**Historical Contexts**

The Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453) occurred because the French royal family stopped having sons;

the Wars of the Roses (1460-1485) occurred because the English royal family kept having sons.

The Hundred Years’ War is misnamed because it lasted, in an on-again/off-again way, 116 years. The Wars of the Roses is misnamed because one of the two sides didn’t use a rose as its badge until after the end of the war in 1485. The name was coined in the 19th century, in a novel by Sir Walter Scott, who based it on a scene in Shakespeare’s *1 Henry VI*, which Shakespeare invented. However, Henry VII, upon his marriage, adopted the Tudor Rose as a badge that signified the union of his Lancastrian ancestry (to which he retroactively assigned the red rose as a badge) with his wife’s Yorkist family, which actually used a white rose as a badge. So Shakespeare, writing for a Tudor monarch, dramatizes a Tudor myth.

Royal Genealogies

*In France –*

**Philip III** (the Bold) reigned 1270-1285; his oldest son became Philip IV and his third son was Charles of Valois, whose son became Philip VI.

**Philip IV** (the Fair) reigned 1285-1314; he had three sons, who reigned successively, and his daughter Isabella married King Edward II of England.

**Louis X** (the Quarrelsome) reigned 1314-1316; he had one son, who died in infancy;

**Philip V** (the Tall) reigned 1317-1322; he had no offspring;

**Charles IV** (the Fair) reigned 1322-1328; he had one daughter.

**Philip VI** (the Fortunate) reigned 1328-1350; he was the first cousin of the three previous kings, who are the members of the French royal family who stopped having sons.

**John II** (the Good), son of Philip VI, reigned 1350-1364, but was a prisoner in England twice.

**Charles V** (the Wise), son of John II, reigned 1364-1380, after serving as regent for his father twice.

**Charles VI** (the Well-beloved or the Mad), son of Charles V, reigned 1380-1422; he had regents while he was a minor, 1380-1388, and was intermittently insane 1392-1422.

**Charles VII** (the Victorious or the Well-served), son of Charles VI, reigned 1422-1461.

*In England –*

**Edward III**, son of Edward II and Isabella of France (Philip IV’s daughter), reigned 1327-1377. His mother was his regent 1327-1330. She and her lover, Roger de Mortimer, had been responsible for deposing his father, Edward II, and having him killed. When Edward III began his personal rule in 1330, he had his mother arrested and Mortimer executed. He began the Hundred Years’ War by asserting his right to the throne of France because his mother’s claim was better than Philip VI’s was. Also, Edward III is the member of the English royal family who kept having sons, five in all, four of whom survived him:

Edward the Black Prince died before his father did; the Black Prince’s son became Richard II.

Lionel, Duke of Clarence, was the father of a daughter, Philippa, who married a Mortimer.

John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, was the father of Henry IV by his first wife, Blanche.

Edmund, Duke of York, was the great-grandfather of the Yorkist kings, Edward IV and Richard III.

Thomas, Duke of Gloucester, was the ancestor of the Dukes of Buckingham.

**Richard II**, son of Edward III’s first son, reigned 1377-1399. He was deposed by Henry IV and then killed.

**Henry IV**, son of Edward III’s third son, reigned 1399-1413. Note that he seems to be the next male in the line of succession after Richard II because Edward III’s second son Lionel had no sons. However, Lionel’s daughter Philippa had a son, who would have a better right to the throne than the third son’s descendants – unless the throne should go to the nearest male whose line of descent was entirely male, in which case Henry IV would be next in line to Richard II after all. There was as yet no question of a woman being monarch; the question was whether the throne could be inherited by a man whose right to it came through a woman. Since Edward III’s claim to the throne of France came through his mother, this dispute about how succession works is behind both of the wars that Shakespeare dramatizes.

**Henry V**, son of Henry IV, reigned 1413-1422. He revived the Hundred Years’ War by renewing the English royal family’s claim to the French throne.

**Henry VI**, son of Henry V, reigned 1422-1461 and 1470-71. Thanks in part to a year-long fit of madness on the king’s part, 1453-54, the jockeying of his noble relatives for power led to open warfare, framed as Lancaster (Henry VI, like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, was Duke of Lancaster) versus York (Richard, Duke of York, grandson of Edmund, fourth son of Edward III). Because Edward III’s second son, Lionel, was great-grandfather to a woman who married this Richard’s father, Richard’s supporters could claim his descent was from the second as well as the fourth son of Edward III – and thus better than Henry’s, which was entirely from the third son. By the time Yorkists captured Henry and won the war, Richard was dead, as was one of his sons, but two of his three sons became king.

**Edward IV**, oldest son of Richard, Duke of York, reigned 1461-1470 and 1471-1483. His decision to let Henry live led to a briefly successful revolt against his rule; in the course of his regaining the throne, both Henry and Henry’s heir apparent (another Edward) died. When Edward IV died a dozen years later, he left two sons and a daughter; his older son became Edward V but was not crowned king.

**Richard III,** third son of Richard, Duke of York, reigned 1483-1485. He either usurped the throne from his nephew or discovered his late brother’s marriage was invalid and therefore his nephew was not eligible to rule. Edward V and his brother died either way, but no one knows when, how, or at whose orders. The 1485 battle that ended his life, the Plantagenet dynasty, and the Wars of the Roses, was the 13th battle in 25 years. It also ends the English Middle Ages and begins the Early Modern period.

**Henry VII**, the first Tudor monarch, was descended from John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, third son of Edward III, by his third wife. (When Gaunt’s second wife died, he married his mistress, who already had four children by him. They were legitimated by Richard II, but Henry IV decreed that their descent from royalty could not give them a claim to the throne.) Henry Tudor declared himself king by right of conquest – he was the last English monarch to win the throne in battle – and then he married Elizabeth of York, daughter of Edward IV. Thus the warring factions of Edward III’s descendants were united.

History Plays

There are more detailed notes on the historical contexts of five of Shakespeare’s ten history plays in the “Individual Plays” folder, under *Richard II, 1 Henry IV, 2 Henry IV, Henry V,* and *Richard III.*

Shakespeare’s other five history plays, *1 Henry VI, 2 Henry VI, 3 Henry VI, King John,* and *Henry VIII*, are not covered in the “Individual Plays” folder, although some of the historical context for the Henry VI plays appears in this document.