



# Who wrote the Titulus Regius?

It is one of the most important documents surviving from the reign of Richard III yet little is known about it, including its authorship, writes **David Johnson**

The *Titulus Regius* is without question the most important document emanating from the reign of Richard III. It is, to quote Professor Michael Hicks, 'the official instrument of his election as king in 1483'. The document, which was enacted as a statute in the parliament of January 1484, sets out in detail Richard's title to the crown. The statute describes the document as a petition, presented by the three estates of the realm, in which the Lords Spiritual, Temporal and the Commons request Richard, Duke of Gloucester, to accept the throne. Richard's receipt and acceptance of the petition on 26 June 1483, the day on which he began his reign, is confirmed in a letter written to the English garrison at Calais two days later on 28 June. The petition (and hence the *Titulus Regius*) established Richard as the rightful king of England on the grounds that Edward IV was legally married to Lady Eleanor Butler (née Talbot) when he subsequently and bigamously 'married' Elizabeth Woodville in 1464. Edward's pre-contract – previous contract of marriage – with Lady Eleanor rendered adulterous his union with Elizabeth and bastardised their children, barring Edward V and Richard, Duke of York, from the succession.

Although Richard was asked to accept the crown by the three estates of the realm, many historians believe that the petition, enacted as the *Titulus Regius* in

1484, was in fact the work of Richard himself. 'There can be no doubt,' wrote Michael Hicks, that the *Titulus Regius* 'represents Richard's point of view. If he did not compile it in person, he most certainly determined its contents'. What this article seeks to demonstrate, however, is that Richard did not compile or determine the contents of the *Titulus Regius*. It will be argued here that contemporary source material, including the document's internal evidence, indicate an entirely different author.

It is important to recognise that the *Titulus Regius* is much more than a matter-of-fact elucidation of Richard's royal title. It also contains a withering attack upon the character and reign of Edward IV, a king corrupted by self-indulgence and the malign influence of Elizabeth Woodville and her family. The parliament rolls of January 1484 show that Edward's kingship was derided as a time 'when those who had the rule and governance of this land, delighted in adulation and flattery and led by sensuality and concupiscence [lechery], followed the counsel of insolent, vicious people of inordinate avarice, despising the counsel of good, virtuous and prudent people'. The result was 'that felicity was turned into misery, and prosperity into adversity, and the order of policy and of the law of God and man confounded'.

Historians have traditionally interpreted the document's censorious

denunciation of Edward IV as a shameless example of Richard's political duplicity. Sean Cunningham argued that the *Titulus Regius* is 'an example of how the authority of late medieval parliaments could be manipulated to express the king's personal agenda', castigating Edward IV's reign 'as the centre of all moral corruption and feckless government', 'the effects of Edward's sordid marriage to a most unsuitable widow'. Charles Ross described the *Titulus Regius* as 'a mixture of the specious moralising and deliberate deceit which characterise Richard's propaganda effusions'. David Hipshon insisted that the 'primary function of the *Titulus Regius* was, in fact, to set out Richard's justification for taking the throne for the purposes of propaganda'. And Michael K. Jones stated that the document was a 'potent mix of accusation, allegation and self-belief that propelled Richard to the throne'.

But is it really credible to accuse Richard of masterminding a document which so utterly condemns his brother's reign? Richard's conspicuous and unfaltering loyalty to Edward is a universally accepted and firmly established fact. Such devotion is hardly likely to provoke the kind of tirade witnessed in the *Titulus Regius*. Moreover, we should not forget that the petition presented to Richard in June 1483 expressed the wishes of the three



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Philippe de Commynes, Louis XI's principal councillor, reported that Stillington was the officiating priest at Edward IV's clandestine marriage with Lady Eleanor Butler, and while Commynes himself refers to Eleanor as 'a certain English lady', he goes on to state that Stillington did in fact reveal the lady's identity. The bishop, wrote Commynes, 'said that he had married them when only he and they were present', and that Edward later wedded Elizabeth Woodville, 'the daughter of an English knight, Lord Rivers'. Following Edward IV's death, Stillington disclosed the late king's matrimonial secret to Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and members of the ruling council. Stillington, therefore, witnessed an exchange of vows between Edward IV and Lady Eleanor, divulged details of that secret union in the aftermath of Edward's death, and drew

To the high and mighty prince Richard Duc of Gloucestre

Please it your noble grace to understande the consideration election and person undoubted of us the lordes openly and temporally and comons of this Realme of England. And therto agreeably to give you assent to the comon and publicke dole of this lande to the comforte and gladnesse of all the people of the same.

Muste we consider howe thin heretofore in tyme passed this lande many yeres stode in gree prosperite honory and tranquillite Which dar aunes for much as the thinge than requiringe wisde and folowed the advice and counsaill of certain lordes openly and temporally and other somes of appoynted wisdest pudent place and experience shewing god and havinge tender pite and affection to misseint misfortune of justice and to the comon and politicall dole of the lande Than once last god dar directe helped and honoured. Than within the lande dar peace and tranquillite and among neighbours concord and charyte Than the malice of untrusty enemies dar unphailly resisted and repelled and the lande honourably defended. Than many gree and glorious victories than the enterprise of our belovede dar largely used and exercised by which thinge abovenumbered the lande dar greatly enriched So that afforde the marchants and asyngers as other poor people inhabitinge for than livinge in muche comforte had convenient gaine to the sustentation of thairne and theyr householdes livinge withoute misfortune and intelligible poyntes But after that than that such as had the rule and gouernance of this lande deliyinge in adulation and flattery and ledde by consualter and conspiciencie folowed the counsaill of somes misliant prauous and of modest untrike despying the counsaill of good persons and prudent personer such as aboue be remembered The prosperite of this lande darly decreased so that felicity dar turned into miserie and prosperite into aduersite and the order of polycie and of the lawde of god and man confounded. Wherby it is likely this realme to falle into extreme miserie and desolation Which god defende Withoute due prouision of ouenable remedie bee had in this behalf in all godly hart

**Intellectual property:** The *Titulus Regius* of 1484 was Parliament's official request for Richard to accede to the throne. It was repealed and then suppressed by the Tudors





### “Passages in the *Titulus Regius* state Edward IV ‘oppressed and injured’ the kingdom ‘by extortions and new impositions’”

up the 1483 petition ultimately enrolled as the *Titulus Regius* of 1484. Stillington’s systematic exposition of Richard’s royal title in the *Titulus Regius* is a natural and logical consequence of his presence at, and intimate knowledge of, Edward IV’s secret marriage with Lady Eleanor. And while it might be objected that Stillington conspicuously failed to identify himself in the *Titulus Regius* as the officiating priest, it should be noted, as H. A. Kelly has recently observed, that the bishop had good reason for not doing so: ‘The Fourth Lateran Council decreed that any priest participating in a clandestine marriage was to be suspended from office for three years.’ The surviving evidence therefore identifies Stillington as the delineator of Richard’s royal title in the *Titulus Regius*. However, this does not automatically imply authorship of those additional passages which so violently denigrate Edward and his reign. For that we must look for clues in the text itself.

Key passages in the *Titulus Regius* state that Edward IV’s rule ‘oppressed and injured’ the kingdom ‘by extortions and new impositions’. These were not only ‘contrary to the laws of God and man’, but also contravened ‘the liberties, old policy and laws of this realm which every Englishman inherits’. These calamities were attributed to the fact that ‘during his life the said King Edward and the said Elizabeth lived together sinfully and damnably in adultery, contrary to the law of God and of his church’. As a result ‘the sovereign lord and the head of this land being of such ungodly disposition’ provoked ‘the ire and indignation of our lord God’. Thus Edward’s ‘ungodly

disposition’, living ‘sinfully and damnably in adultery’, not only offended God’s holy church, but also the King of Kings himself. Such condemnatory invective, vehemently expressed in terms of religious censure, can only represent the moral outrage of Bishop Stillington: a prominent ecclesiastic who had witnessed first-hand an unforgivable breach of that sacred relationship which binds a king – God’s anointed – to the Almighty.

### Episcopal indignation?

Stillington principally served the king as an administrator and diplomat, initially as keeper of the privy seal, and later as Chancellor of England. The bishop’s distinguished career was intimately entwined with Edward’s reign, affording every opportunity to observe the king at close quarters. The disapproving and judgemental tone of the *Titulus Regius* accords with the disabused views of a senior cleric, one who not only knew the secret of Edward’s adulterous Woodville ‘marriage’, but also suffered imprisonment at the king’s hands. In 1478, following the trial and condemnation of George, Duke of Clarence, Stillington was briefly held in the Tower of London ‘for violating his oath of fidelity by some utterances prejudicial to this king’. As Edward’s secret marriage to Lady Eleanor remained unknown at that time, Stillington cannot have revealed the pre-contract to Clarence. It is much more likely that his arrest was prompted by ill-judged references to the duke’s trial, particularly as the bishop had been one of those who in 1471 had persuaded Clarence to abandon the Lancastrians and return to the Yorkist fold.

The available evidence, therefore, including the text of the document itself, indicates that the *Titulus Regius* was the work of Robert Stillington. As the priestly officiate who witnessed the secret

marriage of Edward IV and Lady Eleanor, Stillington composed the petition which invalidated the king’s subsequent ‘marriage’ to Elizabeth Woodville. Although Stillington’s dissatisfaction prompted unrecorded criticism of the king, temporarily landing him in prison, we can be certain that the pre-contract was not disclosed at that time. By the same token we may conclude that the *Titulus Regius* was not instigated or directed by Richard, Duke of Gloucester. He was merely the recipient of a petition drafted by the Bishop of Bath and Wells and endorsed by the three estates of the realm. Furthermore it should be noted that King Richard did not reward Stillington during his reign. Thus the *Titulus Regius* declared, in the religious prose of a morally indignant ecclesiastic, the invalidity of the Woodville ‘marriage’, the rightfulness of Richard III’s royal title, and the absolute condemnation of the ‘ungodly’ Edward IV. 🍷

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### Further reading

To read a transcript of the *Titulus Regius* visit [www.richardiii.net](http://www.richardiii.net) and browse through to ‘Research’, then ‘Ricardian resources’ and click on ‘Titulus Regius’

‘*Titulus Regius* (Royal Title), item 5, Richard III: January 1484’, *Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, (Woodbridge, 2005).

M. Hicks, *Richard III: The Man Behind the Myth* (1991), pp. 20, 82, 83.

S. Cunningham, *Richard III: A Royal Enigma* (2003), p. 60.

C. Ross, *Richard III* (1981), p. 90.

D. Hipshon, *Richard III* (2011), p. 164.

P. Langley and M. K. Jones, *The King’s Grave: The Search for Richard III* (2013), p. 126. Year Book, 1 Henry VII, 5, pl. 1.

H. A. Kelly, ‘The Crowland Chronicle and the Marriage Impediments of Edward IV and Richard III’, *The Ricardian*, vol. xxxii, (2022), pp. 37, 39.

M. Jones (ed.), *Philippe de Commines, Memoirs* (1972), pp. 353–54, 397.

*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Stillington, Robert (d. 1491) by M. Hicks