

Richard Duke of York

(3 HENRY VI)

INTRODUCTION

THE play printed in the 1623 Folio as *The Third Part of Henry the Sixth, with the Death of the Duke of York* was described on the title-page of its first, unauthoritative publication in 1595 as *The True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York, and the Death of Good King Henry the Sixth, with the whole Contention between the two houses Lancaster and York*. It is clearly a continuation of *The First Part of the Contention*, taking up the story where that play had ended, with the aspirations of Richard, Duke of York to the English throne, and was probably composed immediately afterwards.

The final scenes of *The First Part of the Contention* briefly introduce two of York's sons, Edward (the eldest) and Richard (already described as a 'foul, indigested lump, | As crooked in . . . manners as [in] shape'). They, along with their brothers Edmund, Earl of Rutland, and George (later Duke of Clarence), figure more prominently in *Richard Duke of York*. The first scenes show York apparently fulfilling his ambition, as Henry VI weakly cedes his rights to the throne after his death; but Queen Margaret leads an army against York, and, when he is captured, personally taunts him with news of the murder of his youngest son, stabs York to death, and commands that his head be 'set on York gates'. (This powerful scene includes the line 'O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide', paraphrased by Robert Greene before September 1592, which establishes the upward limit of the play's date.)

Though Richard of York dies early in the action, the remainder of the play centres on his sons' efforts (aided by Warwick's politic schemings) to avenge his death and to establish the dominance of Yorkists over Lancastrians. The balance of power shifts frequently, and the brothers' alliance crumbles, but finally Queen Margaret, with her French allies, is defeated and captured, and Richard of York's surviving sons avenge their father's death by killing her son, Edward, before her eyes. Richard of Gloucester starts to clear his way to the throne by murdering 'Good King

Henry' in the Tower, and the play ends with the new King Edward IV exulting in his 'country's peace and brothers' loves' while Richard makes clear to the audience that Edward's self-confidence is ill-founded.

Though the play is loud and strife-ridden with war, power politics, and personal ambition, a concern with humane values emerges in the subtle and touching continuing portrayal of the quietist Henry VI, a saintly fool who meditates on the superiority of humble contentment to regal misery in an emblematic scene (2.5) that epitomizes the tragedy of civil strife.

Richard Duke of York, like *The First Part of the Contention*, draws extensively on English chronicle history. Historically, the period of the action covers about sixteen years (1455 to 1471), but events are telescoped and rearranged; for instance, the opening scenes move rapidly from the Battle of St Albans (1445) to York's death (1450); the future Richard III was only three years old, and living abroad, at the time of this opening battle in which he takes an active part; and Richard's murder of Henry owes more to legend than to fact.