

Crown duels

Lust, betrayal, plots, treason and murder – the story of our monarchy is more gory than glory, says DAVID STARKEY. His TV history of the Crown shows why the Tudors and Stuarts would wade through blood for a circle of gold



At the centre of this story is a mystic circle of gold. People compete to possess it; scheme, fight, even murder to control it. Yet when they have got it, they find that it controls them. Armies fight bloody battles in its name. Once won, it may be put on only with due ceremony, since wearing it brings magical power over humanity. But it corrupts the wearer. The quest to possess it obsesses them, twists their minds, sometimes destroys them. They lose their souls.

Fans of J.R.R. Tolkien will recognise *The Lord Of The Rings* in that synopsis, but this is history, not fantasy. This circle is not a gold ring but a crown. It is a real epic, in the real world of power, battles and lust. We are talking about Monarchy.

Our second Channel 4 television series takes us from the end of one bloodbath, the Wars of the Roses, to the aftermath of another, the English Civil War, via eight kings, two queens and one Lord Protector. Power, lust, treason and murder are always interesting – and this story contains plenty of each.

But that is not the only reason why this particular period in our history is the one that has always most fascinated me. Through the series runs a theme: religion and politics fusing, clashing, blowing each other apart. They do it in a way that made modern Britain, and they do it spectacularly.

The first king in our series, the Yorkist Edward IV, drowned his brother in a vat of wine. The last, Charles I, had his head chopped off. In between come the Tudors and the Stuarts. The first Stuart king, James

I, was a canny Scotsman, who succeeded Elizabeth I, the woman who had beheaded his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots.

We have to include Oliver Cromwell, who was the only person ever to conquer the whole of the British Isles. It is something that neither Julius Caesar nor William The Conqueror attempted, and that Napoleon and Hitler couldn't do. This country has had no greater military genius.

Cromwell, of course, beheaded a king. Then they offered him the crown. He turned it down, yet ended up with more real power than any of the kings and queens before him or after. Several monarchs tried to wield absolute power and failed. Cromwell succeeded, perhaps because

he was unencumbered by expectations of what a crown could actually do.

The crown itself is heavy, grotesque and huge. Shorn of its symbolism, it looks absurd. The Imperial Crown of England made for King Henry VII, the first Tudor king, and used to crown him in 1485, is like something a space alien might wear and must have been vilely uncomfortable.

What exactly was the point of that extraordinary headgear? For some monarchs it was simply a symbol of the power seized on a battlefield, or by family murder, or, if they were lucky, inherited. For others it was far more: a talisman that brought the absolute power of God to those who wore it and made men obey you. And,

like the ring in Tolkien's epic, it seduced people. It seduced everybody. And it corrupted those that pursued it, such as Richard III, who murdered the little princes in the Tower.

Richard is Shakespeare's stage villain, the repulsive hunchback wicked uncle. But Shakespeare had it wrong. The hunchback was probably a myth, and before the lure of that crown got him, Richard was conspicuously loyal to his older brother, Edward IV. He was not the bad brother; he was the good one.

Edward, tall, charismatic, capable, won the Battle of Tewkesbury in 1471, and the throne with it, putting a temporary end to the Wars of the Roses and a century of turmoil. He had two brothers.

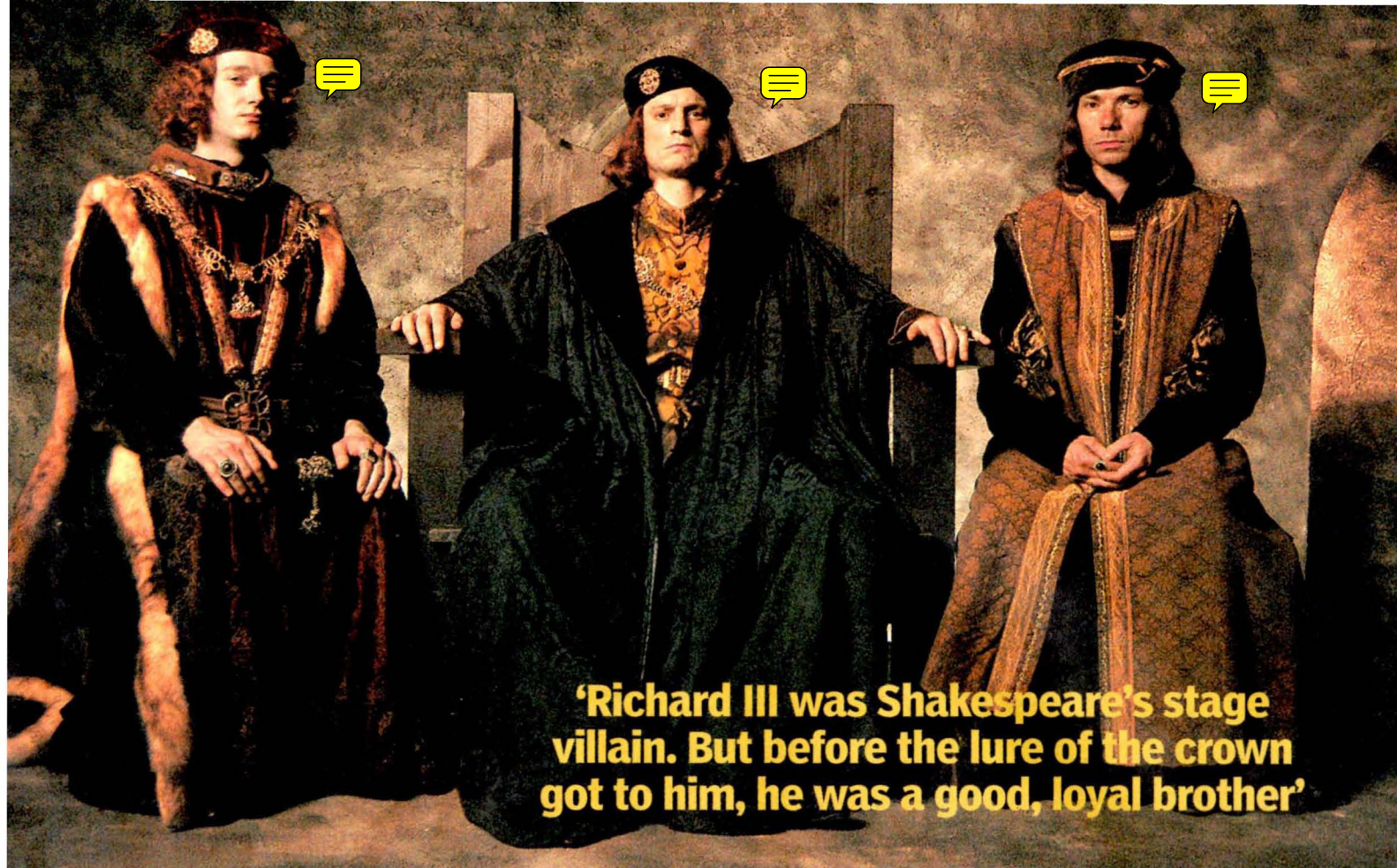
The loyal one was Richard; the disloyal one George, Duke of Clarence. Clarence had schemed and changed sides time and again. It is amazing that Edward IV put up with him for so long. When he did bump him off it was a quasi-legal liquidation: Clarence was charged with treason, sent to the Tower and drowned upside down in a wine barrel. So Edward was left with his loyal brother, Richard, and the saga should have had a happy ending.

But Edward died in 1483, when his sons were barely teenagers. They fell into the care of their uncle: loyal, decent, Richard. It was then that the perverting lure of the crown took over Richard's mind. Richard's was the kind of ambition that twists reality to fit his own prospects. He really did believe he was

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David Starkey in his latest study of British history and, above, Richard III



The Duke of Clarence, left, with brothers Edward (later Edward IV), centre, and Richard (who became Richard III) in the TV series

'Richard III was Shakespeare's stage villain. But before the lure of the crown got to him, he was a good, loyal brother'

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behaving unselfishly in killing his little nephews in the Tower. He persuaded himself that they were illegitimate, with no right to the throne; he had a moral duty to dispose of them and make the throne his own. But no one else believed him. So he died paranoid, maddened and betrayed on a battlefield by barons whom he never really trusted. That was what the mesmeric power of the crown did to a once good man.

It worked its spell on the man who defeated him, too. Henry VII began full of ideals and aspirations: uniting the rival houses of York and Lancaster. He ended as a money-grubbing miser, racking up the medieval equivalent of parking fines to pay for essential services rotily run on the cheap. His son, Henry VIII, began as Prince Charming; he ended, as Dickens put it, as a spot of blood and grease on the history of England.

His second wife, young and sexy Anne Boleyn, was the first of his wives to be put to the sword. She had used sex to catch him; but she found that sex was double-edged. When the son she bore him was stillborn — and, it is said, deformed — he tired of her and switched his affections to a younger model still. But that was not the excuse Henry gave for cutting off her head; he claimed she was a witch and had put magic spells on him. Added to that, he accused her of participating in orgies with a musician and a clutch of courtiers, and of committing incest with her brother. The musician, the brother and the courtier all met terrible ends, tortured before death, and a special executioner was brought from France to cut off Anne's head.

The other wife he killed was number five, Catherine Howard. She too was beheaded for adultery. Unlike Anne, she certainly was adulterous; Henry was too overweight for love-making by then. But none of this wife-murder could have happened if he hadn't been able to get his very first marriage out of the way. It was the power to do it that had turned him into a monster.

To get his first divorce, he had claimed for the crown power it had never had before — over men's minds. He was England's Stalin.

To cut through the laws of the Roman Catholic Church, binding him to his wife Catherine of Aragon, he needed magic tricks.

He found his wizards at Cambridge University: fanatical Protestant theologians. England was never the same again.

The new religion that Henry's testosterone and Protestant theology created put Henry, and not the Pope, in charge of the Church of England. Henry's lust for the black-eyed Anne Boleyn made the crown more powerful than ever before — but more dangerous to its wearer, too.

Two of Henry's three children shared the fashion for religious fanaticism. The boy king, Edward VI, was a

Protestant fundamentalist who smashed anything faintly decorative in churches but died before he could bring in a spy-ridden terror-state. Mary was equally fanatical, but burning people alive for the exact opposite, Roman Catholic, cause. It was Elizabeth I, the survivor, who was too sensible for such extremes and imposed a Goldilocks religion on England — not too hot,

not too cold, not too Protestant, not too Catholic — that most people could sign up to.

James Stuart had been King of Scotland since he was six months old. He had an abused



The top ten

EDWARD IV reigned from 1461-1483

Edward cut his way to the throne in the Wars of the Roses to avenge his father's death. Lecherous and lazy, his early death destabilised the kingdom.

RICHARD III 1483-1485

Edward's youngest brother, he seized the throne after (probably) killing his brother's sons, 'the Princes in the Tower'. His hunchback was Shakespeare's invention, but the unpopularity of his nephews' murder was not. The last English king to die in battle, his death, at Bosworth, ended the Wars of the Roses.

HENRY VII 1485-1509 (above, with his heavy crown)

Founder of the Welsh Tudor dynasty; Henry healed the wounds inflicted by the war, but turned into a grasping, suspicious miser.

HENRY VIII 1509-1547 (right)

A Prince Charming who ran to fat; Henry's marital troubles led to two of his six queens losing their heads (Jane Seymour, far right, escaped the sword but died ten days after childbirth) and sparked the English Reformation.

EDWARD VI

1547-1553 The sickly boy king who proved a religious fanatic. Only Edward's early death prevented England from becoming a Protestant police state.

MARY I 1553-1558 Bloody

Mary's mission was to restore England to her Catholic faith, but her burning of 300 Protestants made her a hate figure and she failed to produce an heir.

ELIZABETH I 1558-1603 An arch politician, Elizabeth kept suitors and favourites vying in vain for the Virgin Queen's hand. She presided over a compromise religious settlement, an artistic

renaissance, and saw off the Spanish armada.

JAMES I 1603-1625 Mary Queen of Scots' son hated new-fangled tobacco, but was over-fond of young male favourites. The so-called 'wisest fool in Christendom' passed on his belief that kings could do no wrong to his ill-fated son — with disastrous results.

CHARLES I 1625-1649 Shy, stuttering Charles tried to impose single-minded royal rule without Parliament. His refusal to accept defeat in the Civil War cost him his head.

OLIVER CROMWELL 1649-1658 Brought Ireland and Scotland to heel and never lost a battle. But his Puritanism ensured a return of the monarchy after his iron rule relaxed upon his death.



childhood in the grip of murderous regents and a sadistic tutor who delighted in flogging him, in an all-male household in Stirling Castle, which may well have helped shape his later sexual preferences.

Scotland's stern Calvinist ministers thought kings were no nearer to God than anyone else, and rebuked them to their faces. James looked longingly at the absolute power that an English monarch seemed to have. But when he came south to mount Elizabeth's throne, he found he couldn't even get the civil servants to obey him. James ended his days going to Newmarket to indulge himself in his two passions, horses and young men.

His son, Charles I, was the most absolute believer in the mysticism of the crown we have ever had. The high point of making the TV series for me was when I was allowed to handle the order of service for his 1625 coronation: I held the book that he read, that Archbishop Laud had annotated with stage directions for the movements that Charles was to make. I sensed Charles touching and feeling every object through which he believed God was giving him Divine Right over every person in the kingdom. Not just the crown, the sceptre and the orb; not only the oil of unction poured on his head; there was supposedly an Anglo-Saxon comb with which kings before the Conquest had combed their hair in an obscure but once meaningful part of the ceremony. No king or queen for a thousand years had bothered with that bit. But Charles did. He believed that his subjects would obey him because God had ordained it. And when they did not, he was deeply puzzled and upset. They did not just disobey him; they rose in arms against him. The first to do so were his fellow Scots. He ordered them to have bishops, and they did not want bishops.

Charles found, at the cost of his head, that his beliefs were mistaken. The man who cut it off and then rejected the crown, Oliver Cromwell, ended up wielding more power than Charles had in his wildest dreams. The civil war had turned into a three-way fight: King against Parliament against Cromwell's army — and the army won.

Cromwell's new model Parliament was a mere rump of yes-men who did nothing at all to contradict their great leader. No other ruler, until perhaps Tony Blair, has had such a compliant Commons. Cromwell managed what Charles had not: to rule without a real parliament. The irony was that, although he had got rid of the King, he found that he needed a king. Someone, in the end, had to be Head of State; in the end, had to give legitimacy to things. That someone was a king. And when Cromwell died in 1658, they rapidly brought one back.

And the signs of kingship? The orb, sceptre and that golden crown that so many people had fought for? They have gone, every one of them melted down. Charles' queen Henrietta Maria took some of the crown jewels abroad and sold them to buy weapons when the war was at its height. Cromwell's men disposed of the rest — no one knows where. The Anglo-Saxon comb has vanished. A few scraps of cloth from those coronations survive in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, but no precious jewels, and no all-empowering circlet of gold. Like Tolkien's and Wagner's rings of power, it has been consumed by fire and has vanished. The crown that Queen Elizabeth II wore at her coronation is a 17th-century copy. David Starkey On The Monarchy begins on Channel 4, Monday, 8pm.