



## Richard III: 'every tale condemns me for a villain'

Jane Hellings

2012 saw the startling discovery in Leicester of the skeleton of King Richard III, who was defeated by Henry Tudor and killed in battle at Bosworth Field in 1485. On Thursday 26 March, his remains will be reinterred in Leicester Cathedral. Jane Hellings asks how kindly Richard has been treated by popular history and wonders what the Catholic king would make of his Protestant burial.

Richard III is best known to us as the eponymous protagonist of Shakespeare's shameless propaganda play.

Shakespeare wrote his *Richard III* during the reign of Elizabeth, not much more than 100 years after the occurrence of the events depicted in the play. He happily bought into the contemporary received wisdom that Richard was an evil schemer and the murderer of countless members of his family in his quest to seize power. Only by perpetuating such stories could the actions of Queen Elizabeth's grandfather, Henry VII, be justified. For Henry Tudor was surely the supreme schemer; after all, he succeeded as a usurper, despite his less strong claim to the throne. And there is as much evidence against Henry for the murders of the princes in the Tower, as there is against Richard.

Even by the standards of the day, Henry VII was a tyrant who showed little regard for the due process of the law. He is known for the stability he brought to the war-torn kingdom, and for leaving a very healthy balance in the treasury; popular history has glossed over his blatant extortions and the disappearances and executions which marked his 24-year reign. History is indeed written by the victors. One hundred years after the Battle of Bosworth, Shakespeare was enthusiastically contributing to the Tudor narrative.



In his homily during the service of Compline in Leicester Cathedral on Sunday 22 March, Cardinal Nichols described Richard as 'a man of prayer, a man of anxious devotion'. In the days and hours before his last battle, Richard repeated meticulous rituals and devotions to reinforce his legitimacy as anointed king, restorer of the house of York to its rightful position. During his short reign he implemented legal

reforms to improve access to justice for poorer people. He established chantries and restored religious foundations dispersed by his brother. These acts of piety show he was aware of the many and grave sins he had committed in grasping back power from the clique threatening to rule through his young nephew. They show he was seeking redemption.

The rituals of death and prayer for the soul were a vital part of the medieval worldview and would have been of enormous importance to Richard. That Henry Tudor felt the need to desecrate his body and neglect these customs entirely shows a particular hatred, even fear. History (and modern science) has now caught up with him. How fantastic it is to be exploring the life and death of King Richard III through the unprecedented circumstance of the astonishing rediscovery of his body and its solemn reburial.

Scorned by British history's most glamorous dynasty, the [Tudors](#), Richard III has at last found closure with tens of thousands greeting his cortege, and people queuing for four hours to witness his lying in state.

What would he think of our 21<sup>st</sup> century rituals and arrangements? He was of course a Catholic king of a Catholic country. Protestant practice would probably have appalled him. Nevertheless, he would have appreciated recognition in a ceremony of the established Church presided over by the premier prelate of the state. And equally he would have found consolation in the familiar service of Compline on Sunday and the Requiem Mass celebrated by Cardinal Archbishop Nichols on Monday evening, the Latin forms of which have changed little over 500 years.

Above all I think he would be comforted that someone has taken care of his personal prayer book, the Book of Hours, which he carefully annotated with his own prayers and which the Archbishop of Canterbury will be carrying at the burial.

Cardinal Nichols suggested in his homily at the Requiem Mass that, 'today we seek not to assert the greatness of Kings but the greatness of God's mercy towards them and towards us all.' And so we should pray for Richard and also for Henry, both striving for a stable earthly kingdom.

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