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The Lost Princes:
Who Murdered King Edward V and his Brother?

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In the summer of 1483, two young boys locked in the tower of London were critical in determining the future of the British throne. England was nearing the conclusion of a thirty-year civil war between the House of York and the House of Lancaster, during which the crown changed hands nine times. In 1471 Edward IV (1442-1483) of the Yorkist line defeated the Lancastrian forces and ruled until his death in 1483. Political instability was still rampant and intensified upon the sudden death of Edward IV. Before dying, he named his twelve-year-old son, Edward V, his successor and named his brother, Richard Duke of Gloucester (1452-1485), the Lord Protector until his son was old enough to rule on his own. However, at just twelve years old, King Edward V was a threat to his paternal uncle, Richard Duke of Gloucester. Edward's loyalties were with the maternal side of his family due to his growing up under the guardianship of his maternal uncle Lord Rivers. The maternal side of the family, including the recently widowed queen, did not support the protectorate of Richard Duke of Gloucester. The Duke of Gloucester had watched his brother, Edward IV, lose and regain his throne in a struggle for power with the deposed Henry VI (1421-1471) and understood that—as a Lord Protector who

was not favored by the young king and his allies—he was in a precarious situation that could cost him both his position and his life.¹

With strong enemies fighting for control of the young king, Richard Duke of Gloucester took Edward V and his younger brother, Richard Duke of York, and locked them in the Tower of London under the guise of preparing Edward V for his coronation. However, after discovering that the royal council named him Lord Protector only until the coronation of Edward V, Richard Duke of Gloucester postponed the coronation and seized control of the Tower of London. A part of this effort was to replace the royal council members, many of whom were loyal to the widowed queen, with council members he knew would be loyal to him. What should have been celebratory preparations for a coronation turned sinister as the princes were declared illegitimate and disinherited. The basis for declaring that the princes were not the rightful heirs was dubious, but was orchestrated by Richard Duke of Gloucester who then declared that he was the rightful heir to the throne. Not long after, the princes disappeared under the rule of their uncle who was then King Richard III.²

The princes were believed to have been murdered, but bodies would not be found until two hundred years later and, even then, could not be confirmed to be the remains of the princes. Dental and skeletal examination confirmed that the bodies discovered in the Tower of London were of two people who died at the same age as the princes were when they were believed to

¹ For this history, see Susan Flanter, “Assassination of Henry VI, King of England (1471),” *Unofficial Royalty* (blog), January 31, 2020, <http://www.unofficialroyalty.com/assassination-of-henry-vi-king-of-england-1471/>; Medievalists.net, “Richard Duke of Gloucester as Lord Protector and High Constable of England,” *Medievalists.Net* (blog), June 24, 2015, <https://www.medievalists.net/2015/06/richard-duke-of-gloucester-as-lord-protector-and-high-constable-of-england/>; Brain, Jessica, “King Edward V,” *Historic UK*, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/King-Edward-V/>.

² For Richard III, see Josephine Wilkinson, *The Princes in the Tower: Did Richard III Murder His Nephews, Edward V & Richard of York?* (Stroud, UK: Amberley Publishing Limited, 2013); Paul Murray Kendall, *Richard the Third* (Redditch, UK: Read Books Ltd, 2013).

have been murdered.³ With no known other missing remains matching the descriptions of these bodies, it is likely these are the bodies of the princes. Theories surrounding the princes' fate have enraptured historians for centuries. Upon examining all plausible theories, it can be concluded that the two princes were most likely murdered at the orders of their uncle, Richard III.

Richard Duke of Gloucester found himself in a precarious position after the death of his brother. The widowed queen despised him and sought to strip him of his position and influence.⁴ This was especially dangerous as the young king had been under the care of his maternal uncle and consequently felt great loyalty to his mother and her family. As Lord Protector, Richard Duke of Gloucester had an unstable and short-term position and limited protection. To truly be safe he needed to be king himself. Under Richard's encouragement, a cardinal declared the two princes illegitimate and they were taken out of the line of succession. This allowed Richard III to take the throne, but it did not allow him to secure the throne as the declaration of their illegitimacy could easily be overturned. The instability of the throne was a reality of which Richard III was aware since, "in 1483 he had already faced a challenge to his throne."⁵ The only way for Richard III to truly be safe from his nephews was if they disappeared altogether. In the summer of 1483, that is exactly what happened.

In order to conclude that Richard III was willing to kill his nephews to secure his throne, it is important to first examine and disprove the other theories surrounding the disappearance of the princes. The first theory is that the princes escaped or were allowed to leave and live a

³ Lawrence Tanner and William Wright, "Recent Investigations Regarding the Fate of the Princes in the Tower," *Archaeologia* 84 (1935): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261340900013606>.

⁴ Rogers Zachary, "Richard III and the Woodville Faction: The Events Surrounding 1483," *URJ-UCCS: Undergraduate Research Journal at UCCS* 9, no. 1 (November 4, 2015), <https://urj.uccs.edu/index.php/urj/article/view/199>.

⁵ Cerdic, "The Fate of the Princes – Suspects – The History of England," accessed March 30, 2022, <https://thehistoryofengland.co.uk/resource/the-fate-of-the-princes-suspects/>.

normal life in England or abroad. This is supported by the fact that no bodies were found at the time and there are those, now understood to be impostors, who sought to claim the throne as one of the two princes throughout the reigns of Richard III and Henry VII (1457-1509). However, this theory can be disproven through the strength of the motive for the princes' murder. The princes and any descendants they may have had were a threat to all future kings of England and needed to be eliminated. No matter their youth or innocence, by virtue of their birth, they could not be allowed to live.

This leads to the second theory presented by those who proclaim Richard III innocent, that Henry VII killed the princes. After only two years on the throne, Richard III was killed in the Battle of Bosworth against Henry VII's forces then Henry VII took the throne as the first Tudor king. Historians argue that Henry VII organized the death of the princes, through his mother Margaret Beaufort, so he could secure his reign through marrying the princes' sister. This is supported by the fact that Henry did not accuse Richard III of killing the princes despite accusing him of other cruelties following the Battle of Bosworth, in addition to Henry VII not even announcing that the princes had been murdered until 1486. Furthermore, Henry's claim to the throne was considered less legitimate than that of Richard III's so he strengthened his claim by re-legitimizing the princes and marrying their sister Elizabeth of York. This would have resulted in the princes, if alive, being ahead of him in the line of succession. As he would have to delegitimize his wife, and by extension himself, in order to stay on the throne, many argue that Henry VII had to be completely confident in the princes being dead in order to have made this political move. It is further asserted that he could only have this confidence if he killed the princes himself and, therefore, must have.

However, at the supposed time of the princes' death, Margaret Beaufort did not have access to the two princes as they were being closely guarded in the tower by King Richard's trusted servants. Therefore, Henry VII could not have killed the princes until two or three years after they disappeared. Furthermore, Henry VII had no motive to kill the princes in 1483. At the time of the princes' death, "Margaret Beaufort, the mother of the future Henry VII, only wanted her son's title of Earl of Richmond."⁶ Henry VII did not become a contender for the throne until after the death of the princes. Even after their death, it was chance that saw him as the champion to steal the throne from Richard III as Henry VII was not the only person with a rival claim to the throne, "People could just have easily turned to the young earl of Warwick, the Duke of Buckingham, or anyone who was free to marry Elizabeth."⁷ Due to his weak maternal claim to the throne, Henry VII had no motive to kill the princes in 1483 as he had no reason to believe his fortunes would change for the better as a result of their death. Furthermore, when he killed his challengers to the throne, Henry VII was unafraid to let everyone know he had authorized their death and didn't hesitate to provide their body to the public. This shows him to have neither the motive, opportunity, or personality to orchestrate the disappearance of the princes in the time and in the way the events took place.

Eliminating other suspects does not in and of itself prove that Richard III is guilty of killing his nephews, but circumstantial evidence makes Richard the most likely culprit in their death. First is the question of access to the princes. After the princes were declared illegitimate and Richard III was crowned king, the princes lost all their servants and princely benefits and

⁶ Helen, Harrison, "The Princes in the Tower –What Happened?" *TudorBlogger* (blog), April 25, 2014, <https://tudorblogger.wordpress.com/2014/04/25/the-princes-in-the-tower-what-happened/>.

⁷ Gareth, "6 Reasons Why Margaret Beaufort Could Not Have Killed the Princes in the Tower – Royal History Geeks," access Medford, MAed March 30, 2022, <https://www.royalhistorygeeks.com/6-reasons-why-margaret-beaufort-could-not-have-killed-the-princes-in-the-tower/>.

had no allies. They were put in the custody of men Richard III thought would do whatever needed to be done to the boys; “certain persons appointed to that purpose. They would have been men Richard trusted greatly.”⁸ As the princes were only visited by King Richard’s most trusted servants, it can be reasonably concluded that he had direct control over the fate of the princes. As such, Richard III is the only suspect who had a reasonable method of killing the two princes.

To confirm Richard III’s guilt, the strength of his motive must be further examined. The future Richard III had made an enemy of his nephew, who was then Edward V, following the death of his brother, late King Edward IV. While taking Edward V to the tower, Richard Duke of Gloucester separated King Edward from his uncle, Earl Rivers, and accused Earl Rivers of treason. When Edward V demanded that his uncle be released from prison and reinstated at his side, Richard Duke of Gloucester refused. Instead, Richard Duke of Gloucester used his status as Lord Protector to have Earl Rivers executed for treason against the wishes of the king. This was a slight to Edward V’s status he was not likely to forget. The event cemented Edward V’s loyalty to his mother and the maternal side of his family, a loyalty that would inevitably result in the downfall of Richard Duke of Gloucester when Edward V was coronated and the Duke of Gloucester no longer had the security of being the Lord Protector. The decision to execute Earl Rivers forced Richard’s hand. He could not have Edward V become more powerful than he and had no recourse but to strip the young king of his authority.

Fully understanding why Richard Duke of Gloucester had to steal the throne from Edward V, we must then ask ourselves why Edward V’s younger brother, Richard Duke of York, also had to be brought under Richard Duke of Gloucester’s control and how Richard Duke of Gloucester acquired custody of his younger nephew. Richard Duke of Gloucester had made an

⁸ Ibid.

enemy of the young king, Edward V, due to the king's loyalty to his maternal family. Richard Duke of York held similar loyalties and was in sanctuary with his mother when his uncle demanded he be transported to the tower. The Duke of Gloucester made it clear that he would not be afraid to break sanctuary and harm both the young prince and his sisters if this demand was not obeyed. Therefore, Richard Duke of York was surrendered to the care of Richard Duke of Gloucester and was sent to join his brother at the tower. Once Richard Duke of Gloucester acquired both princes, he was perfectly positioned to take the crown. He had both the king and the heir to the throne cut off from their allies and completely within his control. As Lord Protector, he was already running the country in his nephew's name and had access to all the lords and religious figures in the nation. This made it easy for him to set the events in motion necessary to make him king. When taking Richard Duke of York from the sanctuary, it is likely Richard Duke of Gloucester already knew that his nephews had to lose their inheritance, but it is not likely he intended to kill them until matters changed in the summer of 1483.

Upon disinheriting the princes, Richard III probably did not feel that his nephews needed to die. However, he came to believe they were too much of a threat at the beginning of the very summer they disappeared. "There was an early attempt to rescue the Princes in the Tower in July 1483, but something went wrong in the planning. It was after this attempt that went wrong that Richard III decided that the princes were too much of a threat to his rule and had to die; they vanished that very summer and were never seen again."⁹ As the princes were not killed until after a failed rescue attempt, it can be reasonably deduced that the original plan was not to kill them. If the plan had always been to kill the princes, keeping them alive for any period or time would have been unreasonably risky. As such, Richard III did not kill his nephews until he felt

⁹ Harrison, "The Princes in the Tower – What Happened?"

he had no other alternative. When forced to kill his nephews, Richard III likely dispatched his trusted servant, James Tyrell. This theory aligns with the confession made by James Tyrell and recorded by Thomas More.

James Tyrell was a trusted advisor to Richard III; he was loyal to the king and the Yorkist cause. Richard III felt he could trust him to discretely carry out any task, a trust that remained throughout Richard's life.¹⁰ In 1502, Sir James Tyrell allegedly confessed to the murder of the two princes. This alleged confession was said to have taken place under the reign of Henry VII, when Sir James Tyrell was arrested and charged with treason. He was interrogated – likely with torture – in the Tower of London before being convicted of treason and beheaded for his crimes.

While it is argued that Sir James Tyrell being tortured led him to falsely confess to the princes' murder, his confession is consistent with the timeline of the princes' disappearance and the state of the princes' skeletons. Sir James Tyrell confessed to having the princes suffocated and the skeletons believed to be the remains of the princes showed crush injuries and discoloration consistent with suffocation. He also claimed that the princes' bodies were hidden below a staircase and the skeletons that are believed to be the remains of the princes were found under a staircase when the tower was being renovated. The accurate comparisons of these accounts can be further legitimized as Thomas More, who wrote about the confession of James Tyrell, had no way of knowing how and where the remains of the princes would be discovered. James Tyrell's accurate confession along with the circumstantial evidence proves Richard III to be guilty of murdering his nephews.

Richard III is not the monster he has been made out to be following the Elizabethan era. In Thomas More's *History of Richard III* and William Shakespeare's play *Richard III*, the king is

¹⁰ "Thomas, More History of King Richard III," The British Library (The British Library), accessed April 2, 2022, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/thomas-mores-history-of-king-richard-iii>.

characterized as a nefarious hunchback who paved his path to power with murder. These accounts – written by people living in Tudor monarchies, which had usurped the Plantagenet monarchy – were not a balanced portrayal. Hatred and distrust for any Plantagenets such as Richard III was rampant among the English elites. Some historians contend that these biased histories are evidence that Richard III was wrongly accused by history, and he did not kill the princes. This defense of Richard III is too much of a stretch to outweigh the evidence condemning Richard III. It is unlikely Richard III had murderous instincts and was plotting the deaths of those closest to him, however – as it has been established that he needed to kill his nephews to survive – Richard III murdered only those whom he saw as obstacles to the throne. While seen as barbaric by today's standards, when placed in the time, this was a common practice which had a heightened necessity because of the instability due to the War of the Roses.

Due to the mystery surrounding the princes and the ulterior motives of the historians of the time, it is unlikely that an unbiased and knowledgeable source about the fate of the princes exists in the historic record. It is impossible to determine with certainty who orchestrated the death of the princes or even if they were, in fact, murdered in the summer of 1483. However, understanding of historical context can allow for the reasonable conclusion that they could not have been allowed to live and were murdered in 1483. Evidence can also reasonably convict their uncle of the crime. Other theories around the princes' disappearance are far-fetched at best. Additionally, a plethora of circumstantial evidence constructs a historically convincing story of why Richard III authorized and profited from the death of his nephews. Richard III cannot be convicted of this crime beyond a reasonable doubt, but it can be concluded that he is the most likely suspect.

About the author

Darcy Mueller is second-year undergraduate student at Tufts University studying history. Her historical area of interest is English Medieval history, specifically the history of Lady Jane Grey. Darcy was born in Charleston West Virginia before moving to Jackson, Wyoming. She currently lives there with her sister, two brothers, and parents. She is a research volunteer at the Zooniverse research collaboratives “Corresponding with Quakers Project” and a student member of the Organization of American Historians and an overseas member of the British Organization for Local Historians.

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