

By the co-author of *The King's Grave: The Search for Richard III*

# BOSWORTH



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The Battle that Transformed England

MICHAEL JONES

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PEGASUS BOOKS  
NEW YORK LONDON

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PREFACE

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More than ten years have passed since the first edition of this book, and in the interval our understanding of Bosworth and the king who fought and died there has moved forward substantially. In the last few years significant archaeological discoveries have taken place. Major finds of artillery shot and other remains – including a boar badge, the personal emblem of Richard III, probably worn by one of his supporters in the last fateful cavalry charge against his opponent – give us a clearer idea of the battle's location and, movingly, where the king may have met his end. And the remarkable discovery of Richard's remains under a car park in Leicester show the terrible injuries he sustained in that clash's bloody denouement.

History is about tangibility – and we now have a far greater connection to Richard III and Bosworth. When I wrote the book, in 2002, Richard's battle position was still a matter of debate. Now battlefield archaeology has placed the king further east than I originally suggested, blocking the Roman road to Leicester a mile and a half to the west of Dadlington, although Henry Tudor and his army almost certainly marched to meet him from the abbey of Merevale, as I proposed. Our grasp of this fateful clash has progressed, and when Richard's remains were dramatically unearthed in the summer of 2012 we saw the wounds that ended his life: the king's head was shaved by a glancing blow from a sword and the back of his skull cleaved off by a halberd – a two-handed pole weapon, consisting of an axe blade tipped in a spike.

However, other aspects of the battle remain more elusive. While the crucial importance of the French mercenaries in Henry Tudor's army is clear, the tactical arrangement that made them so effective is less so. In 2002 I suggested that some of these troops were deployed in a pike formation to protect Tudor from Richard's cavalry charge. The evidence here is indirect – but nevertheless compelling. Tudor's French soldiers had been largely recruited from a disbanded war camp at Pont-de-l'Arche in eastern Normandy. These troops had been drilled and trained in pike weaponry, and by 1484 their elite group, the *francs-archers*, had been converted to this form of deployment. I still think it likely that this formation was used against Richard at Bosworth, in the clash of vanguards, and also to protect Tudor when the king's cavalry charge came so close to killing his opponent and winning the battle.

I also argued that Richard enacted a crown-wearing ceremony before his army at Bosworth, for such a ceremony seems to be referred to, albeit obliquely, in some of the earliest sources. The Croyland Chronicle commented that 'a most precious crown' was displayed by the king, and a Spanish newsletter – composed after the battle by Diego de Valera – confirmed this, describing it as the 'crown royal' and estimating it of considerable worth. Such a valuable object could not be the circlet crown, welded to the helmet that Richard wore into battle; rather, some form of pre-battle ritual appears to have been recorded and remembered.

And if Richard was choosing to perform a crown-wearing ceremony in front of his soldiers, he was thereby making clear, in his eyes at least, the legitimacy of his right to rule. A sense of legitimacy, how it arose, and its repercussions on Richard and those around him, formed the cornerstone of my book – and it remains my belief that the king and many of his supporters genuinely believed in the rightfulness of his claim to the crown of England. In 2002 I considered whether this was derived from Richard's belief that his brother, Edward IV, might have been illegitimate. In my 2013 book with

Philippa Langley, *The King's Grave: The Search for Richard III*, I put greater emphasis on the revelation of the pre-contract that invalidated the marriage of Edward and Elizabeth Woodville, his queen. Interested readers are invited to consider both these lines of interpretation.

When I wrote *Bosworth 1485* I deliberately chose to break away from later Tudor accounts of the battle that portrayed Richard as a nervous and fearful leader, undermined by betrayal, and always reacting to events beyond his control. Instead, I showed him as a confident and aggressive commander, fully believing in his ability to win this vital clash of arms and determined to seek out and kill his challenger. Ten years ago such a depiction was novel; now it is often followed in works of the battle.

Bosworth remains a poorly documented engagement, even by late medieval standards, and fresh ways of interpreting Richard III's actions are always valuable. In my 2002 book, I felt that Richard's reverence for his father, the Duke of York, was crucial to understanding his sense of identity, as man and king. I also thought it illuminated his conduct on the battlefield. New research – which I undertook for *The King's Grave* – has only strengthened this conviction. On 20 July 1441 the Duke of York launched a daring attack at Pontoise that came close to capturing the French king, Charles VII – an act of chivalric renown that could have ended the Hundred Years War in England's favour. On 22 August 1485 I believe his youngest son, Richard III, deliberately chose to emulate such boldness, leading a cavalry charge that came very close to winning Bosworth in the most resounding fashion possible.

Both father and son were strongly influenced by the warrior code of chivalry and *Bosworth 1485* tells a chivalric story of Richard III's life and death. Ten years on, I believe this chivalric interpretation remains an important way of understanding the battle.

For the recent advances around the battle location, see Glenn Foard and Anne Curry, *Bosworth 1485: A Battlefield Rediscovered* (Oxford, 2013), and for a different, more positive view of Henry Tudor: Chris Skidmore, *Bosworth – The Birth of the Tudors* (London, 2013). The likely importance of a French pike formation during the battle was first raised by Dr Alexander Grant in a collection of essays we were both involved in: *Richard III: A Medieval Kingship*, ed. John Gillingham (London, 1993); a good overview of the evidence and context can be found in Sean Cunningham, *Henry VII* (London, 2007). The possibility of a crown-wearing ceremony at Bosworth was first drawn to my attention by Professor John Gillingham.

# PREFACE

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On my twelfth birthday, I saw Sir Laurence Olivier's film version of *Richard III*. I was fascinated by the eerie horror of its culmination: the battle scenes at Bosworth. As an undergraduate at Bristol University the whole period was brought alive for me by my tutor. Professor Charles Ross encouraged my enthusiasm for the late Middle Ages and I wrote one of my first essays for him on that battle. Now, some twenty-five years later, I can make a response of my own to his inspiration. This book is the product of much adult research. But it has been germinated by something simpler: the love of history I had as a child and the compelling power of its stories. So it is a story I offer here, and a quite sensational one. Whether in an academic sense it is 'true' or not is not ultimately important. This tale needs to be told.

The book is based on considerable scholarship but is quite deliberately intended for the general reader. Names, dates and factual detail are kept to a minimum, particularly in the early chapters of the book, to allow the story to gather momentum. The sources on which this story is based are introduced gradually. It is footnoted, but relatively lightly, and contains maps, a timeline and a family tree for easy reference.

I acknowledge many debts in writing this book. Most are mentioned in the footnotes. Here I would like to thank the British Academy, which provided funds for the research undertaken in France, and Carolyn Hammond, the librarian of the Richard III Society for her kindness and help when I carried out my work. Professors Tony Pollard and John Gillingham have read through the text and Tony has kindly contributed the foreword. Drs Jonathan Hughes and Carole Rawcliffe have also commented on an earlier draft. To all I am grateful for their suggestions. As we say in the trade, the responsibility for what remains lies solely with me. Geoffrey Wheeler has undertaken the picture research in a way which I believe really enhances the text. And my wife Liz has not only lived with the book, but her feedback has made it a better one. It was written whilst our son Edmund was in his first year and it is dedicated to both of them.

# FOREWORD

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Richard III is a controversial figure. The controversy is dominated by Shakespeare's play. It dominates because it is a brilliant work of dramatic art. Generations have been moved to denounce its vision of the arch-villain precisely because it is so effective. How can anyone as attractive as the stage Richard really have been so evil? He must surely have been maligned; in 'real' life he was different. It is remarkable how many modern apologists, drawn to the cause of restoring the good name of Richard III, confess they were first inspired by watching the play, often identifying specifically with Olivier's film version. But the alternative Richard III is often an ideal type of medieval noble, heavily influenced by Victorian perceptions of knights in shining armour. It is no accident that many novels in this broad tradition have been, and still are being, written. Even at the heart of historical works, such as Kendall's influential study half a century ago, the romantic hero is firmly lodged. Richard III has become, and arguably has been since the late sixteenth century, a literary figure of contested meaning, as much as a controversial historical figure.

For the historian, the insuperable drawback remains the absence of a contemporary, or near contemporary, narrative which told the story from Richard III's point of view. Even when something dramatic such as the discovery of a new text happens, as was the case with Dominic Mancini's account in 1936, it turns out to tell the same old story. There are straws blowing in the wind as to what the alternative story might have been, not least carried by Mancini's narrative, but it has been difficult to catch these straws, let alone turn them into bricks. Here, for the first time, is a coherent and persuasive reconstruction of what that story might have been, of how the unfolding events of the twenty-five years from Wakefield to Bosworth might have been perceived and understood by Richard III himself and how he wished the world to remember him.

Michael K. Jones is surely right to stress that the important aspect of the dominant tradition concerning Richard III is that it is a literary construct and that it is built upon, and incorporates, a whole series of literary influences concerning character, the springs of political action and the fighting of battles. The 'Tudor' version of Richard III did not simply derive from propaganda; it was couched in story form, drawing upon a common stock of devices and conventions for telling a story. It is because it deployed recurring stereotypes and repeated incidents from romance and history, that it was at the time so persuasive. Here, in the pages that follow, Jones constructs his own alternative: the tragedy, as he says, that Shakespeare might have written. He puts Richard back into the family and society from which Shakespeare excluded him. The alternative is brilliantly conceived, weaving the various strands of half-suppressed rumour, forgotten propaganda and hidden messages into a convincing picture of what might have been going on in Richard III's mind. It is shocking and scandalous. It hinges on the notion that Richard knew that his eldest brother, Edward IV, was conceived in adultery, which their mother privately admitted, and that therefore he and his own children were unfit not only to rule the kingdom but also to head his family. A father-fixated Richard convinced that he was the true heir, was driven to put right this wrong, to rehabilitate the name of his father as statesman and general, and to rescue their dynasty from dishonour. It was an obsession that led to his own downfall.

Only, it follows, if we can understand the world from Richard III's perspective, will we properly understand what went on at Bosworth on 22 August 1485, a battle in which he lost both his throne and

his chance to ensure that generations to come understood that he was rightful king of England. Building upon new documentary evidence and interpreting it in the light of his knowledge of how battles were fought (and in romance were supposed to be fought) Jones both moves the site and alters the course of the engagement. This was not a rattled and demoralised Richard who recklessly threw away a conflict he ought to have won. It is rather a supremely confident man who believed that on the field he would find final vindication for his actions, when as the true king of England he would sweep his last challenger away in the most decisive manner possible. He was beaten, not by the treachery of others or his own impetuosity, but by new tactics employed by the mercenaries opposed to him, of which he had no previous experience. And so he perished on the field that was intended to be his true ritually and figuratively, crowning moment.

This is a truly radical reinterpretation of the career of Richard III, which, being founded on a deep knowledge of the sources and the age, puts forward a compelling explanation of his actions. It is bound to add to the controversy, whether on the site and course of Bosworth, on the legitimacy of Edward IV, on the hero-worshipping of his father, or on the death of the princes, which is still laid at Richard's door. Dr Jones offers to rebuild what Shakespeare finally demolished. Shakespeare, of course, completed a work already nearly done. But symbolically he stands for the whole process. What Jones has rebuilt is not, by the same token, the truth of what really happened, or what Richard's contemporaries knew to be the truth, or what they even believed to be the truth. What Shakespeare actually demolished, finally and once and for all, was any lingering memory of Richard III's own vision of what he stood for and believed to be the truth. Michael K. Jones has crafted a marvellously imagined recreation of what that vision and truth might have been. Believe him or not, this is an exciting reinterpretation which transforms our understanding of what happened on that fateful day near Bosworth in August 1485.

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## THE NIGHTMARE – SHAKESPEARE’S BOSWORTH

Imagine you are having a terrible dream. You feel an odd, heightened awareness, an encroaching sense of dread or sudden experience of terror. There is an alarming lack of continuous time, replaced by freeze-frame moments of extraordinary intensity. You long to cry out for help and assistance, to engage with and be reassured by others. And yet you are faced with the inability of others to hear or respond to you, to realise the urgency of what you wish to say. Instead, you sense a growing threat that tells you your very survival is at stake. You may wish to run very fast, you may be rooted to the spot and be unable to run at all. A terrifying truth dawns. You will have to face whatever it is you dread the most. And when you do, you will do it absolutely alone.

There is a famous and dramatic rendition of a battle which incorporates the universal qualities of such a nightmare – Shakespeare’s Bosworth. The playwright evokes the battle’s most gripping elements, its creeping paralysis, a sense of going nowhere, its sheer paranoia. But they are only visited on one of the sides lined up for combat. In William Shakespeare’s most compelling history play, the evil King Richard III is to face his nemesis. Desperate confusion spreads through his army, gathering clouds of retribution draw down on him. The very cosmos is against him and Henry Tudor, his challenger on the field of battle, will be its instrument of vengeance.

Shakespeare’s portrayal remains enormously influential. It draws on earlier histories written by the triumphant Tudor dynasty. In any case, battle history is generally told by the winners. It is an atmospheric and highly effective depiction of the horror of war, the key themes of which have coloured to a considerable extent all subsequent accounts. Yet the Bosworth I wish to explore in this book could not be further from it. Instead it is the story of a man guided by a great ideal, with a mission to retrieve the honour of his house and fulfil the thwarted destiny of his father. As the battle approaches, Richard III’s army is unified by ritual drama. There is a confidence in God’s support and a vital self-belief, a sense that everything is fitting into place. The commander is not the bloody usurper of legend but has an altogether higher purpose, to reclaim his family’s regal dignity.

This will be a very different kind of battle history. Traditionally we have relied on a static, if technically accomplished view. It has been neat and ordered. Maps and diagrams have shown the position and progress of the armies with all the precision of a drill-square in a military academy. My own interests are very different. I want to invoke the chaos of battle, and to show how difficult it was to see any bigger picture within the conflict. I will emphasise qualities of fear and courage and explore the state of mind of the rival commanders and their soldiers. We will consider the family circumstances and personal journeys of key individuals that led to this clash of arms. This will be an exploration of the intangible factors behind a great encounter. For I believe that it is in the intangible that a real key to understanding a battle’s outcome may be found. This is what I have sought for one of the most famous battles in English history – Bosworth 1485. My interpretation will break new ground and present the battle in an entirely different light. Shakespeare’s influential story will be exposed as Tudor propaganda. And this story will be turned on its head.

To begin with, we need to understand how Shakespeare’s account summons such persuasive power. Shakespeare was instinctively able to communicate the terror of combat and this gave his

writings real plausibility. Let us now consider the sense of atmosphere he could so effortlessly conjure up, the menace and dread that would stalk the field of battle. This was a timeless backdrop. To a medieval audience the intangible menace of the nightmare was made real in the *danse macabre*, one of the most enduring images of the later Middle Ages. It saw the visitation of a personified Death upon his unwilling or unwary victims. The Death-figure might be cloaked in a black cowl, bearing an ominous scythe, or with skeletal frame fully visible. Whether riding or walking, seen or unseen, his remorseless pursuit of any intended victim could not be delayed or bargained with. Highborn or lowborn, rich or poor, all were pulled into the grim rhythm of Death's dance.



Visitation of a personified Death – the horror of the battlefield. *Le Chevalier Délibéré*, Olivier de la Marche, woodcut of 1483.

Nowhere was Death more present than on the battlefield. It could strike without warning at the ordinary soldier or captain, or at an army's commander. The chronicler Philippe de Commines gives us a vivid account of the appalling confusion of a hand-to-hand struggle. He was present at the battle of Montlhéry, a clash between the French and Burgundians in the summer of 1465, in the close company of one of the commanders – the young and impetuous Charles, Count of Charolais. In a series of daring cavalry charges, Charolais became separated from the main contingent of his army. His small force chased after a body of enemy foot soldiers. One of the fleeing men suddenly turned and struck Charolais in the stomach with his pike with such force that the mark remained clearly visible for days afterwards. This isolated opponent was quickly overpowered. But it had been a dangerous moment. Minutes later, as Charolais turned from a reconnaissance of an enemy position, he was dramatically surrounded by a body of horsemen. His escort was overwhelmed and his standard bearer cut down in the struggle. Charolais himself was wounded in several places. As the Count attempted to hack his way out, he suffered a blow to the throat that left him scarred for the rest of his life. Inches from death, he was suddenly saved by a large, rather fat knight who rode between him and his opponents.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Commines witnessed the terrifying chaos of a medieval battle at close quarters. His ride with Charolais left him so pumped up with adrenalin that he literally forgot to be afraid. Instead he captured a series of intense, almost surreal vignettes. The most memorable saw Charolais return to his command position in the middle of the battlefield. The banners and standards that served as rallying

points for his troops had been torn to shreds. The Count was covered with blood so that he was almost unrecognisable. ~~Amidst flattened fields of wheat, a huge dust storm had been kicked up, obscuring friend and foe.~~ The small group of thirty or forty men anxiously waited in the swirling semi-darkness as clutches of horsemen appeared and disappeared in the gloom. They knew that if the enemy arrived in force they would be wiped out or captured. Yet there was nothing to do but stand their ground, hoping that some of their own men would return.

Commynes' experience transmits important truths of medieval combat. He honestly remarks that while some fought bravely in the thick of the struggle, many others on both sides simply ran off. Battle was terrifying and for many of the participants the most important thing was simply to get out of the way. This was certainly true in the engagements of the fifteenth-century Wars of the Roses, that culminated in the most significant and confused of them all, the battle of Bosworth on 22 August 1485. Folklore of Shakespeare's day testified as much to the ingenuity of individual survival skills as collective acts of derring-do. William Bulleyn, author of an Elizabethan medical treatise, remembered as a child playing with his grandfather's great yew longbow, kept in a kitchen corner. His grandfather had been caught up in one of the civil war battles – fought in a swirling mist at Barnet. But his bow was not a killing weapon. Overcome by fear, he had fled to a wood and clambered into the hollow of an oak tree. The bloody conflict that claimed the life of his master, the Earl of Warwick (known to posterity as the 'Kingmaker') passed him by.<sup>2</sup>

The terrifying, fragmented nature of battle is strongly communicated in Shakespeare's portrayal of Bosworth. Its tone is set in Richard III's awful nightmare when ghosts of his victims descend on his tent to curse the efforts of his army. Richard wakes uneasily, and his preparations have an eerie, disjointed quality. A strange prophecy is found pinned to the tent flap of one of his commanders. His battle speech is interrupted by the sudden advance of the opposing army. Fearing one of his aristocrats, who hovers menacingly in the vicinity but refuses to commit his troops, Richard orders the execution of the man's captive son, taken hostage as a precaution against betrayal. It does not take place. His soldiers are already afflicted with confusion. The enemy advances rapidly and men now hurry to oppose them. In the rush to action, the King's command is never obeyed. Instead the audience moves into the thick of battle where one of Richard's closest followers is desperately seeking reinforcements. We now learn that the King is fighting manfully, killing opponent after opponent and attempting to reach the enemy commander. His horse struck from under him, he has continued on foot, into the very 'throat of death'. It is here that Richard's last speech exerts its terrible power: 'A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!' He does not wish to flee the battlefield but to confront his challenger. This is a dream-like moment of truth, where Richard faces his nemesis entirely alone.

There is a remarkable authenticity in Shakespeare's recreation. It conjures its effect through breaking with narrative, and enhancing emotional intensity. There is a recognition of the terror of battle, and of how courage might be found through facing one's fear, however desperate. We are presented with a broken story: plans not executed, the ultimate loneliness of combat, but it is through this brokenness that the audience is deeply touched. The lines repeat: 'A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!'

Yet how far is his powerful description a fair account of the historical battle of Bosworth? Shakespeare was a dramatist and his scenes of fighting were designed for maximum dramatic effect. His plays drew on a solid tradition, the favoured version of the reigning Tudor dynasty. Elements of his account can be found in their earliest recreations of the battle. These also told of Richard's troubled sleep, assailed by dreadful visions and surrounded by a multitude of demons, seen as a product of the King's guilt for dreadful crimes committed in attaining the throne. The theme continued. On awakening, Richard found his camp in disorder; no breakfast had been prepared for him and no chaplain was there to celebrate Mass. The sense of ill-omen was carried through to the battle,

with the story again foretelling the Shakespearean picture. Part of Richard's forces did not engage but remained stationary in forbidding silence, with no blows given or received. His vanguard suddenly lost heart and pulled back from combat. Betrayal was everywhere. Uncommitted soldiers watched from the flanks like carrion crows, prompting Richard's desperate cavalry charge with a small body of supporters. His all-or-nothing attempt to kill his opponent failed, and the King was cut down, cursing the treachery of others.

Inevitably, Shakespeare put forward an account of Bosworth that would find favour with the powers that be: the Tudor dynasty and its aristocratic supporters. The chief ingredients of this rendition developed an almost totemic significance. It is fair to say that in this telling, Richard's battle evolved into a living nightmare, in which men did not hear his commands or chose not to respond to them. There was a terrible inevitability to his betrayal, just as he had betrayed others. The chaos of the battle was thus a judgement on the King, divine punishment for his crimes. It is a highly persuasive view, that permeates in obvious, or subtle, fashion nearly all the accounts that follow it. Yet many of its key features fashion a literary effect rather than search for a historical truth. It is a tale well told. But if we take the action out of a moral context, an act that is surprisingly hard to do, and place it against a backdrop of medieval battle history, many of these elements become problematic, making less and less sense. It is fascinating but also unsettling to examine the apparent certainties of our battle tradition in this way. As we remove or re-examine our assumptions, the possibility of a new and very different understanding of Bosworth emerges.

We can begin by looking at the failure to engage. Near-contemporary reports simply stated that a section of Richard's army remained uninvolved in the fighting. Such a possibility is brought out in Commynes' experiences at Montlhéry. Commynes told how a substantial number of men in both armies did not join in combat. He provided two explanations. Firstly, fear: many men were simply too terrified to fight and some ran away – this is reported as a fact of battle, not a moral judgement on the leadership of either side. Secondly, the engagement developed a momentum of its own, events moved quickly and it was impossible to carry fresh orders to all parts of the army. Entire companies of men were left unsure what to do; indeed, unable to see clearly what was happening or where to go. Either explanation could be applied to Bosworth. Yet the preference is to interpret failure to fight in a very different fashion, as a judgement on Richard's character and political career. This might be true. But equally, it might not.

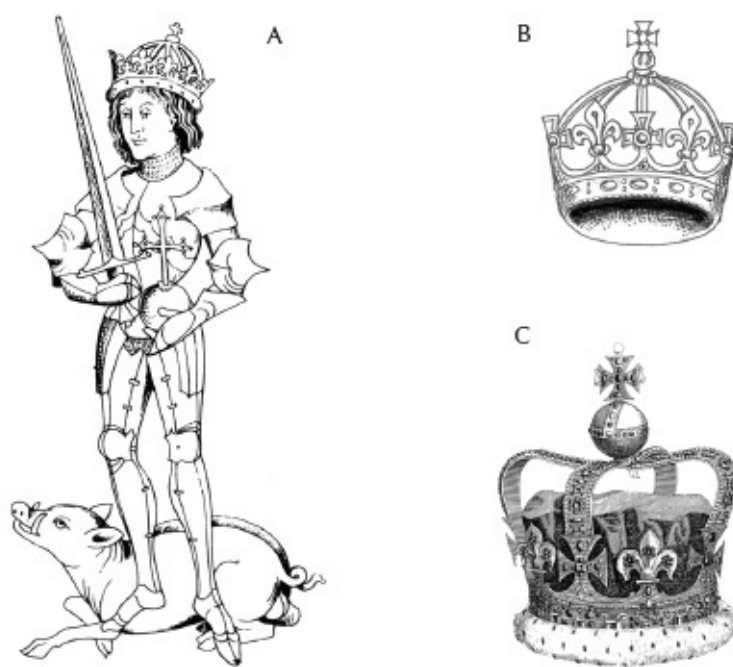
Let us develop the point further. At Bosworth we know that the two vanguards did engage. What followed was initially fierce hand-to-hand fighting. Then both sides drew back and there was a pause. On Tudor's side the action is seen positively, as a re-grouping of his forces; on Richard's negatively, as a lack of will to fight. Yet medieval battle experience might explain the event differently. The *mêlée* – the clash of dismounted men-at-arms – bore all the characteristics of a heavyweight slugging match. This could become so exhausting that both sides would briefly halt, before continuing again. This may seem an astonishing concept to us, imagining men, in the midst of beating the brains out of their opponents, stopping to take a time-out before resuming a frenzy of killing. Yet in some battles it actually happened by mutual agreement, the break being marked by a chosen signal. This was not an indicator of treachery, anymore than half-time in a sports fixture might be. At the battle of Neville's Cross in 1346 English and Scottish foot soldiers set at each other in full-blooded combat. Once, if not twice, the exhausted troops on both sides lay down their weapons and took a brief respite. The struggle then resumed in all its intensity. As one contemporary put it, both sides 'rested by agreement and then fought on'.<sup>3</sup>

Then there is the prevalent mood of confusion and hurry in the war camp. Richard orders an execution but there is not time to carry it out. This is a damning vignette. It places the King in a reactive role, responding to developments outside his control, a feature of almost every narrative of

the battle. Even worse, it implies a revulsion against Richard's order felt even by his closest followers. But is such a scenario really likely? An execution on the field of battle would occupy little more than a couple of minutes. Richard himself was entirely capable of swift and decisive action and so were many of his supporters. Treachery was a constant menace during the Wars of the Roses and the fear of betrayal very real. During one battle, fought near Barnet in thick mist, the opposing armies swung out of alignment. The badge of one side (the starburst) was misread in the gloom as the sun in splendour worn by the opponents. A cry of treachery went up and wholesale panic ensued. With so much at stake, men expected traitors or their hostages to be punished; far better an execution before battle than a rout during it. Fifteen years before Bosworth, at the aptly named skirmish of Lose-cote field (so called because the losing side ditched their uniforms of allegiance and ran for it) Richard's brother, King Edward IV, ordered the father of one of the rebel captains to be executed. This was a deliberate gesture which also took place on the morning of battle in front of the entire royal army. Richard and his followers were fully capable of doing the same. Such an action would not have shocked experienced soldiers. It would have been regarded as a harsh necessity of combat.

We are asked to believe Richard's troops were so pressed for time they could not cut off one man's head. Yet this sense of rush and disorganisation is contradicted by a significant but unremarkable detail found in all accounts. The earliest sources for Bosworth actually refer to Richard as wearing the 'most precious crown' of England before the battle. This expression was used by contemporaries to designate the crown worn in the coronation ceremony. It meant the King was not just wearing a battle crown (a circlet specially fixed to the royal helmet) but part of the regalia of monarchy itself. This striking detail needs to be thought about carefully. It would have been ridiculous for Richard to have ridden into battle wearing a heavy crown, the precious crown of Edward the Confessor, which is what seems to be referred to. Rather, we have a ceremony before battle, a crown-wearing to inspire the troops, after which the King would have donned his full armour. This means that Richard pursued a solemn ritual requiring time and deliberation before moving into battle. Crown-wearing was normally preceded by the hearing of Mass and the taking of communion. Then the crown was placed on the head of the King, allowing him to display himself. The procession past the soldiers of the army made visible the diadem, the most sacred insignia of monarchy. This made a deep impression, which explains why so many sources noted it. This moving ceremonial could not have taken place had Richard lacked time to prepare properly. It allows him a very different and proactive role, planning and shaping battle ritual in a ceremony emphasising the legitimacy of his rule.<sup>4</sup>

If Richard had the time to process before his army, he also had time to cut off one man's head. Once we accept the King had the opportunity to execute the son of Lord Stanley, we also allow him a choice, suggesting that if the execution did not take place, it was for a good reason and a plausible reason is not hard to find – his hostage's father was not actually at the battle at all. Two pieces of evidence support such a conclusion. The first is a statement by the aristocrat himself that he had only met Henry VII, the victor at Bosworth, two days after the battle. The second involves consideration of the survival strategy practised by this noble family during the Wars of the Roses. The Stanleys were a rising force in the north-west of England, determined to protect their landed estates and influence. Their self-interest saw the pursuit of a kind of insurance policy where the family tried to back both sides in a conflict. At one battle, Blore Heath, Lord Stanley's younger brother, Sir William, was sent to one side whilst Stanley himself remained close to their opponents, promising support but finding a string of excuses for not actually joining the army. It is not implausible that a similar strategy was followed at Bosworth. If Lord Stanley did not join the fighting, the hostage taking may have worked. Richard had no need to execute his captive.<sup>5</sup>



A Figure of Richard III, crowned and in armour from the 'Rous Roll';  
 B Another version of Richard III's crown, from the 'Esholt Priory Charter', 1485;  
 C Sandford's engraving of St Edward's crown made for Charles II in 1661, apparently from the fragments of an earlier one 'total broken and defaced' in 1649.

The ambiguity of the Bosworth story warns us of the hazards of battle reconstruction. Again, let us use the analogy of a nightmare. Afterwards, one may remember vivid isolated moments. There may still exist a sort of pattern or sequence of events. But it is difficult to recall the whole story, let alone make sense of it. Yet there is a strong desire to make such sense. One might speculate whether it is the sheer intensity of fear or the disconcerting awareness of being so alone that is so challenging. But by making sense of what happened, one can rationalise it, and this keeps it at a distance and may help in controlling this fear. Similarly, by explaining battles, one creates a distance from the terror of the actual experience. It is particularly challenging if the side with substantial advantages of numerical superiority and resources suffers a seemingly inexplicable defeat. For this overturns elements of predictability at the same time as introducing more intangible, and thus disconcerting, factors. To avoid such alarming uncertainty, observers might find a kind of reassurance in the notion of betrayal offering a reason for an otherwise unfathomable outcome. All sources agree that at Bosworth Richard III substantially outnumbered his opponent. A battle tradition of treachery leading to defeat could arise from an authentic remembering of the conflict but it also might reflect a need to seek this kind of explanation.

The apparent strength of Shakespeare's depiction of Bosworth is that it makes sense of everything. But how far can one truly make sense of a battle? A legitimate enquiry, which recognises such factors as terrain, equipment, relative strength and morale, also has to acknowledge the uncertainties. Battles could take on a life of their own. As Commynes put it: 'things in the field seldom turn out as they have been planned indoors'. And once the plan is departed from, the script abandoned for improvisation, how does one reconstruct the event? Here there is a fundamental paradox. Those best qualified to speak, with first-hand experience of combat, have least sense of the broader picture – the full sweep of the action. The soldier, Jean de Waurin, gave the simple reason in his story of the battle of Verneuil, fought on 17 August 1424 and one of the great English victories of the Hundred Years War. As he honestly admitted, he was so busy defending himself he had little or no idea of what was going on around him. Of course, it is possible to gather the experience of numerous soldiers and try to piece together a broader whole, and this was the technique of the foremost medieval war chronicler, Jean Froissart. But do a series of vignettes, however powerful, fully explain a battle? The Duke of

Wellington, writing shortly after Waterloo, put it best.

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The history of a battle is not unlike the history of a ball. Some individuals may recollect all the little events, of which the great result is the battle won or lost; but no individual can recollect the order in which or the exact moment at which they occurred, which makes all the difference.<sup>6</sup>

However, it is the appealing vignettes, developed by the Tudor histories and rendered so effectively in Shakespeare's play, that have retained a hold on the modern imagination. Remarkably, entire narratives have been built around them, taking the tale further than even the playwright himself or the sources he drew on, ever intended. Faced with fragmented battle details, more recent accounts of Bosworth have given it shape by anchoring the story to specific features of terrain, creating a definite landscape for the drama to unfold. There has been a particular fixation with putting Richard's army on the nearest piece of high ground, Ambion Hill, which overlooked the surrounding moorland. This tradition began with antiquarians of the early seventeenth century, responding to the considerable interest aroused by Shakespeare's play. The famous actor Richard Burbage played a wonderful Richard III, and in an appealing meld of fact and fantasy visitors flocked to the Midlands hoping to stand on the ground where Burbage fought his last battle! The eighteenth-century antiquary William Hutton walked the contours of Ambion Hill on a beautiful summer's day, with the hawthorn in full bloom, and in the first book on Bosworth had Richard and his army starting the battle from its summit. Subsequent studies have largely followed suit.

Marching King Richard to the top of Ambion Hill seems to hold its own enduring fascination. At the end of the nineteenth century, James Gairdner told how Henry Tudor tried to dislodge Richard from this apparently advantageous position with a bombardment of field artillery. Gairdner believed Tudor had collected the guns from the nearby ancient castle of Tamworth, though why a long disused fortress should contain up-to-date cannon, ready for his use, was never explained. By the time Lieutenant-Colonel Alfred Burne surveyed the evidence in 1950, in his *Battlefields of Britain*, Ambion Hill dominated the proceedings, with the pre-battle manoeuvres of both sides evocatively described as a race for its summit. Some twenty-five years later, Daniel Williams had Richard launching a massed cavalry charge of '1,000 or more knights' from the hill-top, a considerable achievement given an area of deployment for his entire army little more than 300 yards wide. Despite the logistical difficulties, Michael Bennett's 1985 study, which remains the best general account of Bosworth, has Richard arranging 'his vast host' on this narrow escarpment. And in Christopher Gravett's recent Osprey publication, Ambion Hill exerts an almost magnetic attraction, with Richard's entire battle strategy revolving around it. First the King sends his vanguard to occupy the crest of the hill. Then Richard arrives at the summit and moves the vanguard further down its slopes. Meanwhile his rearguard is placed on the hill's flank, apparently to protect it from enemy attack. This is a quite astonishing enlargement of the story.

Starting the battle from Ambion Hill embellishes the Shakespearean account, for Shakespeare, concerned with dramatic plausibility, allowed Richard time to march his army off the hill to the plain beneath. This is plausible because in medieval combat a hill was normally used as a defensive position, most famously at the battle of Hastings, where Harold dismounted his men and formed up his shield wall on Senlac Hill, to resist the formidable strength of the Norman cavalry. At Bosworth, all sources agreed that Richard's army was numerically far superior to that of his challenger, Henry Tudor, and there was a likelihood of his using his cavalry in an attacking movement against the enemy. Remaining on the hill would not allow room for an effective advance. The King's military experience was acknowledged even by his harshest critics, and it is hard to imagine him drawing up his battle position where he could not deploy his forces properly.

But if Richard did position his men in such a formation, he would have ignored the lessons of

earlier civil war engagements. At Wakefield in 1460 Richard's own father had died in a disastrous foray from the high ground of Sandal Castle. His sudden charge had enabled his opponents to manoeuvre around him, drawing his forces on and then overwhelming them. Eleven years later, when Richard commanded the vanguard of his brother's army at Tewkesbury, it was the opposition which was enticed from the heights of a prepared defensive position. Their charge was as disastrous as that at Wakefield, allowing an ambush and the rolling up of their line. Given these powerful examples, it is hard to credit Richard making a similar mistake, if he remained in control of his army.

One rationale behind the modern interpretation would answer these objections: perhaps Richard did not plan to remain on Ambion Hill but was not given the time to manoeuvre. The tempo of battle was forced on him by Henry Tudor's army. This account once more places Richard in a reactive role with the shape of battle dictated to him by others. In the rush to arms, his men moved forward in haphazard fashion; the King effectively lost control of his army. This reading of the battle has a clear precedent in the defeat of Charles the Bold at Morat nine years earlier. Here the Burgundians were surprised by the rapid advance of the enemy and hurried from their war camp in clusters of horsemen to be pushed back by the Swiss pikemen. A similar interpretation of Bosworth supposes a contour of battle shaped by the Tudor challenger. The pre-occupation with Ambion Hill creates an even stronger sense of the chaos and disorganisation afflicting Richard's forces, adding a fresh layer to an accumulating battle legend.

It is now time to excavate beneath the surface, and try to find the origin of some of the influential stories of Bosworth, so frequently elaborated on. The writers of the late medieval period did not share our own interest in the fixity of battle terrain. Instead, they employed a literary technique to order and make sense of combat: that of *topos* – powerful, albeit circumstantial, vignettes to point or adorn a tale. They recognised the different truth that detail could be a signifier to either presage development or illuminate their occurrence. This led to a particular form of battle reconstruction, in which a significant action or symbolic turning point was recalled for its meaning in the overall shape of events, rather than precisely located in a set sequence. Gaps could be filled in, detail moved from one martial engagement to another, rather like stage props in the performance of a play.

Understanding this is important, for Bosworth mirrored in its dramatic impact a sensational earlier battle, Courtrai, at the beginning of the fourteenth century. The traditions that developed around both of these bear an uncanny resemblance. Courtrai was a medieval *cause célèbre*. On 11 July 1302 a Flemish army of common labourers, fighting on foot, had routed the strongest force in Europe, the French cavalry – the very epitome of chivalry. The Flemish leaders had prepared a good defensive position. Small rivers protected their flanks and ditches had been dug across their centre to break the force of the cavalry charge. The French were running a considerable risk in attacking such a strong site. However, its natural strength allowed a different weakness, that flight from the battlefield was impossible, and they had the chance to utterly destroy their opponents. The contest was fiercely fought. Many of the cavalry were able to jump the ditches, regroup and charge the enemy. Units of horsemen penetrated the ranks of infantry and came close to breaking their formation. They were forced back by sheer weight of numbers and driven into the rivers with appalling slaughter. In terms of the rank, kudos and training of medieval warfare, it was an inexplicable result: mounted knights had never before been beaten by peasant infantry. The French were expected to win and their failure to do so was a devastating shock.

Commentators were struck by the expensive armour and equipment of the French, their heraldic banners, the golden spurs won at tournaments, and noted incredulously that their opponents had virtually no armour at all. Yet they had somehow managed to triumph. News of the resounding French defeat spread all over Europe. Something quite unbelievable had happened. The event received far more comment than the famous English victories of the Hundred Years War: Crécy, Poitiers and



Agincourt. Contemporaries showed their astonishment and disbelief by likening Courtrai to biblical or mythic triumphs of the underdog: the Greeks defeating the Trojans, or the victories of the Israelites under King David. Indeed, the battle achieved such notoriety that chroniclers soon felt it unnecessary to repeat the details of the story, since they were so well-known already – familiar to English readers in translation and circulated in the form of popular poetry.

Inevitably, writers attempted to make sense of the battle. Many saw God's judgement on the pride of the French commander, Robert, Count of Artois. Although Artois seems to have fought with courage and determination, disturbing images were quickly circulated, remarkably similar to those of Shakespeare's Bosworth. Portents on the morning of battle included Artois' valuable warhorse falling as the Count tried to mount, his dog attempting to paw off his armour and a toad (a creature of ill-omen) crawling out from the Flemish ranks to spit venom at the French. This tradition included an occurrence of particular significance, repeated in early accounts of Bosworth: Artois was unable to celebrate Mass before going into combat. The Count had wished to take it privately and his priest promptly began to read the Mass. However, when Artois was about to receive the host, it had disappeared and could not be found anywhere. An almost identical story is told of Richard's failure to celebrate Mass at Bosworth, again with chaplains running around in confusion, unable to find the host. The similarity is striking and warns us that both are designed with the same effect in mind: we are being told that the defeated commander had not been fighting with God on his side. Artois' reputed cry of defiance, noted by medieval chroniclers, strongly echoes Richard's in Shakespeare's play. Artois impetuously rails against such incidents of misfortune and exclaims to his followers: 'What I have decided to do today, I will bring to an end, come what may'. Richard's call to arms has a similar impulsive tone:

*Let us to it pell mell,  
If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell.*

The Tudor histories were cobbling together a version of Bosworth drawn from an entirely different battle tradition and Shakespeare was skilled enough to adapt some of its best lines.

We see in this the interweaving threads of a literary topos, making sense of the battle's outcome after the event. There is another vignette drawn from Courtrai, one which becomes the most dramatic and perhaps the most famous moment of Shakespeare's play, Richard's desperate cry for his horse. Courtrai also climaxed with the failure of a cavalry charge. The Count of Artois led his men forward in a last bid to break the enemy line. They drove deep into their ranks, reaching the standard, where Artois tore off part of the fabric of the banner. To bring down the opponents' rallying point would shatter their morale and cohesion. But a desperate counter-attack pushed back the horsemen. The opposing infantry marched across the field to find the French commander left stranded. Artois had lost his horse in a ditch but had not fallen in himself. Unhorsed and alone, he cried for help. It was to no avail. His pleading was disregarded and he was slain. The last moments of this war-leader fired contemporary imagination and even found their way into a medieval English poem. It may well have been Artois' fate which inspired Shakespeare's remarkable line, for none of the sources for Bosworth mention Richard's involvement in such a scenario.

As a dramatist Shakespeare might intuitively seize upon a powerful moment like this, as Artois, encumbered by the weight of his armour and finding himself trapped and helpless once thrown from his horse, cried out for rescue. His foes closed remorselessly around him and the Count died under a hail of blows. To us it is axiomatic that Richard III shouted for a horse. It is astonishing to consider that again it may simply be a clever device brought to the story from another battle.<sup>7</sup>

Moral judgement offered medieval writers a clear framework for explaining the uncertainty of

combat. This framework reached a compelling apogee in Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard III. Here we move from the legend of the battle itself to an equally distorted picture of the commander of the defeated army. Shakespeare's Richard was a charismatic but terrifying murderer, a man who killed ruthlessly but under the guise of false dissembled feeling. His behaviour was 'unnatural' in that it accorded with no moral code. The man was a law unto himself, willing to betray the trust of others whenever it suited his own ends. The most heinous example was his disregard of the misplaced trust of his brother Edward, who shortly before his death made Richard protector and guardian of his two sons. Richard had the innocent children done away with in order to take the throne himself. The sense of moral outrage expressed so vividly in Shakespeare's dream sequence before Bosworth is echoed in the earliest sources on Richard's reign. One contemporary saw his drive to the throne motivated by 'a insane lust for power'; another his ultimate defeat at Bosworth as judgement for the murder of the hapless princes in the Tower.

By creating such a powerful villain, and taking us through the sequence of his bloody murders, Shakespeare gives us a way of understanding the battle, as a divine judgement with Henry Tudor the chosen agent for Richard's destruction. To his own audience the nemesis of Richard III at Bosworth could be shown as a watershed, setting the scene for the prosperous and rightful rule of the Tudor dynasty. To us, there is a different attraction. Shakespeare tidies up the bloody uncertainty of the Wars of the Roses, now largely explained by the villainy of one man. Bosworth 1485 becomes one of the neat, memorable dates learned in the classroom, marking the end of the Middle Ages and the development of a more modern identity for the nation. Richard's defeat at Bosworth is thus convenient, understandable and even to some extent inevitable.

This view of the battle as a form of moral judgement, with Richard at last paying for his crimes, has provoked a vigorous modern debate, with the harsher critics of the King lining up in a war of words with his staunch defenders. At times this resembles some humanitarian court of justice, where sessions re-convene endlessly, in an attempt to reach a verdict on the supposed crimes of this long-dead figure.

A puzzling feature of the Tudor tradition Shakespeare drew on was its need to continually elaborate on the villainy of Richard III. It was as if more and more soot had to be emptied on the hooped and horned figure of the devil. Richard came to the throne in horrifying circumstances. The view held by a substantial number of contemporaries was that he was an usurper, who murdered his way to the throne in the summer of 1483, killing his nephews and those aristocrats who had supported their claim. The murder of children, the shedding of innocent blood, was a shocking act and it allowed the Tudors to show Richard as a violator of the moral code. His action was represented as a spiritual offence, likened to the biblical offence of the New Testament, the sin of Herod. Yet even with such a powerful piece of propaganda, the Tudors seemed curiously unable to rest their case. There is a big difference between emphasising a point to clarify it, and telling and re-telling a story with wilder and wilder embellishments.

As the Tudor age progressed, Richard III became more and more a caricature of evil. His physical appearance turned into grotesque parody, and a physical trait, where one shoulder seemed higher than the other, was exaggerated until Richard became crouching and deformed, a 'crook-back' – an embodiment of evil. This represented a conscious process of distortion, seen most famously in portraits of the King, which were later painted over to heighten the misalignment of one shoulder against the other. There was a need here to make Richard physically resemble the nature of his crime. It was crude, if effective propaganda. But were the Tudors afraid that otherwise people might miss the point?

Alongside the creation of a physical deformity, the Tudors found it necessary to bring in a succession of murderous crimes, including those where evidence of Richard's involvement was

tenuous or non-existent. No contemporary accused him of being the instigator or architect of the death of his brother Clarence, yet by the time of Shakespeare this alleged fratricide had become yet further proof of Richard's wicked plan to seize the throne.

The Tudor legend of Richard plotting the murder of his brother showed him as unnatural, an outsider who violated bonds of family. This effect was echoed in another tradition, Richard's alienation from his own mother. To justify his seizure of the throne, Richard was apparently prepared to slander his mother's reputation, suggesting that she had had an adulterous affair and that his eldest brother Edward IV had in fact been a bastard. This shocking revelation did indeed surface in the summer of 1483 and according to one early Tudor court historian, Richard's mother never forgave the calumny on her name. The revulsion and horror felt by this mother towards her son was then underlined through a highly imaginative rendering of Richard's birth. This was troublesome to the extent that he was in the womb for an extraordinary period of two years, emerging already toothed and with hair down to his neck. This astonishing information was of course gynaecologically impossible, but crudely sought fresh emphasis for the unnaturalness of Richard, who from birth was outside any family normality. Methinks the 'official version' protests too much. It allowed Shakespeare to portray the devastating cursing of Richard by his mother:

*A grievous burden was thy birth to me.  
Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy;  
Thy schooldays frightful, desperate, wild and furious  
Thy age confirm'd, proud, subtle, sly and bloody:  
More mild but yet more harmful, kind in hatred.*

This is the last occasion they will meet together. The dreadful encounter culminates with her wishing defeat on her son: 'Bloody thou art; bloody will be thy end'.

This drastic moment is disconcerting to a modern audience. Our own twenty-first-century psychiatry is acutely sensitive to a damaged mother-child relationship. In the jargon of present psychological profiles, if Richard was hated by his mother he would be unable to develop an accurate sense of self. A lack of love as a child would leave him unable to show it as an adult, hence his contempt for human life. This understanding inspired Antony Sher's stunning 1984 portrayal of Richard as a cripple whose crutches emphasise not just a deformity but an all-consuming desire for revenge, destroying a world experienced as hating him. As Sher remarked: 'An absence of love, caused by a hating mother. That is what I will base my performance on'.<sup>8</sup>

If this is illuminating of our own fears, it tells us little about the late Middle Ages and in fact is highly misleading. Here I need to define my own use of 'psychology' in this book's title. I want to employ a bridging concept, but one that avoids projecting on the past our own highly individuated sense of self. Instead I recognise a far more collective sense of identity held by medieval society, where family was mapped through ideas of pedigree and rehearsed through visually striking genealogies. An individual played a part in a larger drama, defined by an image, fashioned over time that the family held of itself. But understanding this family strategy is crucial to make sense of a medieval life, just as our own more focused father/mother issues are to us.

It is motivation, in its late medieval sense, that I am concerned with. Shakespeare's characterisation of a man operating outside family was highly unusual for late medieval society. And although it was so unusual, it became the main ingredient in the Tudor tradition. It is a lack of family identity, which most deeply informs Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard and his nemesis of Bosworth. This is an image I now wish to question.

Shakespeare's Richard III is an outcast, fundamentally isolated from others. This idea is first

communicated in the play where Richard is introduced to us, *Henry VI, Part Three*. He is shown to be responsible for earlier murders, in a fashion largely created by Tudor legend. After one of them, the killing of Henry VI, Richard declares: 'I am myself alone'; his ruthless actions set him apart. This isolation is brought home by the manner of his death. Abandoned by others, the King faces his last moments on the battlefield terribly alone. We see him on stage alone, and hear his last desperate cry. Even his horse has abandoned him. It is a dreadful intimation of his fate. In the medieval *danse macabre*, the death-figure visits on the victim a manner of death appropriate for the way his life has been lived. Richard has betrayed the trust of his victims, isolating them from help and seeing that they are killed when alone and powerless. Now his own army has been robbed of its power and will to fight. His captains have betrayed his trust, refusing to obey his order and engage with the enemy. He has been left alone on the battlefield, without help or assistance. What he has done to others will now be done to him; what he has inflicted will return to haunt him. The dreadful warning of his nightmare has become a living nightmare on the battlefield. The terror of every nightmare lies in this profound sense of separation, of being absolutely alone.

It is isolation, the isolation of Richard from others, that is the key to Shakespeare's depiction of the man, his brutal career and his eventual fate in battle. But suppose one asks a very different question in order to make sense of Richard's life and death. What if we look where Shakespeare did not look, and place Richard back within the context of family and family strategy – what might this tell us? Is there a whole dimension to Richard that Shakespeare missed?

One of the basic assumptions we make about Richard's motivation is an utter lack of legitimacy. It was axiomatic for the Tudor dynasty to insist that Richard was an usurper, a man who took a crown not rightfully his. The theme repeats in our own dramatic interpretations. In Sir Laurence Olivier's 1955 film, still a massively influential representation, an opening scene shows Richard's ducal coronet accidentally dropping to the floor. It is a persuasive addition, designed to counterpoint the King's loss of his crown in battle. For crown-wearing symbolised legitimacy, and Richard's only justification for seizing the throne was ruthless ambition. Thus he sought the crown but was unable to keep it on his head.<sup>9</sup> History has seemingly connived with such a judgement. After Bosworth, the King's body was stripped, exposed naked to public view and was treated in a fashion that left even his sternest contemporary critics uncomfortable. No fitting burial ever took place. A coffin and memorial of sorts was later provided, but the royal bones were then thrown out at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries and their whereabouts is now unknown. The coffin was reused as a horse trough outside a local inn. In death, Richard remains the alienated outsider, with no accredited royal tomb.

Yet if we are to turn Shakespeare's text on its head and place Richard back in the structure of family, lineage and dynastic strategy, we will need to reconsider history's apparent verdict. And this may be a difficult and troubling journey, for it is within the context of late medieval family that our own modern sensibilities may mislead us. For while we still regard ties of family and inter-relatedness as of the utmost importance, we have largely lost touch with the issue of legitimacy and the profound meaning this would have had for medieval families and dynasties, and how ruthlessly a family might have felt justified in acting around matters of legitimate succession. The 'livelihood' of a family, its lands, titles and status, formed the essence of its identity, and was regarded as a sacred trust to be defended *by any means necessary*. The ruthless dynastic acts of Richard's family, the house of York, might collectively have been considerably less shocking to contemporaries than they are to us. The excision of Richard from this family, and thus his lineage, suggests that Shakespeare sought not to invoke any such sympathy. Indeed sympathy, if permitted, may have threatened the identity of the reigning Tudor dynasty, seeking as it did a legitimacy of its own through the marriage of its founder with Richard's niece, Elizabeth of York. This marriage allowed them to depict themselves as rightful successors to the house of York.

Probably the greatest obstacle to our placing Richard back within a collective family strategy is the fate of his nephews—the princes in the Tower. The majority of contemporaries believed Richard was responsible for their murder, even if people were unsure what had actually happened to them. Such a possibility strikes hard at our own sensitivities, for we struggle to perceive the humanity of those who kill children. They remain the outcasts, other than us. Yet while a medieval audience would to some extent have shared our shock at the killing of children, this was a violent age and there were precedents during a bloody period of civil war and aristocratic feud for just such disposals when the child or adolescent represented a faction seen as a threat by their opponents. One of Richard's own brothers had met such a fate, being ruthlessly cut down in the aftermath of the battle of Wakefield when aged only seventeen.

It is hard for a modern audience to enter a world where the unbroken line of legitimacy, the transmission of the essence of a family's identity, was of such paramount significance. But if we do enter it, we encounter a powerful yet disturbing value system in which a seemingly unacceptable action may become a cruel necessity. Shockingly, the disposal of a child whose existence appeared to threaten the vital issue of succession was not unknown in the medieval period. In the early thirteenth century, King John almost certainly murdered his child nephew, Arthur, to safeguard his own claim to his foreign possessions. This harsh act lost him some of his supporters. But others understood the brutal realism upon which the decision was based.

As custodians of an historical pedigree, a family would together determine where the interest of its lineage lay and act to defend it. Such action, whilst it could not fail to provoke unease and discomfort, would not necessarily place those who had carried it out beyond the pale. If some contemporaries were alienated by such ruthlessness, others could have understood these actions were for a larger cause, the sacredness of family succession. To us, the sacredness of each individual life would be more important than anything else, but during this period other loyalties might sometimes take precedence over the perceived collective good justifying a necessary evil. In this scenario, even a killing, such as the murder of the princes, would not make its perpetrator a monster. For the Tudors to depict themselves as the instruments of divine intervention to remove a cruel tyrant, they would need more than this to demonstrate his depravity.

Displacing Richard from his share in a family identity and interest would remove such justification. By separating him from contemporary values, the Tudors could castigate him as an embodiment of evil. If we put him back within them, another story may emerge. The Richard approaching Bosworth would be a different figure, conscious of sin but viewing himself and viewed by those following him as having showed the ruthlessness the situation required. This Richard could command the loyalty of those who understood his sense of family destiny. He and they would have sought vindication on the battlefield, a victory that would underline the legitimacy of his rule. Rather than a nightmare, this could be the vision sustaining Richard and his followers.

This insight will be crucial for our understanding of the battle. To explore it, it will be necessary to rebuild what Shakespeare has demolished, Richard as a dynastic figure occupying a central place within his family mythology as rightful successor and legitimate King.

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## MARTYRDOM – DEATH OF A FATHER

In atrocious winter weather, a small army marched north from London. Torrential rain had led to widespread flooding. Roads and bridges were down, and effective reconnaissance impossible. The commander was Richard's father, Richard, Duke of York. Tragically, he had been lured into an awful trap. He had separated his forces, leaving a contingent behind to guard against insurrection in the West Country. But these rebels had in fact undertaken a rapid, secret march and were now ahead of him, joining with further reinforcements. York was alarmingly outnumbered. He had anticipated time to gather loyal troops with a rendezvous at his Yorkshire residence of Sandal Castle, and then take war to the enemy. His column was encumbered with a siege train and could only move slowly. But there was not time for his followers to meet him. His position grew increasingly desperate. He reached Sandal just before Christmas, short of supplies and menaced by his opponents. A few days later, on 30 December 1460, he was overwhelmed in battle.

York's family and closest followers remembered the occasion of his death with one highly charged phrase, 'the horrible battle'. According to family tradition, York met his end in heroic fashion. A party of his men, sent foraging for supplies, was suddenly threatened by the enemy. He charged from the high ground of Sandal Castle in a brave attempt to rescue them. It proved a disastrous mistake. He was unaware of his opponents' strength, and his small detachment was surrounded and cut down in particularly savage fighting.<sup>1</sup>

The violent fate of Richard's father at the battle of Wakefield strikingly foreshadowed his own at Bosworth. Both men mounted cavalry charges, taking the fight to the enemy. Both were cut down in fierce hand-to-hand combat. The comparison extends further. Both had marched to battle to champion the rightful claim of their bloodline to the highest prize of all, the throne of England. Their right had been wrested from opponents through tarnishing their rivals' issue with the stigma of bastardy. Inevitably, this slanderous affront was challenged by force of arms, and it gave a terrible bitterness to the conflict, which assumed the brutality of a family vendetta. No niceties of convention would be respected here. The bodies of both men were mutilated in the aftermath of battle, and denied proper burial.

It is the startling similarity between the two battles, some twenty-five years apart, that first intimates to us that Richard III is not the maverick loner, pursuing his own agenda at the expense of all family susceptibility, but that a broader pattern is being drawn, with Richard's own action one link within it. A better understanding of this pattern must begin with Richard's own relationship with his father.

Our present understanding of the power of father-son relationships can distort our sense of the medieval past. In the Middle Ages, an aristocratic child would have little contact with his father, and his upbringing would be the responsibility of nurses and tutors. Richard, who was eight at the time of his father's death, had little real experience of the man, who would have been a remote, if impressive stranger. So how would Richard remember him?

Having little actual recall of the man himself, the boy Richard, surrounded by the custodians of the family legacy, would learn to remember and understand a figure depicted by those around him. A

mythology is bigger than a memory, and Richard grew up in its shadow. As its power gained a hold on his imagination, he came to see himself in this mythic father's likeness and thus as his true heir. Physically and temperamentally resembling him, and bearing his name, he carried the legacy of a right to the throne denied by the violence and treachery of others. To illuminate this legacy we need to explore these mythic elements in more detail.

Perhaps the most important vehicle for the preservation of his father's memory was a religious house that had particularly benefited from his patronage, at Clare in Suffolk. And it was here that the image of this lost, heroic father, who had come so close to securing the crown of England, was promulgated. A chosen religious community in the late Middle Ages fulfilled the same function as a modern-day presidential library, acting as a repository for documents and other memorabilia, and serving as a centre of scholarship and learning, designed to disseminate the good works and reputation of its patron.

The significance of such a hallowed collection was its focus on a three-fold representation of Richard, Duke of York – almost a triptych: the worthy statesman, the pious man chosen by God to be king, and the courageous warrior beleaguered by his enemies. A painted scroll in the collection at Clare describes York as man of destiny, raising his sword to vanquish his enemies, in pursuit of the path chosen for him by God. Another manuscript, translated into verse, makes accessible the deeds of renown of Stilicho, a notable general of the late Roman empire, betrayed by the machinations of a jealous court party – a story both familiar and relevant to York's family. These memorabilia gained a posthumous force through York's sudden, tragic death. The repository at Clare almost represented a shrine to an uncrowned king. Those who kept this repository might well have seen themselves as guardians of a flame, designed to be rekindled to illuminate the realm of England and redound to the glory of the house of York. It was the circumstances of York's death that gave this collection its extraordinary power within the family, and to those who felt themselves heirs to his thwarted ambition. And Richard, as we will see, viewed himself as his father's ultimate successor.<sup>2</sup>

York's defeat and death at Wakefield came as a terrible shock to his family. Perhaps the most painful aspect would have been the realisation that his own mistake had led to this disaster. His friends and supporters had been unable to join him as planned at Sandal Castle, and the enemy had been present in far greater numbers than anticipated. A more prudent course of action would have been to hold firm within Sandal's defences and send for help as soon as possible. Had York not charged impulsively to the rescue of the foraging party, the outcome could have been so very different.

To ride to the help of followers at risk from the enemy was a noble gesture. But however admirable the sentiment, contemporaries could not help but regard it as at best 'incautious' and at worst a pointless waste. Such criticisms were understandably too difficult to bear, and the family's interpretation of the dreadful events at Wakefield underwent an all-important shift; York had been betrayed without by unscrupulous opponents breaking a Christmas truce, and within by turncoat supporters who had already cast their lot with the enemy. His death was thus seen as a brutal murder, and the subsequent mutilation of his body a violation of honour. His decapitated head was ironically crowned in mockery of his pretensions to the throne. This in the eyes of his supporters came to represent an icon of almost Christ-like significance. As the legend evolved, this imagery became more pronounced, and one version had Richard crowned and taunted on a hillock before being cruelly put to death.

We can see how the understanding of an event might be altered in hindsight through a selective perception of what had taken place. The medieval equivalent of the spin-doctor would be called upon to protect family honour. A similar shift can be found in accounts of the battle of Baugé, fought between the English and the French, supported by their Scottish allies, six years after Agincourt, at

which Henry V's brother, Thomas, Duke of Clarence, was defeated and slain. Clarence was seized with a sudden, overwhelming desire to engage with the enemy one evening while he and his followers were having supper. Hearing a report that they were in the vicinity, he at once leapt up from the dinner table, leaving those around him with no option but to join a pell-mell advance in the gathering twilight. Those caught up in this highly spontaneous undertaking had very mixed feelings about it, and a vigorous debate ensued in the ranks. The worst fears of the doubters were entirely justified. Clarence and his advance guard careered across a river, colliding with a larger than expected body of enemy troops. A chaotic skirmish broke out in the gathering dusk, which quickly cost Clarence his life, with his remaining men-at-arms killed or captured. Such was the velocity of this disastrous engagement that the English archers only arrived on the scene when darkness had fallen and the battle was decided.

It comes as no surprise to find many English commentators severely critical of Clarence's actions and for his own closest followers and supporters his good name had to be retrieved. So they depicted Clarence as the victim of treachery: the breaking of an agreed truce while he was leading a reconnaissance party. This unlikely scenario satisfied those to whom it was both unacceptable and unmentionable that Clarence had died as a result of his own foolish impetuosity. His idiotic charge was therefore dressed in the garments of a measured action, seized upon by a duplicitous opponent.<sup>3</sup>

There is a strong resemblance here to the treatment of Wakefield within York's own family and entourage. It was extremely unlikely that York's adversaries had agreed to any form of truce, such was their hatred of the man and what he stood for. But blaming the enemy was a palatable distraction from the painful reality of York's terrible misjudgement. It would be easier to focus a righteous anger on treacherous opponents than to speak ill of a dead leader. An heroic death was infinitely preferable to the stupid waste of a life.

Where a renowned figure appears to have acted rashly and without much thought, there seems to be a strong impulse to impute a cunning and pre-meditated killing plan upon opponents. In the thirteenth century the charismatic leader Simon de Montfort was caught in an apparent trap at Evesham. His heroic charge at the main strength of the enemy position carried little chance of success and he and his followers were cut to pieces. A recently discovered source reveals that the charge may have been unnecessary, for an escape route out of the town still existed and de Montfort and his followers could have lived to fight another day. It might have seemed dishonourable to have retreated in this way, but the violent charge, however heroic, seems almost like the rash embracing of a noble death. But soon after the battle a cult of Simon's memory developed a different emphasis. His apologists now chose to concentrate on the unscrupulous killing plan agreed by his opponents before battle, brought to a terrible fruition in the murder of Simon and the mutilation of his body on the field of combat.<sup>4</sup>

This alternative view of Evesham consciously used biblical archetypes to transform the manner of Simon's death. He became a defender of a just cause, prepared to sacrifice his life for a higher ideal. The idea of violent death in battle was replaced by that of an assassination, with Simon disarmed, mocked and then cold-bloodedly despatched. Although we have little detail on the exact manner of York's death at Wakefield, we know his son Edmund was probably murdered in the battle's aftermath and it is significant that accounts soon placed similar ingredients in the story, with York also being disarmed, mockingly saluted and then cut down. Whatever the propagandist element, a cult of martyrdom could only exist in certain conditions. In both these cases it was a grave misjudgement to dismember the body of the fallen commander. This was a vulgar act, in violation of the rules of war. The treatment of York's dismembered head, adorned with a paper crown in mockery of his pretensions, inevitably extended the imagery of martyrdom through its unintentional evocation of Christ's own crown of thorns.

In this form of remembering battle, the frightening portents seen before Evesham and Wakefield



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