

The usurpation of richard iii in 1483

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Whereas with the Princes in the Tower the events are questioned rather than motivations, it is the opposite with Richard's usurpation in 1483. The death of Edward IV left an atmosphere of dangerous uncertainty. His heir apparent, Edward V, was in the hands of the Woodville family. The Woodville's had risen to the pinnacle of the English political hierarchy of England under Edward IV and they naturally were keen not to diminish their position, thus making them unlikely to acquiesce to Richard as regent or King. In April 1483, it seemed inconceivable that on July 6th Richard would be crowned King of England. In order to understand how and why he took the throne, three events must be assessed: The actions of the Woodville faction and events leading up to Stony Stratford, Richard's actions during his brief tenure as protector, and the delegitimising of his nephews leading to his eventual coronation.

The Woodville's were naturally opportunistic following the death of Edward. The will of Edward IV, as described by Vergil stated that Richard would be the protector of his brother's children. Elizabeth resided in London exerting influence over the council and Antony Woodville, 2nd Earl Rivers, had custody of Edward V in Ludlow Castle Scotland. Annette Carson, a vehement defender of Richard against all accusations, interprets the events of April 1483 as a sign the Woodville's were "determined to seize the initiative". Moreover, the very existence of a council during this period is in the eyes of Murray Kendall "unlawful in its own existence" as a prerequisite for a Council was the presence of a monarch on the throne. Mancini corroborates the Woodville manoeuvring, stating there was a split in the council between those who supported Richard "because Edward in his will had so directed"

and those “ who favoured the queen’s family” suggesting that such a conflict was known to the lay people who would have informed Mancini. Thus, there is evidence that the Woodville family sought to exploit the death of the king for their political gain. This is important because if true, it provides a legitimate motive for the actions which Richard took.

In the immediate aftermath of the death of Edward IV, Richard III’s behaviour “ had been impeccable”. He had offered “ submission fealty and all that was due to King Edward V.” In other words, Richard was displaying tendencies of someone who understood what the role of Lord Protector entailed and the precedent in place, mainly set during the minority of Henry VI. Stony Stratford was meant to be a moment of unification between the two factions. Yet, upon arrival there was a notable absence: Edward V. It is odd that the very king whom Richard was going to pledge loyalty to was absent, this is important because if we are to believe Richard acted in what he believed was the right way, it provides some justification for his odd actions at the rendezvous. After Rivers and Grey sat “ at the duke’s table for dinner... in pleasant conversation”, the next morning Richard arrested Rivers, Grey and Vaughan citing an alleged conspiracy and then took Edward V into his own custody. John Rous, an early Tudor Chronicler who rewrote his account of Richard from a positive view to a significantly negative portrayal, dramatically states “ the new king was removed from his loyal servants and received with kisses and embraces, like an innocent lamb falling into the hands of wolves”. This embellishing certainly points to bias, showing the sensationalism of Tudor history. It is contradicted by the Crowland Chronicler, possibly the most important source for Richard’s reign. The

anonymous writer was a government insider, probably a member of the council, but his partisan account was written to favour Elizabeth Woodville. He writes that “ Richard took an oath of fealty to the king, because this promised best for future prosperity, it was performed with pride and joy for all”. As the chronicler wrote after Bosworth, he has the advantage of hindsight and of not being influenced by Tudor propaganda. We can conclude that it would seem at Stony Stratford, Richard was acting in response to the machinations of the Woodville Council. Thus, the interpretation of Colin Richmond, a fiercely anti-Richard historian writing in response to Kendall’s vindications, that “ Richard feared for his personal safety if Edward was crowned” does not seem to be validated by primary evidence as it is unlikely Richard would have taken steps to organise the Coronation so early. We can conclude that after Stony Stratford, Richard intended for Edward V to become king.

Richard’ actions in June 1483 are hardest to defend. At a “ carefully managed” council meeting on 13th June Richard accused Hastings, Stanley, Morton and the Archbishop of York of plotting treason against him. Buckingham is said to have ambushed the chamber and arrested Hastings. Hastings was then immediately killed. Fabyan’s Great Chronicle of London describes how he “ led Lord Hastings out to the green and without any long confession struck off his head”. Mancini describes how “ Hastings fell killed by a friend whom he had never doubted”. The use of extrajudicial methods should be the most robust ground upon which Richard can be labelled as morally wrong, because even if the treasonous plot Richard alluded to were true, a public trial and killing would have surely being a more effective way

to garner the support of the people. Carson, a staunch Ricardian, argues that “ the narrative is tainted by the fact he believed Richard had motivations for the throne from the death of Edward IV, he acted in response to a threat to his life”. I disagree, as it does seem that he took the initiative carefully planning this specific event. Thus, instead of agreeing with Carson’s view that “ his actions were a sudden response to threat, rather than a calculated move in a diabolical game of chess” I instead incline towards Ross’ view that Richard “ moved with speed and efficiency towards establishing his own claim to the throne”. It does not seem possible to believe that Richard did not carefully plan the events of June 13th – whether it be for his advantage or safety. The removal of the sons of Edward IV as rightful heirs occurred after preaching from Ralph Shaw, a theologian, alleged that “ Edward V and his brother were bastards, because their parents hadn’t been properly married or because Edward IV had himself being illegitimate”. There is debate surrounding the legitimacy of these allegations but in the context of this debate it suffices to know that such controversy exists. It is difficult to judge whether the commoners believed these rumours, if they were true it does give justification to Richard’s ascension. However, it does seem convenient that these rumours arose from nowhere, the simple truth is that just over two months after the death of Edward IV, Richard was now in a position to ascend to the throne. He did on the 26th June before being crowned on the 6th July.