

**A Guide to
RICHARD III**

by William Shakespeare



Alistair McCallum

“The Shakespeare Handbooks open the plays up admirably. Excellent for all levels of reader – everybody will get something from them.” Simon Callow

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *Richard III* in or around 1592. He was in his late twenties, and had arrived in the London theatre world relatively recently, probably in the late 1580s, as a novice actor. He soon turned to writing, however, and quickly made his mark as a dramatist. By the time of *Richard III*, his fame was such that the established London writer Robert Greene scathingly described the provincial newcomer, the actor-turned-playwright who lacked a university education, as ‘an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers’.

Richard III was an immediate success, and remained popular throughout Shakespeare’s lifetime, both in performance and in print; it was relatively unusual for theatre companies to produce printed versions of their plays, but *Richard III* was published in booklet form a few years after its first performances, and reprinted several times over the next forty years.

In 1700, a young actor and aspiring playwright named Colley Cibber published an adapted version of *Richard III*. It was far shorter and simpler than the original; many characters and scenes were removed, and less than a third of Shakespeare’s text was retained. Lines from several other Shakespeare plays were inserted, and Cibber added hundreds of lines of his own. Cibber intended to play the part of Richard himself, but his attempts were widely ridiculed. However, the play itself grew in popularity; although it is now regarded as a museum-piece, it was widely preferred to Shakespeare’s original for almost two hundred years.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, Shakespeare’s original story of the rise and fall of an ambitious, unscrupulous, Machiavellian individual has demonstrated its power to captivate audiences once more:

“Looked at one way, Richard III belongs to a distant world of medieval politics, obscure chronicles and vanished theatrical traditions. But from another angle his story still speaks to a contemporary world, which views politicians and their schemes with mistrust and looks for reassurances about the power of good to overcome evil ... There is no shortage of power-hungry and ruthless politicians and executives today. Over 400 years since its composition, Richard III still tells us a story we want to hear.”

Malcolm Hebron, *Richard III and the Will to Power*, 2016

A violent resolution

For thirty years, England has been torn apart by civil war. Two rival royal families, the houses of York and Lancaster, have been fighting for possession of the English crown in a series of bloody battles, executions and assassinations. Later generations will remember these decades of conflict as the Wars of the Roses.

The long, troubled reign of the Lancastrian King Henry VI has come to an end after a brutal battle in which many Lancastrian supporters were killed. After the battle, the king was imprisoned and his young son murdered. Soon Henry himself was also murdered, and the Yorkist King Edward IV came to the throne.

An uneasy peace

Edward has two sons, so the future of the house of York seems secure. However, this period of calm, achieved with such violence, is extremely fragile. The king's wife, Elizabeth Woodville, is unpopular with the established nobility; she is a widow of relatively humble origins, and many suspect that she has abused her position to gain wealth and influence for her own family. There is growing antagonism in court between the queen's supporters and her opponents. King Edward himself, meanwhile, is in poor health, and can do little to reconcile the rival factions.

The king has two younger brothers, George and Richard, both of whom distrust their sister-in-law Elizabeth. The younger of the two, Richard, is ill-proportioned and hunchbacked, and cuts an incongruous figure in the elegance of the royal court. These times of peace and comfort do not suit him, and he is already nostalgic for the excitement and danger of the wars. Instead, his attention is now directed towards achieving his own ambitions: shrewd, energetic and amoral, he is already considering what the consequences might be if his brother Edward were to die in the near future.

Curtain up

Evil intentions

I, i

Richard, youngest brother of King Edward, is alone, contemplating recent events. The years of civil war are over, he reflects; and his brother Edward, after a series of decisive battles, is finally secure on the English throne.

Although the Duke of York, Edward and Richard's father, was one of the thousands who died in the fighting, the house of York is now firmly in power:

Richard: Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this son of York,¹
And all the clouds that loured upon our house²
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.

¹ *King Edward, eldest son of the Duke of York*
² *frowned threateningly upon our family*

Conflict has given way to pleasure, muses Richard, as he imagines the spirit of war transforming itself into a lover:

Richard: Grim-visaged War hath smoothed his wrinkled front;¹
And now, instead of mounting barbed² steeds
To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber
To the lascivious pleasing³ of a lute.

¹ *his grimacing face*

² *armoured*

³ *pleasurable, sensual music*

Richard, however, does not share in the widespread mood of elation. He is aware that his physical deformity – the result of his premature birth – cuts him off from the world of romantic adventures. Nature has treated him cruelly, he complains:

Richard: ... I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,¹
Cheated of feature² by dissembling Nature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent³ before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,

And that so lamely and unfashionable⁴

That dogs bark at me as I halt⁵ by them ...

¹ *have been denied an attractive physical form*

² *mistreated in my outward appearance*

³ *born*

⁴ *scarcely half finished, and so poorly created and misshapen*

⁵ *limp*

The general euphoria brought about by his brother's triumph only makes Richard more conscious of his own misfortune:

Richard: ... Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,¹
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to see my shadow in the sun
And descant on² mine own deformity.

¹ *time of carefree music and idleness*

² *comment on, enlarge on*

In his resentment, Richard vows to create hostility between his two older brothers, King Edward and George, Duke of Clarence. He has already taken steps to sow discord between them:

Richard: ... since I cannot prove a lover
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,¹
I am determined² to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
Plots have I laid, inductions³ dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams,⁴
To set my brother Clarence and the King
In deadly hate, the one against the other ...

¹ *to occupy these bright, cheerful days*

² *resolved; also predestined, fated*

³ *initial measures*

⁴ *by spreading fictitious prophecies during drunken conversations, passing round documents that make false claims, and inventing troubling dreams*

In particular, Richard has anonymously spread rumours of a prophecy that an individual known only as 'G' will murder the king's two sons, heirs to the throne of England. If the rumour has been effective, suspicion will immediately fall upon the king's brother George; after all, if the king's sons were to die, he would be next in line to the throne. The fact that the king is in poor health, and possibly close to death, makes the matter even more crucial.

Aiming for the crown

It immediately becomes clear that Richard's ruse has been successful as the Duke of Clarence himself approaches, surrounded by an armed guard. Richard feigns surprise, and asks his brother why he is being treated in this way. Clarence confirms that the king has – as Richard had hoped – learnt of the prophecy and taken it to heart. As a result, Clarence is to be imprisoned in the Tower of London.

Richard offers his sympathy, and assures Clarence that the decision to imprison him cannot have been taken by their brother the king; this is clearly the work of his scheming wife, Elizabeth Woodville. She and her brother, Richard mentions, recently arranged for an important nobleman, Lord Hastings, to be held captive in the Tower. Fortunately, Hastings has been freed; but no one is safe, claims Richard, while the queen holds such power over her ailing husband.

Clarence agrees. Their brother, King Edward, is dominated by two women, his wife Elizabeth Woodville and his mistress Elizabeth Shore. In fact, Hastings was released only after pleading desperately with the king's lover:

Clarence: By heaven, I think there is no man secure
But the Queen's kindred¹ and night-walking heralds²
That trudge betwixt the King and Mistress Shore.
Heard you not what an humble suppliant
Lord Hastings was to her for his delivery?

¹ *family, relations*

² *go-betweens, servants carrying secret messages at night*

In charge of the guard accompanying Clarence is Sir Robert Brakenbury, the Lieutenant of the Tower of London. He now approaches the two brothers and explains respectfully that his detainee is not permitted, by order of the king, to have any private conversations. Richard replies, flippantly, that their discussion is completely innocent, and Brakenbury is welcome to join them:

Richard: ... You may partake of any thing we say.
We speak no treason, man; we say the King
Is wise and virtuous, and his noble Queen
Well struck in years,¹ fair and not jealous.
We say that Shore's wife² hath a pretty foot,
A cherry lip, a bonny eye, a passing pleasing tongue³ ...

¹ *ageing but well preserved*

² *William Shore's wife, Elizabeth Shore; the king's mistress*

³ *an exceptionally pleasant way of expressing herself*

Brakenbury insists, politely but firmly, that there must be no further talk between the two brothers, and Clarence is led away to the Tower. As he leaves, Richard promises to do his utmost to secure Clarence's release. However, once he is on his own again he reveals his true feelings. If he has his way, Clarence will never leave the Tower alive:

Richard: Well, your imprisonment shall not be long;
I will deliver you, or else lie for you.¹
Meantime, have patience.

Clarence: I must perforce.² Farewell.
[Clarence is escorted away by Brakenbury and the guards]

Richard: Go, tread the path that thou shalt ne'er return;
Simple, plain Clarence, I do love thee so
That I will shortly send thy soul to heaven ...

¹ *I will ensure that you are released, or else take your place in prison*

² *I have no choice*

The nobleman Lord Hastings now appears. He has just been released from the Tower, and is resentful towards those who, he believes, were responsible for his unjust imprisonment. Richard sympathises; his own brother Clarence, he explains, has been mistreated in the same way. The two men, without naming names, make it clear that they blame the queen and her family – who are not of aristocratic descent – for their arbitrary abuse of power:

Richard: How hath your lordship brooked¹ imprisonment?

Hastings: With patience, noble lord, as prisoners must;
But I shall live, my lord, to give them thanks²
That were the cause of my imprisonment.

Richard: No doubt, no doubt; and so shall Clarence too,
For they that were your enemies are his
And have prevailed as much on him as you.³

Hastings: More pity that the eagles should be mewed
While kites and buzzards play at liberty.⁴

¹ *tolerated, endured*

² *repay, take revenge*

³ *they have been cruel to him, just as they were to you*

⁴ *noble birds of prey are confined to a cage while
inferior ones can fly freely*

Hastings mentions that the king is very ill. In response, Richard suggests that his brother, though not an old man, is paying the price for many years of over-indulgence and sexual excess:

Hastings: ... The King is sickly, weak and melancholy,
And his physicians fear him¹ mightily.

Richard: Now by Saint John, that news is bad indeed.
O, he hath kept an evil diet² long,
And over-much consumed³ his royal person.
'Tis very grievous to be thought upon.

¹ *fear for him, are worried about him*

² *an unwholesome way of life*

³ *worn out, depleted*

Hastings leaves; and Richard, alone, once again reveals his real intentions. Clarence must be removed as soon as possible, he resolves, to clear the path for his own succession when the king dies. If things go well, both of Richard's brothers will soon be dead:

Richard: He¹ cannot live, I hope, and must not die
Till George² be packed with post-horse³ up to heaven.
... if I fail not in my deep intent,
Clarence hath not another day to live;
Which done, God take King Edward to His mercy,
And leave the world for me to bustle⁴ in.

¹ *King Edward*

² *the Duke of Clarence*

³ *sent swiftly*

⁴ *take action, make my way*

Shakespeare wrote *Richard III* at an early stage of his career. Not yet thirty, he was already a successful playwright, best known for his gruesome revenge tragedy *Titus Andronicus* and the three parts of *Henry VI*.

Richard III, following on from the *Henry VI* plays, was the fourth in a series which traced the course of the Wars of the Roses. However, the play stands out sharply from its predecessors, marking a new departure for Shakespeare. Its central character, the energetic and shameless Richard, was by far his most ambitious and complex creation to date, and created a sensation in the world of London theatre:

“There can be no doubt as to the relish with which Shakespeare fashioned his Richard. If the devil has all the best tunes, Richard has all the best lines ... Darkly charismatic, Richard is Shakespeare’s most compelling creation so far.”

Catharine Arnold, *Globe: Life in Shakespeare’s London*, 2015

Richard has a further scheme in mind. His brother Edward rose to power by defeating the forces of King Henry VI and imprisoning the king; to consolidate the victory of the house of York, both the king and his only son were then murdered. Richard took part in both murders. Now, incredibly, he intends to win the affection of Lady Anne Neville, the young widow of the murdered prince:

Richard: ... I'll marry Warwick's youngest daughter.¹
What though² I killed her husband and her father?³
The readiest way to make the wench amends
Is to become her husband and her father⁴ ...

¹ *Lady Anne Neville*

² *what does it matter if*

³ *her father-in-law, King Henry*

⁴ *carer, protector*

For the present, however, Richard's two brothers stand in the way of his ambitions:

Richard: But yet I run before my horse to market.¹
Clarence still breathes, Edward still lives and reigns;
When they are gone, then must I count my gains.

¹ *I am being too hasty*

An unwelcome interruption

I, ii

The body of the murdered King Henry, accompanied by an armed guard, is being carried through the streets of London towards its final resting place in a monastery outside the city.

The chief mourner is the king's daughter-in-law, Lady Anne Neville. She asks the pallbearers to put the coffin down while she pauses to lament the death of the king, and she recalls, with bitter anger, the man who murdered both him and his son. With their deaths, the short-lived royal house of Lancaster – the family of Henry, his father and his grandfather – is extinct:

Anne: Pale ashes of the house of Lancaster,
Thou bloodless remnant of that royal blood,
Be it lawful that I invoke thy ghost¹
To hear the lamentations of poor Anne,

Wife to thy Edward,² to thy slaughtered son,
Stabbed by the selfsame hand that made these wounds.³

¹ *I hope it is permissible to appeal to your spirit*

² *King Henry's only son*

³ *stabbed by the same man – Richard – who caused the wounds on your own body*

As Anne looks lovingly at the king's mutilated corpse, she curses his killer Richard vehemently:

Anne: O, cursed be the hand that made these holes;¹
Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it;
Cursed the blood that let this blood from hence.²
... If ever he have child, abortive be it,
Prodigious, and untimely brought to light,³
Whose ugly and unnatural aspect
May fright the hopeful mother at the view⁴ ...

¹ *Henry's wounds*

² *spilt the king's blood*

³ *unnatural, monstrous, and delivered before its time*

⁴ *as soon as she sees it*

Anne now tells the pallbearers to raise the coffin, and the procession continues. At this moment, however, Richard himself appears and orders them to stop. Anne is horrified:

Anne: What black magician conjures up this fiend
To stop devoted charitable deeds?¹

¹ *to interrupt our sacred, loving ceremony*

Richard tries, in vain, to pacify Anne. Appalled by his presence, she continues to curse him, and urges him to leave. She is convinced that the king's wounds are starting to bleed once more in the presence of his murderer:

Richard: Sweet saint, for charity, be not so curst.¹

Anne: Foul devil, for God's sake hence,² and trouble us not ...
[*to her attendants*] O gentlemen, see, see dead Henry's wounds

Open their congealed mouths, and bleed afresh.

[*to Richard*] Blush, blush, thou lump of foul deformity,
For 'tis thy presence that exhales³ this blood

From cold and empty veins where no blood dwells.

Thy deeds, inhuman and unnatural,

Provokes this deluge⁴ most unnatural.

O God, which this blood mad'st, revenge his death!

¹ *ill-tempered*

² *get away, leave me alone*

³ *draws out, produces*

⁴ *sudden flowing of blood*

Impervious to Anne's curses, Richard continues to flatter her, and begs for a chance to explain himself. The only way in which he can begin to make amends is to kill himself, she retorts:

Richard: Fairer than tongue can name thee,¹ let me have
Some patient leisure² to excuse myself.

Anne: Fouler than heart can think thee, thou canst make
No excuse current³ but to hang thyself.

Richard: By such despair I should accuse myself.⁴

Anne: And by despairing shalt thou stand excused
For doing worthy vengeance on thyself⁵ ...

¹ *inexpressibly beautiful woman*

² *your time and patience*

³ *no genuine release from your guilt*

⁴ *such a despairing action would be sinful*

⁵ *you would be atoning for your murders by justifiably killing the murderer*

Richard now claims that he did not kill Anne's husband: it was his brother, now King Edward, who struck the fatal blow. Anne rejects his assertion angrily, aware that all three of the York brothers – Edward, Clarence and Richard – took part in the murder. Richard alone, moreover, was responsible for the death of King Henry.

Undaunted, Richard claims that Henry, known for his religious piety, is more suited to life in heaven than on earth. Drawing Anne into a battle of words, he suddenly makes a brazen suggestion:

Anne: He¹ is in heaven, where thou shalt never come.
Richard: Let him thank me that help to send him thither,²
For he was fitter for that place than earth.
Anne: And thou unfit for any place but hell.
Richard: Yes, one place else, if you will hear me name it.
Anne: Some dungeon.
Richard: Your bedchamber.

¹ *King Henry*

² *helped to send him there*

“Graphically, this scene illustrates Richard’s power and Anne’s powerlessness. Helpless to challenge him physically, she attempts to disarm him with words. She seeks to force her will. Scorn, hatred, vehemence, curses: all fall from her lips. Little anticipating the aim of his confrontation, she is astonished and completely bewildered when Richard offers marriage. Historically, Richard pursued Anne for two years before winning her. Shakespeare compresses this into one scene, choosing a moment when she is most confused and emotionally most unstable.”

Irene G. Dash, *The Paradox of Power in Richard III*,
1981

A change of heart

Despite her contempt for Richard, Anne continues to engage in verbal jousting with him. It was her beauty, he declares, that drove him to commit the violent acts of which he is guilty. She replies that she would disfigure her face with her own hands if she believed that to be true. Richard, like a sonneteer addressing his beloved, tells her that he would not allow it:

Richard: These eyes could not endure that beauty's wrack;¹
You should not blemish it if I stood by.²
As all the world is cheered by the sun,
So I by that.³ It is my day, my life.
Anne: Black night o'ershade thy day, and death thy life.⁴
Richard: Curse not thyself, fair creature; thou art both.⁵

¹ *I could not bear to see the destruction of your beauty*

² *if I were present to stop you*

³ *in the same way, I am sustained by your beauty*

⁴ *may your days turn to night, and your life to death*

⁵ *you are my light and my life; do not curse yourself*

Richard even suggests that he would make a better husband for Anne than the man he murdered. He reminds her that although he and King Henry's son were from rival families – the houses of York and Lancaster – both houses are branches of the old Plantagenet family. Anne responds with fury:

Richard: He that bereft thee, lady, of thy husband,
Did it to help thee to a better husband.
Anne: His better doth not breathe upon the earth.
Richard: He lives¹ that loves thee better than he could.
Anne: Name him.
Richard: Plantagenet.
Anne: Why, that was he.
Richard: The selfsame name, but one of better nature.
Anne: Where is he?
Richard: Here. [*she spits at him*]
Why dost thou spit at me?
Anne: Would it were mortal poison,² for thy sake.

¹ *there is one man living*

² *I wish it were deadly poison*

Eventually Richard makes an outright declaration of his love for Anne. Terrible events in his past have never brought tears to his eyes, he claims, but her cruel rejection of his love has made him weep. In a dramatic gesture, he bares his chest and, kneeling before her, hands her his sword:

Richard: If thy revengeful heart cannot forgive,
Lo, here I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword,
Which if thou please to hide in this true breast
And let the soul forth that adareth thee,¹
I lay it naked to the deadly stroke
And humbly beg the death upon my knee.

¹ *release my loving soul from its body by killing me*

He urges her not to pause; after all, he is the one who, motivated by love for her, murdered her husband and father-in-law. Anne cannot bring herself to kill him, however, and she drops the weapon. He will take his own life, says Richard, if she gives the word; but her mood is becoming calmer, and she tells him to sheathe his sword.

Anne refuses to say that she has forgiven Richard, but her earlier rage has died down. She even accepts a ring from him, though she warns him not to expect her gratitude or affection:

Richard: Say then my peace is made.¹
Anne: That shalt thou know hereafter.²
Richard: But shall I live in hope?
Anne: All men I hope live so.
Richard: Vouchsafe³ to wear this ring.
Anne: [*puts on the ring*] To take is not to give.⁴
Richard: Look how my ring encompasseth thy finger;
Even so thy breast encloseth my poor heart.
Wear both of them, for both of them are thine.

¹ *we are reconciled*

² *in the future*

³ *agree, do me the honour*

⁴ *if I accept it, I do not owe you anything in return*

Richard now ventures to ask a favour: if Anne permits him, he will gladly take care of King Henry's burial. He deeply regrets the king's murder, he assures her, and would appreciate the chance to make amends by mourning over the body and burying it personally at the monastery chosen as Henry's final resting place. Anne, believing that Richard is showing genuine remorse, agrees, and she leaves with her attendants.

Richard, who in truth has no interest in mourning his victim's death, sends the pallbearers on their way with the king's body. Now alone, he reveals his delight at having pacified Anne. He is convinced that she is in love with him, and is amazed at his own success. He considers the idea of marrying her, although he feels no particular affection towards her:

Richard: Was ever woman in this humour¹ wooed?
Was ever woman in this humour won?
I'll have her, but I will not keep her long.

¹ *state of mind, mood*

When Richard considers Anne's dead husband, King Henry's son and heir Edward, he is even more astonished. The young prince, killed by Richard and his brothers after a decisive battle in which the Lancastrians were defeated, was a model of courage and chivalry:

Richard: Hath she forgot already that brave prince,
Edward, her lord, whom I, some three months since,
Stabbed in my angry mood at Tewkesbury?¹
A sweeter and a lovelier gentleman,
Framed in the prodigality of Nature,²
Young, valiant, wise and, no doubt, right royal,
The spacious world cannot again afford³ ...

¹ *site of a major battle in the Wars of the Roses*

² *created by Nature at her most generous*

³ *will never again be seen anywhere in the world*

Richard reflects, in amused disbelief, on Anne's apparent attraction to him, her husband's murderer, a man who is in every way inferior to his victim:

Richard: ... And will she yet abase her eyes on me,¹
 That cropped the golden prime of this sweet prince²
 And made her widow to a woeful bed?
 On me, whose all not equals Edward's moiety?³
 On me, that halts⁴ and am misshapen thus?

¹ *degrade herself by looking favourably on me*
² *cut short Edward's life as he reached the springtime of early manhood*
³ *whose whole worth is not equal to half of Edward's*
⁴ *limps, is lame*

Perhaps he is wrong about his appearance, Richard tells himself mockingly; perhaps he is, after all, as handsome and well built as any courtier. He is amused at the idea of adopting vain habits and admiring his own image:

Richard: Upon my life, she finds, although I cannot,
 Myself to be a marvellous proper¹ man.
 I'll be at charges for a looking-glass²
 And entertain³ a score or two of tailors
 To study fashions to adorn my body ...
 Shine out,⁴ fair sun, till I have bought a glass,
 That⁵ I may see my shadow as I pass.

¹ *good-looking*
² *spend some money on a mirror*
³ *employ*
⁴ *keep shining*
⁵ *so that*

“Whatever else he may be, Richard is also an actor. He plays parts with a brio unmatched by virtually any other character in Shakespeare: he may do it with a sly wink to us of his true motives, but he does so to dazzling effect. No wonder, then, that the critics and his onstage comrades interpret him so differently – he is never playing quite the same role in any scene.”

Peter Byrne, *Richard III: Sympathy for the Devil*, 2007

Bad blood

I, iii

An atmosphere of anxiety hangs over the royal palace. King Edward, though scarcely in middle age, is very ill; and his heir, also named Edward, is still a child. If the king dies in the near future, Prince Edward will be placed under the protection of the king's brother Richard, who will effectively become ruler of England. King Edward's wife, Queen Elizabeth, is horrified at the prospect of losing her son to the unscrupulous Richard.

There is deep, long-standing hostility between Richard and the queen. King Edward's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville, a young widow from a relatively low-ranking family, had created uproar amongst the English nobility; indeed, the king had, at first, attempted to keep the marriage secret. This resentment has continued through the years as members of the Woodville family have gained great wealth, power and status despite their humble origins.

The queen is with her brother Anthony – now Lord Rivers – and Lord Grey, her son from her previous marriage. Both men are trying, unsuccessfully, to console her:

Rivers: Have patience, madam. There's no doubt his majesty
Will soon recover his accustomed health.

Grey: In that you brook it ill,¹ it makes him worse;
Therefore for God's sake entertain good comfort
And cheer his grace with quick and merry eyes.

Queen Elizabeth: If he were dead, what would betide on me?

Grey: No other harm but loss of such a lord.²

Queen Elizabeth: The loss of such a lord includes all harms.

¹ *take it badly, show that you are upset*

² *you would lose your husband, but there would be no further ill effects*

Two nobleman, the Duke of Buckingham and Lord Stanley, now arrive at the palace. They bring news that the king wishes to make peace between the warring factions in the royal household. With this in mind, he has summoned his brother Richard and the various members of the queen's family to his bedside. Lord Hastings, recently imprisoned in the Tower of London at the behest of the Woodvilles, is also to attend.

The queen doubts that harmony can be achieved among the country's divided nobility:

Queen Elizabeth: Would¹ all were well, but that will never be;
I fear our happiness is at the height.²

¹ *I wish*

² *our fortunes can only get worse*

At this moment Richard bursts in, angrily demanding to know who has been spreading rumours about him. He is a blunt, plain speaker, he declares, and for that reason people have been telling the king, his brother, that he has been stirring up trouble. The fault lies not with him but with the king's devious, deceitful courtiers, he protests. He is the victim, not the perpetrator:

Richard: Who is it that complains unto the King
That I, forsooth, am stern and love them not?
... Because I cannot flatter, and look fair,
Smile in men's faces, smooth, deceive and cog,¹
Duck with French nods and apish courtesy,²
I must be held a rancorous enemy.³
Cannot a plain man live and think no harm
But thus his simple truth must be abused
With silken, sly, insinuating jacks?⁴

¹ *flatter and cajole*

² *behave in an affected, servile manner*

³ *considered a vindictive troublemaker*

⁴ *distorted by smooth, ingratiating scoundrels*

Richard looks round accusingly at the company. Everyone in the queen's entourage is guilty of victimising him, he asserts, even though he has never done them any harm. The queen replies that no one has approached her husband to complain about Richard; it was the king's own decision to bring everyone together, no doubt because he was worried about Richard's hostile attitude towards the Woodvilles.

Even though he is the king's brother, Richard remarks sarcastically, he has no power in the disordered world of King Edward's court. The aristocracy has been pushed aside by ambitious commoners:

Richard: ... the world is grown so bad
That wrens make prey where eagles dare not perch.
Since every jack¹ became a gentleman,
There's many a gentle person made a jack.²

¹ *low-born fellow*

² *reduced in status; also, made into a target, like the small ball aimed at by bowls players*

An example of the ill-treatment of the established nobility, mentions Richard, is the fact that his brother Clarence is currently being detained, without justification, in the Tower of London. The queen hotly denies any responsibility for his imprisonment; and when Richard mentions the detention of another nobleman, Lord Hastings, the queen's brother Lord Rivers intervenes to defend her. Richard then berates both the queen and her brother for their corruption and nepotism.

Finally, the queen, exhausted and disheartened, threatens to tell the king about Richard's constant quarrelling:

Queen Elizabeth: My lord of Gloucester,¹ I have too long borne
Your blunt upbraidings and your bitter scoffs.
By heaven, I will acquaint his majesty
Of those gross taunts that oft I have endured.
I had rather be a country servant maid
Than a great queen with this condition,²
To be so baited, scorned, and stormed at.³
Small joy have I in being England's queen.

¹ *the Duke of Gloucester, Richard*

² *under these circumstances; with this constant criticism*

³ *tormented, derided and shouted at*

A voice from the past

In the midst of the ill-tempered wrangling, a frail, elderly figure slips in unnoticed. It is Queen Margaret, widow of Henry VI, the Lancastrian king ousted by the Yorkists and replaced by King Edward. She observes the proceedings with bitter contempt.

Margaret resents Queen Elizabeth, who has taken her place as consort of the King of England; but her fiercest hatred is reserved for Richard. As he defiantly reminds Queen Elizabeth that he helped to place her husband on the throne, Margaret, unheard, recalls the murderous part Richard played in events:

Richard: [to *Queen Elizabeth*] What? Threat you me with telling of the King?
Tell him and spare not. Look what I have said
I will avouch't¹ in presence of the King.
I dare adventure² to be sent to th' Tower.
'Tis time to speak; my pains are quite forgot.³

Queen Margaret: [*aside*] Out, devil! I do remember them too well:
Thou killed'st my husband Henry in the Tower,
And Edward, my poor son, at Tewkesbury.

¹ *whatever I have said, I will repeat it*

² *I'm not afraid of the risk*

³ *everyone has forgotten the efforts I made on my brother's behalf*

“Beyond the real time of the play’s events, there is quite another time scale operating, personified in Margaret, which presents a world where the living and the dead are very close together. The dead haunt this play, constantly bringing the past into the present. Margaret’s arrival in the play, into the immediate here-and-now of the quarrelling Yorkists, brings with it a sense of an ancient world, of timelessness and revenge, of grief and pain, of a different, dark time system that comes to possess the play.”

Director Steven Pimlott on his 1995 production of
Richard III with the Royal Shakespeare Company

Remaining in the background, Margaret continues to comment angrily on the discussion as Richard, Elizabeth and Lord Rivers, unaware of her presence, argue over past events.

Finally, when Elizabeth complains once more that her position as Queen of England has not made her happy, Margaret – believing herself to be the rightful queen – can no longer remain in the background. She strides forward, to the shock of the assembled court, and singles out Richard, who responds venomously:

Queen Margaret: Hear me, you wrangling pirates, that fall out
In sharing that which you have pill'd¹ from me:
Which of you trembles not, that looks on me?
... [*to Richard*] Ah, gentle² villain, do not turn away.
Richard: Foul wrinkled witch, what mak'st thou in my sight?³

¹ *plundered, stolen*

² *high-born*

³ *what are you doing here?*

Richard reminds Margaret that, after the final defeat of the Lancastrians, she was banished from England forever. Unafraid of death, however, Margaret is determined to confront her enemies, insisting that she is the true queen:

Richard: Wert thou not banished on pain of death?
Queen Margaret: I was, but I do find more pain in banishment
Than death can yield me here by my abode.¹
[*to Richard*] A husband and a son thou ow'st to me;
[*to Queen Elizabeth*] And thou a kingdom; [*to all*] all
of you, allegiance.
This sorrow that I have, by right is yours,
And all the pleasures you usurp are mine.
¹ *banishment holds more pain for me than remaining
here to face death*

Margaret was not an innocent victim in the recent conflict, however. After one of the many battles between Yorkists and Lancastrians, she had taken part in the murder of Richard's father, the Duke of York – who was himself ambitious for the throne – and mocked him by placing a paper crown on his head. At the same time she had taunted the duke with the fact that his young son Edmund had been put to death.

The memory of the young boy's murder unites the assembled nobles in their hatred for Margaret, and they turn on her accusingly. Unrepentant, she casts a series of curses on the house of York and its followers. King Edward will die soon, she predicts; she prays too that his young son and heir, like her own, will suffer a violent death. Margaret turns to Elizabeth, and wishes her a long life of misery and loss:

Queen Margaret: Thyself a queen, for me that was a queen,¹
Outlive thy glory,² like my wretched self.
Long mayst thou live to wail thy children's death
And see another, as I see thee now,
Decked in thy rights, as thou art stalled in mine.³
Long die thy happy days before thy death,⁴
And, after many lengthened hours of grief,
Die neither mother, wife, nor England's queen.⁵

¹ *in return for usurping my position*

² *may you live to see your days of glory come to an end*

³ *see another woman steal the adornments of royalty from you, just as you have stolen them from me*

⁴ *may your life become miserable long before you die*

⁵ *without children, husband or throne*

Margaret prays that the other courtiers present – Rivers, Hastings and Grey – will all die violent, untimely deaths, as they too were present when her young son was killed.

Finally Margaret turns to Richard. She hopes that fate holds a worse punishment for him than any she can imagine:

Richard: Have done thy charm,¹ thou hateful withered hag.
Queen Margaret: And leave out thee? Stay, dog, for thou shalt hear me.
If heaven have any grievous plague in store
Exceeding those that I can wish upon thee,
O, let them keep it till thy sins be ripe,²
And then hurl down their indignation
On thee, the troubler of the poor world's peace.

¹ *that's enough of your magic spells*

² *may the heavens wait until your full wickedness emerges*

If heaven have any grievous plague in store ...

Shakespeare's plays include numerous references to the plague, which was a constant presence throughout his life. He had been fortunate to survive an outbreak in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, the year of his birth; in that year, the small town lost over 200 people to the plague, including four children in the same street as the newborn William.

The London theatre world was severely affected by the plague, as theatres were forced to close whenever plague deaths reached dangerous levels. It is possible that the first performances of *Richard III* had to be postponed for several months, perhaps over a year, due to major outbreaks in 1592–3. A government proclamation of that time was typical of many that would follow throughout Shakespeare's career:

"Forasmuch as by the certificate¹ of the last week it appeareth the infection doth increase ... we think it fit that all manner of concourse and public meetings of the people at plays, bear-baitings, bowlings and other like assemblies for sports be forbidden."

¹ *record of plague deaths*

Margaret foresees a life of doubt, fear and treachery for Richard:

Queen Margaret: The worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul;¹
Thy friends suspect for traitors² while thou liv'st,
And take deep traitors for thy dearest friends;
No sleep close up that deadly eye of thine,
Unless it be while some tormenting dream
Affrights thee with a hell of ugly devils.

¹ *may your conscience constantly eat away at your soul*

² *may you suspect your friends to be traitors*

Finally, her anger building, Margaret hurls a series of bitter insults at him:

Queen Margaret: Thou elvish-marked,¹ abortive, rooting hog,²
Thou that wast sealed in thy nativity
The slave of nature³ and the son of hell;
Thou slander of thy heavy mother's womb,⁴
Thou loathed issue of thy father's loins ...

¹ *disfigured at birth by spiteful spirits*

² *disruptive, hunch-backed beast; the boar was
Richard's heraldic emblem*

³ *marked out at birth as a villain*

⁴ *disgrace to your sorrowful mother*

Richard interrupts Margaret's outburst, preventing her from bringing her curse to its conclusion. He has rendered her words worthless, remarks Queen Elizabeth with satisfaction. Margaret warns her that it is foolish of her to defend Richard. One day, she predicts, Elizabeth herself will be cursing her brother-in-law:

Queen Margaret: Poor painted queen, vain flourish of my fortune,¹
Why strew'st thou sugar on that bottled² spider,
Whose deadly web ensnareth thee about?
Fool, fool, thou whet'st³ a knife to kill thyself.
The day will come that thou shalt wish for me
To help thee curse this poisonous hunch-backed toad.

¹ *worthless, superficial imitation of the majesty that is
rightfully mine*

² *squat, hunch-backed*

³ *you are sharpening*