

### **The Motives of Richard III** *Stephen*

King Richard III is more likely to have reacted to protect himself than to have schemed for the throne.

Upon the death of Edward IV, Richard of Gloucester is often reported to have set in train his long term plan to take the throne. The Croyland Chronicler, More, and Shakespeare all believe his usurpation to be the result of a long term plan. Yet his actions seem more likely to be an immediate reaction to the events of the time. Dominic Mancini offers the most likely view that "Richard was actuated not only by ambition and lust for power, for he also proclaimed that he was goaded by the ignoble family of the queen" (EHD 1327-1485, p 330) Many incidents happened outside of his control, and his actions often seem too hasty to be part of a long term plan. It seems more likely that the death of his older brother placed Richard under threat from the Woodville family, and that his extreme actions stem from this.

The England of April/September 1483 was one of great political turmoil. Richard's actions within this environment are almost certainly of a reactionary nature. Richard would have had little warning or foreknowledge of Edward's death, which caused a power vacuum to occur within the English monarchy, as both the York and Woodville factions sought to control the new heir. Neither could Richard have guessed what the future held. Based on precedent, it seems that he could naturally presume a threat from the Woodville family, who had elected themselves to various high-ranking positions during the reign of Edward IV and who now had the new king, Edward V, in their custody. Events such as their opposition to Richard's claim to be Protector of the Realm are again out of his control (EHD, p 330 and Pollard, 1991 p 97), and could only serve to strengthen his belief that the Woodvilles, if left to their own devices, would surely thwart his ambitions.

That Richard was a man governed by ambition is without question (Mancini, EHD p 330, Pollard p 71, Hicks, p 64) but did this ambition lead him to covet the throne? The concentration of his power was in the north of England, with the centre being York. Richard seems to be almost ignorant of London, and made little attempt to force himself upon the crown. It seems unlikely that he had designs on the throne prior to the Woodvilles opposing his role in the Council of London in 1483. In the past he had shown unbending loyalty to Edward IV (EHD), and for a time Richard made preparations for Edward V's coronation, using the new king's seals and currency (Mancini p 286). His usurpation can be seen as the result of the necessity for extreme action. The lack of forethought displayed in his actions would also lead us to believe that Richard was incapable of the long-term planning attributed to him.

While not all of his actions were as extreme as stealing the throne, his actions still show the rash thinking involved in his decision-making. His early move to discredit the Queen by accusing her and her family of planning an ambush was generally met with ridicule, and did nothing to maintain the people's trust:

..ahead of the procession they sent four wagons loaded with weapons bearing the devices of the Queen's brothers and sons, besides criers to make generally known, throughout the crowded places by whatsoever

way they passed, that these arms had been collected by the Duke's enemies and stored at convenient spots outside the capital, so as to attack and slay the Duke of Gloucester coming from the country. Since many knew these charges to be false, because the arms in question had been placed there long before the late King's death for an altogether different purpose, when war was being waged against the Scots, mistrust both of his accusation and designs upon the throne was exceedingly augmented. (EHD p 332)

The way in which Richard lays spurious charges without a second thought seems indicative of a man who is clutching at straws, and simply acts on the moment without forethought.

This is not to say that Richard's actions were all trivial or foolish. In his attempt to hold on to his position, he left a series of bloody murders and political blunders, none of which demonstrate the nobility for which he was previously known. This led many contemporaries to paint him as deceiving, but it seems more likely that Richard became desperate and abandoned his previous scruples out of necessity. His actions show a man temporarily confused or panicked over the course of events, one who is simply reacting without planning, thus leaving his actions without forethought or reason.

His execution of Rivers, Grey and Vaughan adds weight to this argument. While it may have been a prudent move to remove the new king from the influence of the Woodvilles, the lack of a suitable charge and the haste with which the executions took place brought condemnation from writers of the time:

Shortly after, Rivers, Grey and Vaughan were cruelly killed at Pontefract, lamented almost by all. Anthony Woodville, Earl Rivers, was found to be wearing, at the time of his death, the hair shirt which he had long been in the habit of wearing against his bare flesh. These lords were condemned to death by the Earl of Northumberland on the false charge that they had plotted the death of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and at that time Protector of the Kingdom of England; and for a thing they had never contemplated, the innocent humbly and peaceably submitted to a cruel fate from their enemies' butchers (Hallam p 282)

This act is probably the first in a series of hasty moves made by a man who clearly felt threatened.

The execution of Hastings is possibly the best example of how these actions continued to become more extreme as time passed. The action taken by Richard is one that clearly defied the conventions of the time. Supposedly acting on information that Hastings was supplying the Woodvilles with information (Jacob, p 618), Richard executed Hastings without a trial and without even allowing him any confession or repentance:

.. one made an outcry of " Treason, treason!" and forthwith the usher opened the door and then pressed in such men as were before

appointed and straightaway laid hands upon the Earl of Derby and the Lord Hastings; and at once without any process of law or lawful examination led the said Lord Hastings out unto the green beside the chapel and there, upon the end of a squared piece of timber, without any long confession or other space of repentance, struck off his head (EHD p 334)

At no point did Richard appear to consider the consequences of this action, and it seems as though it was decided on the spur of the moment. Neither was the cry of treason by Richard substantiated by any evidence, and this disregard for justice caused suspicion, as is hinted at by the Croyland Chronicler:

Thus, without justice or trial, the three strongest supporters of the new king had been removed, while his remaining followers were fearing something similar. Thereafter, the two dukes (Gloucester and Buckingham) did whatever they wished (Hallam p 284)

The short-sightedness of this action seems to indicate the rashness with which Richard was prone to act. The execution of Hastings seems completely without planning, and seems to be a hasty reaction to a rumour.

Outrage was also expressed at Richard's reported move to marry Lady Elizabeth, the eldest daughter of Edward IV. Possibly a move to counter Buckingham's request that the lady be married to Henry Tudor. Richard's blatant move to marry her met with disapproval from many sources. The Croyland Chronicler writes with disapproval of the Christmas of 1484:

Christmas that year was celebrated with great splendour in the Great Hall at Westminster. There was far too much dancing and gaiety. King Richard presented Queen Anne and Lady Elizabeth with a similar set of new and fashionable clothes each. This caused a lot of gossip amongst ordinary people, nobles and bishops (Pollard, 1991 p 162)

It also caused the outrage of even his closest associates:

These men told the king to his face that if he did not deny any such purpose and did not counter it by public declaration before the mayor and commonalty of the city of London, the Northerners in whom he placed the greatest trust would all rise against him.. (Pollard 1991, p 165)

This desperate move to counter Henry Tudor did nothing to aid his already strained credibility, and this shows a very short-term understanding of events and a failure to carefully consider the results of his actions.

This failure to consider carefully his actions led to Richard's final downfall. The Battle of Bosworth Field, Richard's last battle, illustrates the haste with which Richard acted and the calamitous results. In rushing to meet Tudor in battle, Richard neglected to confirm that all his summons for men had been answered. (Pollard p 171)) This resulted in him being short of men, though this alone should not have affected the

outcome of the battle. Richard's final charge, inspired by anger and the desire for a speedy victory, seems to be the final stroke that caused his death:

While the battle continued hot on both sides between the vanguards, King Richard understood ....when Earl Henry was afar off with a small force of soldiers about him; then, after drawing nearer he knew it perfectly by evident signs and tokens that it was Henry. Wherefore, all inflamed with ire, he struck his horse with the spurs and ran against him out of his own army, ahead of the vanguard. (EHD p 346)

This decision allowed William Stanley to attack from behind and destroy the remainder of Richard's army. While Polydore Vergil records that Richard fought "manfully in the thickest press of his enemies" (EHD p 346) one cannot help notice the impetuosity and foolishness of this action. Here, Richard's lack of forethought and need to act ultimately cost him his life.

The portrait that Richard's actions paint of him is one of a man prone to hasty decisions, lacking forethought and the wisdom to make them seem plausible. The manner in which Richard accuses Hastings of treason and subsequently executes him, with no substantial evidence, seems to be hasty, ill-considered and impulsive. The same seems true of the false charges laid against Rivers, Grey and Vaughan before their execution. Other incidents, such as the disaster over his intentions to marry Lady Elizabeth, seem ridiculous and only serve to outline Richard's impetuosity.

This is not the character of a shrewd and cunning traitor. This does not show Richard to be the calculating dissembler that Shakespeare and More have made him. It seems that he was driven by reactions to events outside of his control, and lacked the forethought to execute these actions with any standing success. His taking of the throne seems to be the ill-considered move of a short-sighted man determined to keep his position, not the long term plan of a calculating and artful usurper.

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