

The Anxiety of the Age; background to Shakespeare's Richard III

The Wars of the Roses refers to a series of civil wars in medieval England fought between two rival branches of the Plantagenet royal dynasty for the English crown: the York family (white rose) and the Lancaster family (red rose).

The wars came to an end in 1485 and can be dated back to the overthrow of Richard II by Henry IV in 1399. In 1485 the Yorkist Richard III was defeated by the Lancastrian Henry VII at the Battle of Bosworth Field. ('...the bloody dog is dead.' Richmond, V.v.19)

The ascent of Henry VII marked the beginning of the Tudor royal dynasty which lasted from 1485 to 1603 in England. ('We will unite the white rose and the red.' Richmond, V.v.19). The Tudor monarch whose reign dominated the period of Shakespeare's career as a playwright was Queen Elizabeth I (ruled 1558-1603).

Shakespeare sought and enjoyed royal patronage and was influenced by the Lancastrian/Tudor view of Richard III as an evil tyrant who was not entitled to the throne. ('I am determined to prove a villain.' Richard, I.i.30)

One of the great anxieties of the age and of Shakespeare's writing is concern about the legitimacy of kings. What becomes of a realm when it is ruled by a usurper? What sorts of kings do rulers who are not entitled to their crowns become? The tragic consequences of these questions hang over many of Shakespeare's plays.

Lessons to consider:

'History is written by the victors.' Various identified as a Latin proverb or attributed to Winston Churchill

'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' Lord Acton, 1887

'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.' Percy Bysshe Shelley, Defence of Poetry, 1819

