

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO SHAKESPEARE'S  
SECOND TETRALOGY



RICHARD II  
HENRY IV PARTS 1 and 2  
HENRY V

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*by Cedric Watts*

*The  
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to  
Shakespeare's  
Second Tetralogy*

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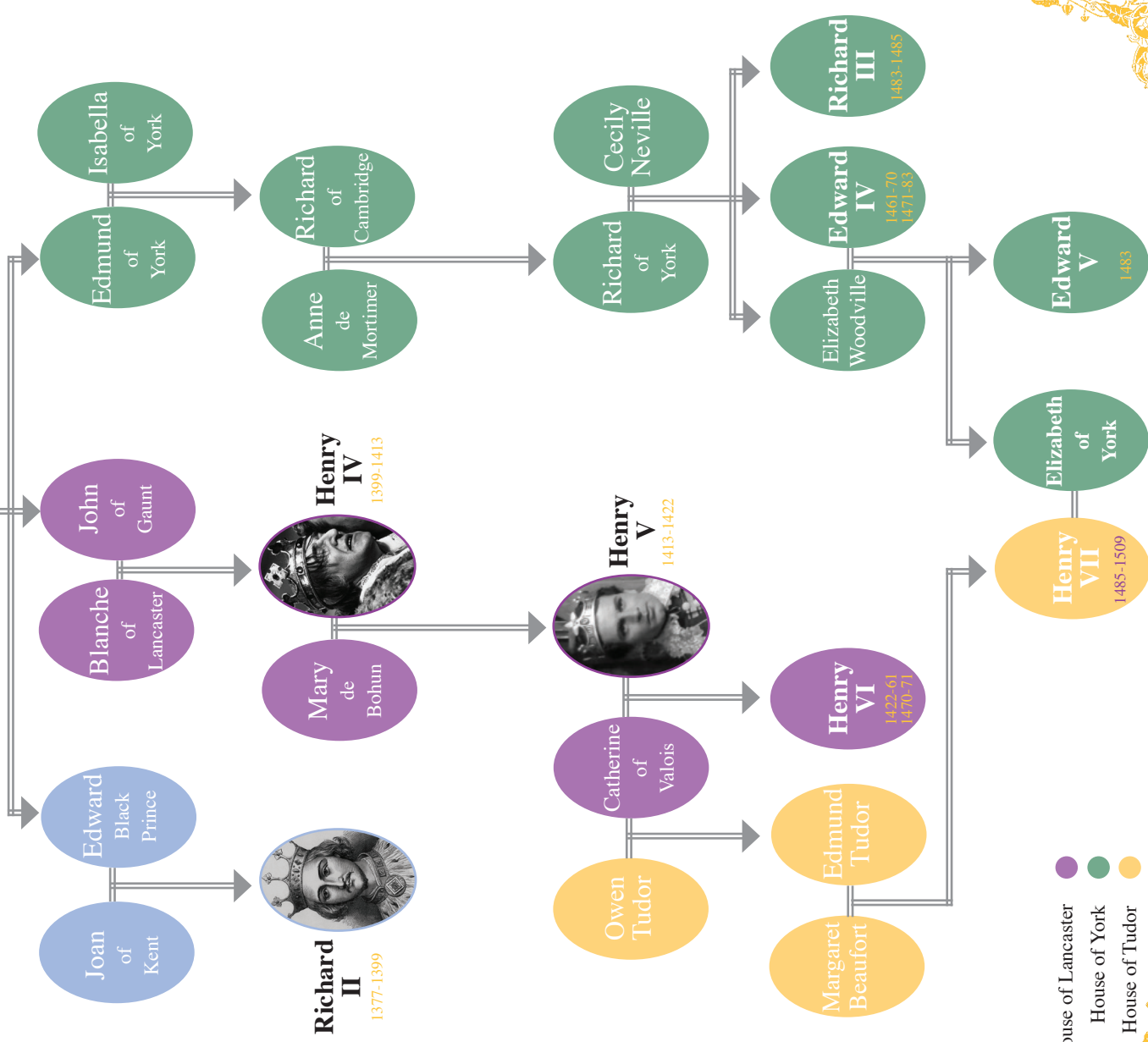
Richard II  
Henry IV Parts 1 and 2  
Henry V

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*by  
Cedric Watts*



# HOUSE OF PLANTAGENET FAMILY TREE



House of Lancaster  
House of York  
House of Tudor



# Introduction

In his first tetralogy of history plays (*Henry VI Parts 1, 2 and 3*, and *Richard III*), Shakespeare offered the most extensive dramatic sequence since the great days of ancient Greek drama in Athens.

In the early years of his career, around 1589-93, it is evident that the young Shakespeare had nerve, verve and cheek. The sheer range of his early works implies a pugnacious generic virtuosity: he seemed to be challenging predecessors and rivals in a wide variety of genres. These included: verse-narratives on classical subjects; the amatory sonnet-sequence; farcical comedy; and gory revenge-drama.

Shakespeare then wrote not one play but three on the doomed reign of Henry VI, capping it with *Richard III*, in which Richard is vigorously demonised. Evidently the theatre-goers of the day demanded more of the same. (History plays were very popular. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* was so successful that it generated a sequel, portraying Tamburlaine's death.)

No wonder that by 1592 Shakespeare was being denounced by a rival, Robert Greene, as "an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers", who is "an absolute *Iohannes Factotum* [Jack of all trades]". The significance of the sheer scale of that first historical tetralogy combining the three parts

of *Henry VI* and *Richard III* is hard to underestimate. In 1937, having seen the plays performed in sequence in America, the scholar R.W. Chambers wrote:

To see this was to realise that Shakespeare began his career with a tetralogy based on recent history, grim, archaic, crude, yet nevertheless such as, for scope, power, patriotism, and sense of doom, had probably had no parallel since Aeschylus...

Critics have sometimes disparaged this first tetralogy as episodic and amateurish, apprentice work lacking the panache of the later historical dramas. There are various lively scenes, and some characters radiate vitality – in *Richard III*, Shakespeare (defying historical fact) created a superbly memorable monster, the grotesque and arrogant villain whom audiences love to hate.

Generally, however, characterisation in the first tetralogy tends to be relatively two-dimensional, the verse lacks the later supple expressiveness, and the thematic development is unsubtle. Indeed, the treatment of religious matters is sometimes crudely explicit – as is the related patriotism. What today's critics might term "demonisation of the Other" is almost absurdly blatant. Joan la Pucelle (Jeanne d'Arc), the French leader, for example, is seen to be aided by devils – who

eventually desert her although she has offered them her body and soul. On the eve of the Battle of Bosworth, a parade of ghosts curses Richard and blesses his foes.

The Shakespeare of the first tetralogy blithely embarrasses his modern fans by the abundance of jingoistic propaganda. His second tetralogy is much more sophisticated and ambiguous. Indeed, in view of the problems of censorship which he faced, Shakespeare provides remarkably incisive insights into the behaviour of kings and their followers and opponents. The second tetralogy is rich in characterisation, memorable in heroic and plangent rhetoric, crafty in its plotting, and exceptionally intelligent in the way it relates low life to high life, the small to the great, the farcical to the tragic.

The vitality of Shakespeare's second tetralogy has ensured its endurance for more than four centuries, and will probably ensure its endurance for centuries to come. It is not simply a sequence of perennially entertaining plays; it is part of England's cultural identity, and continues to contribute to the shaping of that identity. The tetralogy dramatises nostalgia poignantly and critically; now it, too, forms part of the nation's cultural nostalgia. At the same time, it exposes the continuing wiles of politicians, and offers ever-topical warnings about the cost of military ventures overseas.

## What are the main themes of the four plays?

In 1944, E.M.W. Tillyard, in his highly influential study, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, emphasised the thematic coherence of the first tetralogy, and its links with the second. In particular, he argued that Shakespeare, developing the patriotic theme he found in various sources – notably, Hall's Chronicle – showed how the deposition and killing of Richard II had consequences which lasted through the reigns of Henry IV, Henry V, Henry VI, and the wicked Richard III, and culminated in the accession of Henry Tudor as Henry VII.\*

According to Tillyard, the hero of the two tetralogies is not any single individual but England itself, the nation, or, as Tillyard sometimes calls it, "Respublica": the nation considered as a commonwealth to which both low and high characters contribute. The climax then comes with the two parts of *Henry IV*. In Tillyard's view, there is a decline in quality in *Henry V* because Shakespeare felt obliged to conform to "the requirements both of the

\*Henry Tudor was Queen Elizabeth's grandfather, and, by marrying Elizabeth of York and thus uniting the rival houses of York and Lancaster, he was deemed to have inaugurated a time of peace and unity, a happy outcome after the woes precipitated by the fall of *Richard II*. (That version of events is often called 'the Tudor Myth'.)

chroniclers and of popular tradition” by portraying an ideal monarch who lacks the humanity of his earlier self.

The whole idea of patriotism – what it means and why it’s important – lies at the heart of the four plays. Shakespeare eloquently suggests that, under an able ruler who can unite the nation, England can seem specially blessed and powerful. As Simon Schama has said, Shakespeare is helping to engender a patriotic sense of England’s unique greatness as a nation – and suggesting the emergence of a “United Kingdom” in which Scotland, Wales and Ireland at last aid England instead of opposing her.

But if Shakespeare suggests England can seem blessed, he also probes that suggestion: for example, although England is, according to Gaunt, this “other Eden, demi-paradise”, France is already “the world’s best garden” before Henry V’s conquest of it. Shakespeare’s historical dramas show that repeatedly, alas, England’s worst foes have been at home: feuding noblemen have divided and weakened the realm. Even Jack Cade, the anarchistic man of Kent in *Henry VI Part 2*, is merely a pawn of the Duke of York. And the two tetralogies are linked, as we have seen, by a common theme: the terrible consequences of a single act of usurpation.

The second tetralogy, probably written between 1595 and 1599, depicts this act – which brings the

Lancastrians to power – and the resultant turmoil: the plays “define a moral pattern of sin and retribution followed by expiation and success”, says Herschel Baker. The last play, *Henry V*, indeed *seems* to be a great success story: the charismatic Henry unites the realm, leads the British to a great victory over the French, and ensures peace by marrying the French princess, Katherine. But then we reach the Epilogue. And its effect is startling. The complete Epilogue, a formally perfect Shakespearian sonnet, is this:

*Thus far, with rough and all-unable pen,  
Our bending author hath pursued the story,  
In little room confining mighty men,  
Mangling by starts the full course of their glory.  
Small time: but, in that small, most greatly lived  
This star of England. Fortune made his sword;  
By which the world’s best garden he achieved,  
And of it left his son imperial lord.  
Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned King  
Of France and England, did this King succeed:  
Whose state so many had the managing,  
That they lost France, and made his England  
bleed:  
Which oft our stage has shown; and, for their sake,  
In your fair minds let this acceptance take.*

After the triumphalism of so much of the final Act, we encounter this utterly subversive ending.