

KING EDWARD IV has died, in his fortieth year. His death unleashes a struggle for power between two factions: on one side, Edward's widow, Queen Elizabeth Woodville and her family, which her influence has supported for nineteen years. Against her, the 'Old Nobility' is led by Richard Duke of Gloucester (later RIII), and his cousin Harry, Duke of Buckingham.

Richard, in Middleham, receives a letter asking for his help. The seal on the letter is torn. Why? Richard's varlet, Thomas, has a ready explanation:



Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham
by William Sherlock, b. 1738

**'Dark Sovereign'
from The Merchant Scene.**

GLOUCESTER: The seal is torn out!

THOMAS: Devoured, I doubt not, by a rat.

GLOUCESTER *takes the letter:* Who is the author?

THOMAS: He is your cousin Harry, duke of Buckingham, your grace.

GLOUCESTER, *aside:* Aye, a ravening rat!

Thrusts the letter back at THOMAS:

What matter-subject does my cousin write?

THOMAS: Your grace knows that I cannot read.

GLOUCESTER: Lack of learning seeleth up thine eyes;
but stoppeth not thine ears. What do my letter'd scullions say? n

THOMAS *makes a show of remembering.*

Clutching the letter to his chest, recites the contents by heart:

THOMAS: Duke Harry writes a privy business.

GLOUCESTER: *My* privy business: Whereof I am the last to know;
wherethrough the tongues of stable-grooms and ostlers
pay their lord a privy nip. n

Is it for this moment apt? n

THOMAS: O, apt, sir. Fit and apt.

GLOUCESTER: Recite my private business, do!

THOMAS *recites*: Your brother George, duke of Clarence,
our loyalst friend against the queen, would seize my Lady Anne.

Duke Harry writes: He means to sever from you her inheritance.

GLOUCESTER *snatches the letter. Tries to find the place*:

Writes he for gospel, Thomas?

THOMAS: Aye, your grace, for gospel.

GLOUCESTER: Wherefore rouse our men at arms!

THOMAS: Belikely they lie with their whores.

GLOUCESTER: Then bid them fix their blades in feller foes.

To horse!

n

THOMAS: The whores?

GLOUCESTER: To horse!

THOMAS: Fare we against the Scots, your grace?

GLOUCESTER: You drowsy-headed monkey, we ride south.

Thrusts the letter at THOMAS. Post we sans stop to London!

(They go.)