Richard III. Henry Tudor then became King Henry VII of England, beginning the Tudor dynasty.¹⁸

¹⁸ Horrox, "Richard III"

V. Dark Age Myth of Medieval Grotesqueness

One of the major Dark Age myths that serve to construct the legacy of the “Mythic Dark Ages” is the myth of medieval grotesqueness. The “Historic Dark Ages” did contain an amount of strange, disgusting, and unpleasant images and events. However, in the “Mythic Dark Ages”, medieval grotesqueness is greatly over-exaggerated and nearly every person and every event is repulsive, incongruous, and utterly horrific. The myth of medieval grotesqueness serves to further blacken the legacy of the medieval period. The myth of medieval grotesqueness is one of the most popular of the Dark Age myths that William Shakespeare incorporates in his play *Richard III*.

One of the primary ways that Shakespeare incorporates the myth of medieval grotesqueness into his play *Richard III* is by painting a negative portrait of the character Richard III through his physical appearance. In the very first scene of *Richard III*, Shakespeare has the character Richard III describe his own physical appearance in an opening soliloquy. Richard describes himself by stating:

“But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks, nor made to court an amorous looking glass; I, that am rudely stamped and want love’s majesty. To strut before a wanton ambling nymph; I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion, cheated of feature by dissembling nature, deformed, unfinished, sent before my time into this breathing world, scarce half made up, and that so lamely and unfashionable that dogs bark at me as I halt by them- Why, I, this weak piping time of peace, have no delight to pass

away the time, unless to see my shadow in the sun and descant on mine own deformity.”¹

From the very beginning, Shakespeare paints a repulsive, disgusting, and decrepit image of Richard III. Shakespeare even has Richard III describe himself as being born prematurely with several birth defects, which include him having uneven arms, a prominent limp, and a hunchback. Richard III describes himself more like a repulsive pathetic creature than a human being.

While Shakespeare has the character Richard III describe his physical ailments in the first scene of the play, he does not strictly limit the mention of Richard’s deformities to the play’s opening monologue. Throughout the play *Richard III*, Shakespeare has several characters make mention of Richard III’s repulsive features. One of the more notable characters who provide an excellent description of Shakespeare’s version of “Richard III” is the character Queen Margaret. Queen Margaret was the wife of the last Lancastrian King, King Henry VI, whom Richard’s family deposed in order to take the crown. In an encounter between Queen Margaret and Richard in Act One, Scene Three of the play, Margaret blames Richard for her husband’s death, and curses him by saying: “Thou elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog. Thou that wast sealed in thy nativity, the slave of nature and the son of hell. Thou slander of thy heavy mother’s womb. Thou loathed issue of thy father’s loins. Thou rag of honor, thou detested.”² Margaret describes Richard as a deformed and devil-like creature. She later adds to the Shakespearean image of Richard III when she refers to Richard as a humpbacked spider.

¹ William Shakespeare, *Richard III* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), (I.i.2.)

² Shakespeare, *Richard III* (I.iii.62)

In addition to Queen Margaret's vivid description of Richard III, one of the other notable descriptions of the character Richard III comes from his very own mother, The Duchess of York. In Act Four, The Duchess describes how she feels about Richard in a soliloquy. The Duchess says "O ill-dispersing wind of misery! O my accursed womb, the bed of death! A cockatrice hast thou hatched to the world, Whose unavowed eye is murderous."³ The Duchess of York first describes her womb as cursed for giving birth to a foul creature. She then goes as far as to compare her giving birth to Richard III as her giving birth to a cockatrice, a winged, basilisk-like mythical being, that could kill with its gaze. Shakespeare utilizes the character of The Duchess and her physical description of Richard III to further serve and perpetuate the grotesque image of the character Richard III.

The image of Richard III as a decrepit and deformed creature is completely a literary creation by Shakespeare.⁴ There are no records during Richard III's era that make any mention of him having any deformity what-so-ever. Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous section, Richard was a high-ranked military commander and was a very strong and able-bodied man. There is no way that a deformed and limping Richard III could have climbed the military ranks so swiftly and gained so much prestige as a commander.

In addition to Richard III's malformed physical traits, another way which Shakespeare incorporates the myth of medieval grotesqueness into his play *Richard III* portraying the character Richard III as an immoral, depraved man and murderer.⁵ When the play opens, Richard's elder brother, Edward IV is King of England. Richard admits to having his eye on

³ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (IV.i.224)

⁴ Justin Pollard, "Great Misconceptions, Was Richard III a Hunchback?" *BBC History Magazine*. (2009), 1.

⁵ Waldo F. McNeir, *The Masks of Richard III*, (1942): 168. JSTOR. accessed April 11, 2010, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/450058.html>

the throne of England. The only problem with Richard being King of England is that he is fourth in line for the throne. Richard's elder brother Clarence and his two nephews are in his way of attaining the throne. In the opening scene of the play, Richard reveals his first plan to help himself come closer to attaining the crown. Richard says:

“I am determined to prove a villain, and hate the idle pleasures of these days. Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous, by drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams. To set my brother Clarence and the king, in deadly hate, one against the other; And if King Edward be as true and just, as I am subtle, false, and treacherous, this day should Clarence closely be mewed up. About a prophecy which says that “G” of Edward’s heirs the murderer shall be.”⁶

Richard admits that he is not only determined to be a villain, but that he is willing to use whatever measures it takes to achieve his goals. In order to achieve his ultimate goal of becoming King of England, Richard must first eliminate the three people ahead of him in the royal line of succession. The first person that is between Richard and the crown that Richard seeks to eliminate is his elder brother Clarence. In order to eliminate Clarence, Richard makes up a false prophecy that is told to Edward IV. In the prophecy, a man whose name starts with “G” will take the throne away from Edward’s children. Richard’s elder brother Clarence’s first name is George. Edward IV panics when he hears the prophecy. He realizes that the War of the Roses was a recent memory and that it is vital to keep the throne stable for the House of York dynasty to succeed. In reaction to hearing the prophecy, Edward IV orders Clarence’s arrest, has him locked away in the tower, and orders his execution. Ironically, Edward IV does not realize that it is not Clarence, but his youngest brother

⁶ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (I.i.6)

Richard who will steal the crown away from his two sons. Shortly after ordering his brother's execution, Edward IV realizes that his reaction to the prophecy was a bit harsh, and Edward IV sends an order to stop the plan for Clarence's execution. Upon hearing of Edward IV's changed plans for Clarence's execution, Richard is infuriated. Clarence *must* die in order for Richard to become closer to taking the throne. In order to achieve his dream of becoming the King of England, Richard intercepts Edward IV's order to reverse Clarence's execution plans. By intercepting the order to cancel Clarence's plans, the plans for Clarence's execution will continue to move forward. While Clarence will now inevitably be executed, Richard is still not satisfied. He meets with two murderers hired to kill Clarence and tells them that they should do the job quickly and not take pity on Clarence.⁷ As Richard asks, the murderers take no pity on Clarence, and kill Clarence by drowning him in a barrel of wine. Richard has now succeeded in killing the first of four people who are in the way of him and the throne.

Before moving on to the next person who is in the way of Richard and crown, the character Richard seeks to find a wife. Richard sets his eyes upon the Lady Anne. Anne was the wife of the Lancastrian King Henry VI's son. Both King Henry VI and Anne's husband were killed by the Yorkist forces. While it was indeed the Yorkist forces that killed Henry VI and Anne's husband, Richard historically did not play a part in either of the Lancastrian men's murders. However, in Shakespeare's tale of *Richard III*, it was Richard alone who slaughtered King Henry VI and Anne's husband. By having Richard kill both Henry VI and Anne's husband, it makes it extremely unsavory and grotesque that Richard is forcing himself upon the woman whose husband he slaughtered. While the funeral procession for

⁷ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (I.iii.72)

Anne's husband and King Henry VI is in the midst of taking place, Richard decides to interrupt it. To make the matter more awkward, Shakespeare has Richard state his interest and intention to marry Anne while Anne is in mourning and crying over her husband's casket. After Richard states his intention to marry Anne, Anne makes a horrifying and grotesque observation about the King's corpse stating "O, gentlemen, see, see, dead Henry's wounds. Open their congealed mouths and bleed afresh!"⁸ Shakespeare creates a scene where Richard's intentions toward Anne are so foul and evil that they cause the dead King's corpse's wounds to rip open and begin to bleed again, creating a grotesque image. While Richard at first has trouble persuading Anne to marry him, he ultimately wins Anne over with false promises and lies.

Shortly after Richard persuades Anne to marry him, his elder brother King Edward IV falls ill and dies. When Edward IV died, he left behind two sons, both of whom as we have seen supersede Richard in the line of succession to the throne. The eldest of Edward's sons, Edward the Prince of Wales, is now the rightful heir to the throne. Edward the Prince of Wales becomes King Edward V of England. Since Edward V was still in his adolescence when his father Edward IV died, his Uncle Richard is granted the title of Lord Protector until the boy king reaches maturity. While the title of Lord Protector is an extremely honorable and high ranked position, Richard's thirst for power and glory is still not satisfied. Richard sees his brother's death as another obstacle being eliminated on his quest to become the King of England. Richard is now one step closer to his dream of becoming the King of England. However, in order to become King of England, Richard must first eliminate his two nephews who stand in his way.

⁸ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (I.ii.20)

In order to become King of England, Richard next commits one of the most heinous and dark crimes in British history. Richard III has his two nephews locked up in The Tower and murdered in order to become the King of England. Again as we have seen, it remains a great historical mystery as to why or even if Richard III came to the decision to order the murder of his nephews. Many historians believe that Richard was pressured by his peers to do so to save the Yorkist Dynasty. Some historians even go as far as to argue that it was not Richard, but one of the Yorkist allies who ordered the death of the two boy princes. In Shakespeare's version of *Richard III*, the character Richard acts alone and out of pure greed and selfishness to murder his nephews. Furthermore, Richard shows no sympathy nor hesitation in ordering the death of his nephews. After Richard's elder brother King Edward IV dies, Richard reveals to his best man and ally Buckingham his feelings about his young nephews. Richard says:

“O bitter consequence that Edward still should live ‘true noble prince’! Cousin, thou wast not wont to be dull. Shall I be plain? I wish the bastards dead, And I would have it suddenly performed.”⁹

While Buckingham questions Richard's actions, Richard shows no remorse about his decision to plan the murder of his nephews. Richard continues with his plans and hires a man named Tyrell to murder his nephews in the Tower. When Richard meets with the hired assassin Tyrell, he is so ecstatic in anticipation over the soon-to-be murder that he tells him “Come to me, Tyrell, soon at after-supper, when thou shalt tell me the process of their death.”¹⁰ After the murder of his two nephews, Richard is finally able to attain the title that

⁹ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (IV.ii.232)

¹⁰ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (IV.ii.240)

he has long been waiting for. Richard the Duke of Gloucester becomes Richard III, King of England.

Shakespeare's creation of Richard III as an ugly and depraved murderer is based on fiction and theories.¹¹ As stated in the previous section, Richard III's brother Clarence had joined forces with the Lancasters and was a traitor to Richard and his family. While Richard III stood by his brothers in his decision to place Clarence on trial for treason, it was Edward IV who made the final decision to have Clarence executed. Richard III's marriage to Anne was a political marriage, likely arranged by Edward IV. There is no evidence of Richard courting Anne while she is mourning over her former husband's death. Lastly, Richard III mercilessly ordering the murder of his nephews is a picture that Shakespeare greatly exaggerates by having Richard want to know every detail of his nephew's deaths.

The myth of medieval grotesqueness is one important Dark Age myth that William Shakespeare incorporates in his play *Richard III*. Shakespeare captures the essence of medieval grotesqueness in his play through the play's central character, Richard III. One of the main ways that Shakespeare incorporates the myth in his play is by using horrific and monstrous images and descriptions of the character Richard. In addition to casting Richard as a deformed and ugly creature, Shakespeare also portrays Richard as being a selfish and self-driven murderer. By portraying him as the ultimate greedy, foul, and monstrous King, Shakespeare successfully incorporates the myth of medieval grotesques into his play *Richard III*, further darkening the image of Richard III.

¹¹ Roberts, 212.

VI. Dark Age Myth of Spells and Prophecies

Another major myth that serves to construct the “Mythic Dark Ages” is that of spells and prophecies. During the medieval period people believed in spells and prophecies. However, while people believed in spells and prophecies, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that any of the medieval spells were effective or that any and prophecies routinely came true. In contrast, spells and prophecies are very real and very effective in the “Mythic Dark Ages”, and they are part of everyday life. The people of the “Mythic Dark Ages” are extremely superstitious and cast spells and believe in the power of spells and prophecies. The “Mythic Dark Age” world is filled with witches on brooms and their curses curses and prophecies always come true.¹ The myth of spells and prophecies serves to further darken the “Mythic Dark Ages”, and it is also an immensely important Dark Age myth that William Shakespeare incorporates to his play *Richard III*.

In the first scene of the play, Richard sets out on his dream to become the King of England. To achieve his dream, Richard must bring down his older brother Clarence. As we have seen previously, Richard circulates a false prophecy that his brother Edward IV is told. The prophecy states that Clarence will steal the throne away from Edward IV’s two children. Upon hearing the wizard’s prophecy, Edward IV panics and locks his brother Clarence away. Edward IV even orders his brother’s execution in order to protect his two sons. The Shakespearean Edward IV is extremely superstitious and easily influenced by prophecies. In fact, Shakespeare’s Edward IV decides to order the execution of his brother solely because of a prophecy he heard. Prior to hearing the prophecy, the characters of Edward IV and Clarence were extremely close as brothers. This historical reality of course, is much

¹ Shakespeare, *Richard III*

different. In reality, Edward IV and Clarence had an extremely strained relationship.² As a young man, Clarence had abandoned Edward IV and the House of York. Clarence then teamed up with his family's mortal enemy, the House of Lancaster. Edward IV acted alone in ordering the execution of his brother Clarence. Edward IV executed Clarence because he was a traitor and an actual threat to the York dynasty, and not because of a false prophecy.

Throughout the entirety of Shakespeare's play, multiple characters cast spells and curses upon Richard. Some of the characters cursing Richard are Edward IV's wife Elizabeth, Richard's mother The Duchess of York, and Richard's wife Anne. One of the most notable characters to cast spells and curses upon Richard III is Queen Margaret of Anjou. Margaret of Anjou is the widow of King Henry VI. Henry VI was the last king of the House of Lancaster. Henry VI along with his son were deposed by the York family, shortly before Edward IV ascended to the throne. Throughout the play, the character of Queen Margaret is constantly present in the palace. Richard refers to Margaret as being a "foul, wrinkled witch,"³ Part of the reason Richard refers to Margaret as a witch is that she is constantly roaming the halls of the palace and placing curses upon Richard and the York family. One huge prophetic curse that Margaret places on the House of York is aimed at King Edward IV's wife, Elizabeth. In a confrontation between Elizabeth and Margaret, Margaret casts a prophetic curse upon Elizabeth saying:

"Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven? Why then, give way, dull clouds, to my quick curses! Though not by war, by surfeit die your king, As ours by murder to make him king. Edward thy son, that now is Prince of Wales, For Edward our son,

² Horrox, "Richard III"

³ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (I.iii.56)

that was Prince of Wales, die in his youth by like untimely violence. Thyself a queen, for me that was a queen, outlive thy glory like my wretched self. Long mayst thou live to wail thy children's death. And, after many lengthened hours of grief, die neither mother, wife, nor England's queen"⁴

In Margaret's curse to Elizabeth, Margaret prophesizes that Elizabeth will soon lose her husband King Edward IV. She also curses Elizabeth's son, saying that he will be murdered and die in his youth. Margaret finally prophesizes that when Elizabeth dies, she will die neither a mother, a wife, nor England's queen. Each prophecy and part of Margaret's curse upon Elizabeth and her family ultimately comes true as the play progresses.

After cursing Elizabeth, Margaret turns to Richard to place her next major curse. Blaming Richard for the deaths of her husband and son, Margaret casts her eyes upon Richard telling him:

“Stay dog, for thou shalt hear me. If heaven have any grievous plague in store, exceeding those that I can wish upon thee. O, let them keep it till thy sins be ripe, and then hurl down their indignation on thee, the troubler of the poor world's peace. Thy friends suspect for traitors while thou liv'st. No sleep close up that deadly eye of thine, unless it be while some tormenting dream affrights thee with a hell of ugly devils.”⁵

Richard thinks Margaret's words are rubbish and does not believe them. While Richard believes Margaret's curse to be a joke, each aspect of Margaret's curse will ultimately come true as the play unfolds. Richard is eventually haunted by his selfishness and greed that drive

⁴ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (I.iii.58)

⁵ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (I.iii.62)

him to become a murderer. In addition to being haunted by his actions, by the end of the play, Richard's closest friends and allies abandon him, leaving Richard to die alone.

It is true that the historic Queen Margaret of Anjou was an enemy of the House of York, for the York family murdered Margaret's husband and son. While Margaret was a great enemy of the York family, there is no historic evidence to suggest that Margaret cast prophetic spells and curses upon the Yorks. The play *Richard III* opens up in the latter half of King Edward IV's reign in England. Historically, Margaret would have been home in France for nearly a decade when the play begins. She certainly would not have been roaming around the royal castle casting prophetic spells on people. Shakespeare pulls Margaret from France and places her in the royal castle amongst her enemies to further darken the tale of Richard III, through her spells and prophecies to the play.

By Act Four of *Richard III*, Richard has killed his two nephews and becomes the new King of England. Once Richard is crowned, he reveals a prophecy he once heard from King Henry VI. Richard III says "I do remember me, Henry the Sixth did prophecy that Richmond should be king when Richmond was a little peevish boy. A king, perhaps."⁶ Richard III reveals to the audience that there is a prophecy that Richmond will become the next King of England. As all of the prior prophecies in *Richard III* come true, so does the prophecy that Richmond will become the next King of England. Shakespeare includes this prophecy solely as a homage to his play *Henry VI*, in which the character Henry VI prophesizes the young Richmond becoming King of England.

⁶ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (IV.ii.240)

Shortly after Richard III reveals Henry VI's prophecy of Richmond becoming King of England, Richmond's rebellion against Richard III begins to build and gain momentum. While Richard III has the upper hand in numbers and in strength, it is revealed to the audience that Richmond's troops will indeed pose a significant threat to the House of York. In the castle, Richard's mother The Duchess, and Richard's sister-in-law, Elizabeth, are grieving over the murder of the two boy princes. The curse that Margaret placed on Elizabeth has come to light, and Elizabeth has lost her husband and two sons. Remembering the power of Margaret's curse, Elizabeth asks The Duchess to help her place a curse upon Richard III. In the Duchess' curse is as follows:

“Therefore take with thee my most grievous curse, which in the day of battle tire thee more than all the complete armor that thou wear'st. My prayers on the adverse party fight. And there the little souls of Edward's children whisper the spirits of thine enemies and promise them success and victory. Bloody thou art; bloody will be thy end. Shame serves thy life and doth thy death attend.”⁷

The Duchess curses Richard so that Edward's children's spirits will come to Richmond and aid him in battle. She also prophesizes that Richard will lose the battle and that he will die violently. As with all the curses set upon him, Richard believes the curse to be nonsense. In the final act of *Richard III*, the Duchess's curse comes true. Historically, as in the case of the curse of Margaret of Anjou, there is no evidence to suggest that the Duchess cursed Richard.

One of the final and most memorable ways that Shakespeare incorporates the myth of spells and prophecies into his play *Richard III* occurs in the last act of the play. On the night

⁷ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (IV.ii.240)

before the great Battle of Bosworth Field between Richard III and Richmond, both Richard III and Richmond have elaborate prophetic dreams. In Richard III's dream, all of the people that faced Richard's wrath come back from the dead to haunt him. The characters who visit Richard in his dream are Edward the Prince of Wales, Henry VI, Clarence, Rivers, Grey, Vaughn, the two boy princes, Hastings, Anne, and Buckingham. Each of the characters tells Richard of how their spirits will weigh down on him in the next day's battle causing him to lose. The ghost of Clarence tells Richard:

“Let me sit heavy in thy soul tomorrow. I, that was washed to death with fulsome wine, poor Clarence, by thy guile betrayed to death. Tomorrow in the battle think on me, and fall thy edgeless sword. Despair, and die!”⁸

While each of the ghosts visits Richard's dream with a dark and negative prophecy, they also visit Richmond's dream the night before the battle. In contrast to the message they deliver to Richard, the ghosts offer a very supportive and positive message to Richmond. When the ghost of Clarence visits Richmond, he tells him that:

“Thou offspring of the house of Lancaster, the wronged heirs of York do pray for thee. Good angels guard thy battle. Live and flourish.”⁹

The prophetic dreams that Richard and Richmond have in the final act of the play comes true the day of the Battle of Bosworth Field. In history, as in the play, the Battle of Bosworth Field ends with the death of Richard III and the rise of Richmond to become King Henry VII. While Shakespeare's version of the Battle of Bosworth Field is fairly accurate, there is no evidence of Richard III or Richmond having a prophetic dream the day before the battle. The

⁸ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (V.iii.318)

⁹ Shakespeare, *Richard III* (V.iii.318)

prophetic dream at the end of the play is Shakespeare's way of further darkening the tale of Richard III by using the myth.

The myth of spells and prophecies is one of the major Dark Age myths that William Shakespeare incorporates into his play *Richard III*. Shakespeare embeds spells and prophecies into every act of the play. Nearly a dozen characters cast prophetic curses throughout the play. Shakespeare even describes one character, Margaret of Anjou, as being witch-like. There is no evidence to suggest that the spells and prophecies in the play *Richard III* have any historical value, but they are all very much a part of the "Mythic Dark Ages" that Shakespeare's *Richard III* inhabits. Shakespeare effectively adds the myths of spells and prophecies into his play to further blacken the tale of Richard III.

VII. Conclusion

Richard III's reign as King of England is not looked upon by historians as being glorious and triumphant.¹ Richard III occupied the throne for less than three years. When Richard III first took the crown in 1482, he had many allies and supporters who backed him. While Richard did enjoy a brief period of monarchical stability as King of England, it did not last long. Shortly into his reign as, it had leaked out to the public that Richard III's nephews had been murdered at The Tower. The murder of the boy princes remains a huge mystery to this day. While historians have never been able to confirm the person responsible for the murder, there are many popular theories. The most popular theory is that Richard III's allies believed that the Yorkist Dynasty would be seen as weak and could easily be jeopardized if it had a boy as King of England.² Richard III's allies pressured him into taking the crown and into ordering the murder of his nephews in order to secure his new position as King of England. Some theories even state that it was one of Richard's allies, and not Richard who ordered the death of the boy princes. Regardless of whether or not Richard was pressured to order the death of the boy princes, the murder of Richard's nephews greatly clouded his relationship with the British people. The murder of the two princes would forever shroud Richard III's reign in darkness, and ultimately lead to his fall from the throne.³

While the historic Richard III's reign is shrouded in darkness to begin with, William Shakespeare further blackens the tale of Richard III. Shakespeare accepts the theory that Richard III ruthlessly murdered his two nephews in order to become the next king of England, and he does not stop there. Shakespeare further blackens the image of Richard III

¹ Roberts, 212-213.

² Roberts, 212.

³ Horrox, "Richard III"

by incorporating Dark Age myths of medieval grotesqueness and spells and prophecies into his play. The hunch-backed, deformed figure that would become the common image associated with Richard III is none other than Shakespeare's own creation.⁴ Furthermore, the numerous and effective spells and prophecies that Shakespeare incorporates into his tale of Richard III are purely fictional. Shakespeare uses his literary license to forever shroud Richard III in utter darkness.

While there are no official records that exist to show Shakespeare's reasoning behind his construction of Richard III, the historical context can explain much. Shakespeare wrote the play *Richard III* in 1591, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth I was the fifth ruling member of the Tudor dynasty. When Shakespeare wrote *Richard III* in 1591, the dynasty had been ruling England for over a century. As we have seen, the dynasty was founded in 1485, by Henry Tudor. Prior to becoming King of England, Henry Tudor held the title of the Earl of Richmond. While the Earl of Richmond was not born as King of England, he was of royal blood and could trace his lineage to King Edward III. After the murder of Richard III's nephews, many Lancastrian and even Yorkist supporters began to back Richmond and his fight to be King of England. In 1485, Richmond and his troops fought against the Yorkist monarch King Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field. After Richard III was killed on the battle field, Richmond became King Henry VII of England, founding the Tudor dynasty. From the death of Richard III, the Tudor dynasty was born. Shakespeare's play *Richard III* contains a profuse amount of Tudor propaganda.⁵ By incorporating Dark Age myths into his play such as the myths of medieval grotesqueness and

⁴ Roberts, 212.

⁵ Horrox, "Richard III"

effective spells and prophecies, Shakespeare is able to further darken the tale of Richard III, which in turn further legitimizes the Tudor dynasty.

The historic period known in history as the Dark Ages lasted for roughly three hundred years, ending around 750 CE. The historical tale of Richard III took place nearly seven hundred years after the historic Dark Ages had ended. Richard III lived during the fifteenth-century in late medieval England. The historic England that Richard III grew up in was a nation full of rich culture and advancements in art, literature, and technology. The period in history known as the historic Dark Ages had long passed by the time of the historic Richard III. Many historians mark Henry VII's accession to the throne as the dawn of the Early-Modern period in British history. By embracing the "Mythic Dark Ages", Shakespeare replaces the historic medieval period with the mythic, and greatly exaggerates and distorts late-medieval British history. He resuscitates and lengthens the Dark Age period by seven hundred years, so that the Dark Ages are very much alive and thriving during the time of Richard III. By extending the Dark Age period in England, Shakespeare is better able to paint a portrait of the Tudors as being the great liberators of England, rescuing the nation from the Dark Ages and bringing in the dawn of a new era.

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