RICHARD II

The play opens with the accusation of Henry Bolingbroke that Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, is responsible for the murder of Richard's uncle, the Duke of Gloucester. Richard decrees that the two shall settle the matter in trial by combat, but revokes this option as the Norfolk and Bolingbroke are readying to attack each other. His new decision is that both men are to be banished. Within a short time, Bolingbroke's father, the Duke of Lancaster dies; Richard seizes the late duke's estates in order to raise capital for a campaign against Ireland.

In the meantime, Bolingbroke has returned to find grumbling amidst Richard's nobles—most notably the Earl of Northumberland, who joins with other disaffected nobles against the Duke of York, Richard's regent while the King is in Ireland. Upon Richard's return, he learns that Bolingbroke has not only returned to reclaim the lands he should have inherited upon his father's death, but that he has dispersed Richard's army and executed a pair of Richard's favorites. Richard flees to Flint Castle for his own protection.

Bolingbroke meets him there and takes him back to London as a prisoner. There, in a session of Parliament, Richard is made to confess crimes against the state, the end result of which he must forfeit his crown to Bolingbroke (who becomes King Henry IV). Intrigue develops as the Duke of York's son, Aumerle, conspires against the new King Henry in response to Richard's loss of the throne. Aumerle is granted clemency, but Richard is imprisoned in Pomfret Castle. While there, Sir Pierce of Exton murders him (believing this to be the wish of the king). Henry disavows the deed when he hears of it, however, and promises a Crusade to atone for Richard's death.

HENRY IV Part I

King Henry IV has two main problems as the opens. First, the Welsh leader Owen Glendower has beaten one of the King's armies and captured its leader, Edmund Mortimer. Second, his son, Hal, is a miscreant keeping company with rogues such as Falstaff. The Percy family is less than happy when Henry refuses to ransom Mortimer from Glendower, and the heads of the family—Worcester, Northumberland, and Henry Percy, who is nicknamed "Hotspur"—decide that they will in turn not yield prisoners from a Scottish campaign to King Henry. Then they set about stirring up a rebellion in collusion with York, Douglas, Mortimer, and even Glendower. In the midst of this, young Hal, the Prince of Wales, is content in running with Falstaff and his lot, drinking, playing pranks, and thieving.

The rebels led by the Percys immediately run into difficulties. Hotspur proves quarrelsome, arguing with Glendower over the division of England once King Henry is defeated—and this before the battle has even begun. Northumberland takes ill, and Glendower's force is seriously delayed. Added to these troubles, King Henry has finally struck a chord within his son, Hal; after a lengthy rebuke, Hal determines to make amends with his father with a valiant display against the rebels. King Henry has also raised a considerable army to stop Hotspur and the rest.

In a parley preceding the battle, Hal offers to settle matters in a one-on-one contest with Hotspur, winner take all; Henry will even offer pardons to everyone else on the rebel side if Hal and Hotspur meet. Worcester, Hotspur's representative, does not trust this offer, and instead lies to Hotspur that King Henry is spoiling for a fight. In the ensuing battle, the rebels are resoundingly defeated. Hal slays Hotspur, saving his father in the process, although Falstaff—who survives the battle by playing dead—attempts to steal the glory for Hotspur's death. Hal, unwilling at this point to press the issue, lets Falstaff have his moment. All seems well for the moment, but there are other rebels lurking in the background in Henry IV, Part II.
HENRY IV Part II

The play picks up the action three years after the death of Hotspur at Shrewsbury. Westmoreland and Lancaster are appointed by the king to lead an army against the last of the rebels. The Archbishop of York, Scroop, is backing the lords Hastings, Mowbray, and Bardolph, along with the tacit support of Northumberland. Northumberland, however, is later dissuaded from joining the rebellion by Lady Grey. Meanwhile, Falstaff is back at the Boar's Head Inn, driving Mistress Quickly out of business with his appetite. Prince Hal visits to have some sport with him, but both he and Falstaff are soon summoned to war by the king, who has come down with a grave illness. Falstaff is to recruit soldiers for the king's army.

This is not a duty one would normally entrust to Falstaff, and true to form, Falstaff finds himself lingering in Gloucestershire with the local justice, Shallow. His "recruits" are easily allowed to buy their way out of service to the army, and Falstaff wastes no opportunity to take advantage of Shallow's hospitality or wallet. In the meantime, the rebel army forces the king to send his younger son, Prince John of Lancaster, to parley with the insurrectionists. John agrees to address the issues raised by the rebels, but only if their army is dispersed. That done, John's army (which has conveniently not disbanded) seizes Scroop and the rest of the lords at the head of the conspiracy. The leaders are summarily executed.

King Henry IV, by this time, is near death with his illness. In a deathbed meeting with Hal, the king is at last reconciled with his son, convinced that his true nobility will prevail. With that accomplished, the king dies; Hal ascends to the throne as King Henry V. When Falstaff hears this news, he immediately sets out for London—after all, Falstaff is a freeloader, and the thought of his old friend's new station has him envisioning all kinds of rewards. To his shock, Henry bars him and any of his acquaintances from henceforth approaching within ten miles of him on pain of death.

HENRY V

The Archbishop of Canterbury, worried over impending legislation that would effectively rob the Church in England of its power and wealth, convinces Henry V to forego this pursuit in favor of laying claim to France. Armed with a legal technicality, Henry means to take the throne of France by whatever means necessary. The Dauphin's insulting response—sending an ambassador with a gift of tennis balls—convinces Henry that the French will only respond to war; thus, he arranges for an army to invade France. However, rebellion has always seemed to follow when the king's away, and Henry makes certain that he leaves behind enough troops in England to quell any potential uprising. That leaves him with a relatively small invasion force.

In fact, Henry must deal with one plot before even crossing the Channel. Lords Cambridge, Scroop, and Grey are discovered to be conspiring to assassinate Henry (paid for by the French). Henry makes a very public example of all three, arresting them in person and seeing to their execution. The army then lays siege to Harfleur, capturing it after heavy losses in battle with the city's defenders. Henry attempts to take his army out of France before the onset of winter; however, now the French are certain that they can teach the young king a humiliating lesson on the field of battle. Henry is resolute, nonetheless. If the French want a decisive battle, they will have it.

While in camp, Henry disguises himself as a common soldier in order to mingle with his troops before the battle. There he talks candidly with his men, and they with him. The men may be leery of their king, but their willingness to battle the French army is undaunted. The next day at Agincourt, Henry makes the stirring St. Crispin's Day speech, knowing his army is outnumbered five to one. Aided mightily by the longbows of his archers, Henry makes the day a rout for the French. The French must now sue for peace, which Henry will grant—completely on his own terms, of course. According to the terms of the Treaty of Troyes, Henry will marry Princess Katherine of France and will be named as heir to the French throne. England and France will thus be united in peace.

HENRY VI, Part I

Henry V of England has died, and a young Henry VI ascends to the throne. Charles, the Dauphin of France, is nurturing a rebellion across the Channel, and there are growing rifts among the nobles in England, notably between
factions of York and Lancaster (which will fester and over time become the War of the Roses). Emboldened by the exploits of Joan la Pucelle (Joan of Arc), the French attack Talbot at Orleans and drive the English army toward the sea. Talbot, however, manages to retake Orleans by night in a surprise attack.

In England, Richard Plantagenet and the Duke of Somerset have a disagreement concerning the letter of a law. The two men ask others to show their support for their respective positions: those supporting Richard pick a white rose, and those supporting Somerset pick a red one. Richard seeks the counsel of his uncle, Edmund Mortimer, and comes away from the discussion convinced that the throne more rightfully belongs to the house of York than young King Henry. Winchester and Gloucester continue a feud of their own, in the meantime.

Back in France, Joan battles the English and drives them from Rouen, but an English counterattack gives it back. Talbot and Burgundy prepare for Henry VI's coronation in Paris. Joan asks Burgundy for a parley on the road to Paris, which the duke accepts; this leads to Joan convincing the Duke of Burgundy to switch over to the French side. Talbot, upon hearing of Burgundy's defection, marches his army against him, and Henry appoints Richard and the Duke of Somerset to reinforce Talbot in the battle. The bickering of Somerset and Richard, however, leads to delays in sending their troops. Talbot fights valiantly, but is slain in the combat when the additional soldiers never arrive.

Richard and Somerset set aside their differences long enough to capture Joan of Arc and burn her as a witch. In the meantime, Gloucester is trying to set up a match between Henry and the daughter of a French lord in order to force a peace between France and England. The Earl of Suffolk, however, introduces Margaret of Anjou to Henry in an attempt to get him to marry her. However, Suffolk has some designs of his own on Margaret, hoping to use her to control Henry. This leads to the action of *Henry VI, Part II*.

**HENRY VI, Part II**

Picking up from the closing action of Part II, Suffolk introduces Margaret to Henry, who elevates Suffolk from an earl to a duke. Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester is unhappy with Margaret's lack of dowry, and much less with Henry giving up two fiefs to France in the process. Suffolk sets plots into motion against Gloucester, who is perhaps the only honest supporter of Henry at this point; he sets up Gloucester's wife to be arrested for witchcraft. Meanwhile, York lurks in the background, convinced of his legitimate claim to Henry's throne.

Gloucester is eventually arrested on charges invented by his enemies. These he manages to fend off, but the king still orders that he go to trial. During this process, York is sent to Ireland to quell a revolt; while in Ireland, York will leave it to a henchman, Jack Cade, to muster support among the populace for York to depose Henry. If Cade succeeds, York has an army at his back to use against Henry when he returns from Ireland. In the meantime, Gloucester is murdered at Suffolk's behest. Henry in turn banishes Suffolk under heavy pressure from the populace. Margaret, who has carried on an affair with Suffolk, pleads on his behalf to no avail. Suffolk is en route to France when he is captured by pirates and summarily put to death.

Cade's rebellion gathers support, and he marches on London; Henry stages a retreat before him. Buckingham, however, confronts his force with an army and pardons to all who abandon Cade. Cade must now flee, and after a five-day flight without food, is killed while foraging in a private garden. In the wake of this failed uprising, York returns from Ireland—and demands that the king arrest Somerset before his men lay down their arms. The king does so, but Margaret frees him just as quickly, leading York to declare war on King Henry; York will take the crown by force if necessary. At the Battle of St. Albans, Richard, son of York, slays Somerset. The Yorkists then set out in pursuit of the fleeing Henry and Margaret, leading into *Henry VI, Part III*.

**HENRY VI, Part III**

In the wake of the Yorkist victory at St. Albans, York now has the crown of England. Henry arranges for a parley and presents an offer to York: Henry will rule England until his death, with ascension at that time passing to the house of York. York agrees, but this infuriates Queen Margaret; the Prince of Wales, her son, will be the next king.
At Sandal Castle, Margaret leads an army that defeats the Yorkists, killing the Duke of York and his youngest boy, Rutland. A rally by the Yorkists, however, leads to Margaret and Henry fleeing to France and Scotland, respectively. Edward, eldest son of York, assumes the title of King of England.

Henry secretly returns to England, where he is captured by Edward and put in the Tower of London. Margaret, meanwhile, is petitioning the King of France to come to Henry's aid. However, Warwick enters the scene trying to broker a marriage between Edward and the King's sister-in-law, Bona, and the King temporarily lends his allegiance to Edward—only to revoke it when word comes that Edward has hastily wed a woman he fancies, Lady Grey. Warwick, also affronted by the betrayal of his mission, joins forces with Margaret as well.

Meanwhile, back in England, further dissension is sown between the York brothers. Richard seeks the throne for himself, and George, Duke of Clarence, is disgruntled with his own lot. Clarence ends up defecting to Margaret's side with Warwick and the French forces. Warwick, however, manages to capture Edward before the major combat begins, thus temporarily restoring Henry to the throne. But Richard rescues Edward and gathers a force to meet Warwick. Clarence rejoins his brothers as well, and at Barnet and Tewkesbury, Warwick is defeated and slain by Edward. Though the French troops attempt to rally, Margaret and the Prince of Wales are captured; the sons of York slay the Prince, but Edward grants mercy to Margaret.

Anticipating Edward's further mercy to Henry, Richard pays a visit to the Tower of London, where Henry is held as prisoner. When Henry foretells Richard's bloody future, Richard kills him. Edward now holds the throne as King Edward IV, but Richard yet plots his own means to usurp the crown for himself.

HENRY VIII

Cardinal Wolsey, a close advisor to King Henry VII, has arranged that the Duke of Buckingham is arrested on charges of treason. Henry's wife, Queen Katherine, pleads on Buckingham's behalf with no success; Buckingham is tried and executed. Katherine condemns Wolsey, who is despised for the taxes he levels on the populace in the King Henry's name. Later, at a party hosted by Wolsey, Henry meets and is smitten with Anne Bullen, a lady-in-waiting to Queen Katherine.

Henry seeks counsel from Wolsey. Henry's argument is that Katherine is the widow of his brother, which makes the marriage one step removed from incest—never mind that Henry and Katherine have been wed for almost twenty years. Wolsey, already hated by Henry's courtiers for his role in Buckingham's death, is now further despised because Henry wishes a divorce. Wolsey agrees to have the Pope send a representative to render a decision on the matter. Katherine, on the other hand, wants nothing to do with such proceedings, viewing her marriage as sacred, valid, and incapable of being dissolved. Nevertheless, hearings will be held.

Wolsey, however, endures a series of mishaps that expose him unflatteringly to King Henry. Most damning in Henry's eyes is Wolsey's meddling in his divorce proceedings: Wolsey, recognizing that Henry intends to marry Anne once Katherine is out of the way, has instructed the Pope to stay any decision on the matter. Wolsey is disgraced, and Henry proceeds to divorce Katherine and marry Anne in secret regardless of the Pope's opinion. Wolsey dies soon after, and Katherine (who is in poor health at this point) soon follows him to the grave.

Meanwhile, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Cranmer, is the subject of a plot by Gardiner, Wolsey's secretary. Though Gardiner is brought to trial in much the same manner as Buckingham previously, he is under the King's protection. Henry exonerates the Archbishop, and has him christen his new daughter by Anne Bullen, Elizabeth. At the christening, Cranmer foretells a noble reign for Elizabeth and glory for England in her time.

KING JOHN

The king's nephew, Arthur, is backed by the King of France in a rebellion. Refusing the King of France's demand that he surrender his throne, John sends an army to France under the command of Philip Faulconridge (also known as Philip the Bastard). The English army clashes with the French at Angiers, but neither one can claim a decisive
victory. John proposes peace with the French king, ceding to him some English fiefs in France and arranging for the Dauphin to wed his niece, Blanch.

However, John is excommunicated by the Pope over a dispute concerning the appointment of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Pandulph, the Pope's legate, orders the French to resume their warfare upon King John. In the conflict that follows, John's army beats back the French and captures Arthur. John wishes him executed; his chamberlain, Hubert, disobeys the order, but Arthur later plunges to his death while trying to escape. John's nobles ironically suspect John of murder—which was his original intent—and desert him for the French. Meanwhile, John arranges a peace of sorts with Pandulph, to whom he turns over the crown of England; he will receive it back, therefore becoming a vassal of the Church.

Pandulph attempts to stop the warfare, John now being back in the folds of the Church. The French will have none of it, and the forces clash at St. Edmundsbury. During the battle, a fallen French noble named Melun warns the turncoat English noblemen that the King of France will have them executed just as soon as John has been conquered. The nobles, seeing the winds of fortune shift, return their allegiance to King John. Without his allies, the French king comes to terms with Pandulph and John. John, however, will not be in a position to appreciate the victory—he is poisoned by one of the monks while staying at Swinstead Abbey. His son will ascend to the throne as King Henry III.

**RICHARD III**

Richard, the Yorkist Duke of Gloucester, has not stopped plotting since the defeat of Henry VI. He conspires to play his brothers, Edward (now King Edward IV) and George, Duke of Clarence, against each other in an attempt to gain the crown for himself. By insinuating charges of treason against George, Richard has him arrested. He also brazenly woos Anne, widow of the murdered Prince of Wales, in the midst of her husband's funeral procession. In the course of events, Edward IV, who is deathly ill at the beginning of the play, dies; Richard has already arranged for George to be murdered while imprisoned, and so it stands that Richard will serve as regent while Edward's son (also named Edward) can come of age.

In order to "protect" the Prince of Wales and his younger brother, Richard has them stay in the Tower of London. He then moves against Edward's loyalist lords; Vaughan, Rivers, Hastings, and Grey are first imprisoned, then executed. Then, with the aid of Buckingham, Richard declares that Edward IV's offspring are technically illegitimate. In an arranged public display, Buckingham offers the throne of England to Richard, who is presumably reluctant to accept. By this time, Richard has alienated even his own mother, who curses him as a bloody tyrant.

By now, Richard needs to bolster his claims to the crown; the young princes locked away in the Tower of London must be disposed of. Buckingham, until now Richard's staunchest ally, balks at this deed. Richard gets a murderer to do the deed, but turns on Buckingham for his insubordination. Now Richard—conveniently a widower after the suspicious demise of Anne—makes a ploy to marry the late King Edward's daughter, his niece. Elizabeth, Edward's widow, makes Richard believe that she agrees to the match; however, Elizabeth has arranged for a match with the Earl of Richmond.

Richmond, at this point in the action, is bringing over an army from France to war against Richard. Buckingham, finding himself out of favor with the king, gives his allegiance to Richmond. However, Buckingham is captured when his army is thrown into disarray by floods, and Richard has him executed immediately. Richmond, who has undergone his own troubles crossing the English Channel, finally lands his army and marches for London. The armies of Richard and Richmond encamp near Bosworth Field; the night before the battle, Richard is visited by the sundry ghosts of the people he has slain, all of whom foretell his doom.

At Bosworth, Richard is unhorsed in the combat. Richmond finds him, and the two of them clash with swords. Richmond prevails and slays Richard, to be crowned as King Henry VII there on the field of battle. This is the founding of the Tudor line of kings and the end of the War of the Roses.