THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 144: A MURDER OF CROWS AND PRINCES

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 144: A Murder of Crows and Princes. In this episode, we're going to look at an interesting phenomenon that was emerging in the English language in the mid-1400s. It was a fad for coining new terms for collective nouns like a school or fish, and a gaggle of geese, and a murder of crows. It was also a time of transition in England. The Plantagenet era was coming to an end. The last Plantagenet king was Richard III – one of the most controversial kings in English history. Much of that controversy surrounds the fate of his two nephews who disappeared in the Tower of London. According to popular tradition, he had them murdered in order to secure the throne for himself. That verdict is still a matter of debate, but it points to a different kind of murder – a murder of princes. So this time, we'll explore those historical and linguistic developments.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, we're going to resume our overall historical narrative. Over the past few episodes, we've explored the Great Vowel Shift, so for those of you who listen in real time, it's been several months since we considered what was happening on the ground in the late 1400s as Middle English evolved into early Modern English. Since it's been a while, I thought it might be a good idea to remind you where we were in our overall story before our digression into the vowel shift.

As you might recall, the first major phase of the Wars of the Roses came to an end when the first Yorkist king Edward IV defeated his Lancastrian cousin Henry VI. Edward had been the king for several years before being briefly deposed. And the victory over Henry allowed him to recover the throne and continue the reign of the House of York. The victory also saw the defeat and death of the main line of Lancastrian kings – those who were directly descended from John of Gaunt and his first wife Blanche. The Lancastrian story wasn't over yet, but the defeat was devastating for the Lancastrian cause, and it allowed Edward and the Yorkists to rule England for more than a decade in relative peace.

At the time, Edward had an infant son also named Edward, and a short time later, he and his wife had a second son. So Edward had not only re-secured the throne for himself, he also secured his eventual succession with sons who could inherit the throne when he died. Edward also had a younger brother named Richard. At the time, Richard was held in high regard and was seen as a loyal supporter of his brother. But that perception would change over time.

A short time after Edward IV defeated the Lancastrians and re-secured his position as king, William Caxton arrived in England with the printing press. It was the first printing press to be placed into operation in the country, and we looked at that development back in Episode 139.

The main benefit of the printing press was the ability mass produce books. I discussed all of the benefits of the printing press in that earlier episode, but there were also some drawbacks. It was very easy for the type setter to make a mistake, and that meant the mistake occurred in every copy of the book. Of course, that wasn't an entirely new problem. Scribes sometimes did the same thing when they copied a text by hand. And if another scribe came along and made a copy of that copy, then the mistake could be repeated over and over in each subsequent copy. So it was common to find mistakes in these publications, and to see those mistakes repeated over and over again.

That was the context for a figure of speech that appeared in writing for the first time in the mid-1400s. It's the phrase 'without rhyme or reason.'

If something happens 'without rhyme or reason,' there's no logical explanation for it. Now it makes sense that something unexplainable might happen without reason, but why do we say that it happens without 'rhyme' or reason? What does 'rhyme' have to do with it? Well, the answer has to do with the original context of the phrase.

In the mid-1400s, a writer name John Russell wrote an extended poem called 'Boke of Nurture.' Russell worked for a prominent Lancastrian noble, and the poem was intended as a handbook of manners and household management. The poem outlined the duties of a butler, and described the proper way to prepare and serve a meal, to organize a wardrobe, and to prepare a bath for the members of the noble family. At the very end of the poem, Russell included the following lines:

"As for ryme or resoñ, þe forewryter was not to blame
For as he founde hit aforne hym, so wrote he þe same"

In Modern English, it reads:
'As for rhyme or reason, the fore-writer was not to blame,
For as he found it before him, so wrote he the same.'

In other words, if you're reading this poem and see a mistake, don't blame the scribe who simply copied the original text word for word. The mistake was made by the author himself. ***Rhyme*** referred to the poetic form of the work – the way the words and text were presented. And ***reason*** referred to the actual content and substance of the work – the basic ideas expressed in it. So whether the mistake the one of 'rhyme or reason' – in other words, one of form or substance – the mistake belonged to the original author, not the scribe.

Again, these types of mistakes were not unusual, whether caused by the original author, a careless scribe, or a sloppy printer. When readers encountered them, they probably had to pause to make sense out of what they were reading. Between occasional printing mistakes, spellings that were yet to be standardized, and documents composed in regional dialects, early books could pose quite a challenge to readers. Without a standard form of English, some readers may have wondered if they were reading English at all.

And given that, maybe it isn't surprising that the word ***gibberish*** entered English for the first time during this period. During the mid to late 1400s (the exact date is uncertain), a manuscript called 'The Mirroure of the Worlde' was produced. It was an English translation of an earlier French work. One passage in the text warns against muttering prayers casually or lazily. The passage reads:

"And whoosoo prayeth to Godde withoute deuocion of herte, hee speketh giberisshe to Godde, as hee that speketh halfe Ynglisshe and halfe Frenshe."

In Modern English, it reads:
'And whoso prays to God without devotion of heart, he speaks gibberish to God, as he that speaks half English and half French.'

That's the first known use of the word ***gibberish*** meaning 'nonsense or incomprehensible speech.' It appears to be based on the word ***gibber*** which is found in later documents. So where did those words come from? Were they borrowed from French or Latin? Well, no. Words like ***gibber***, ***gibberish***, ***chatter***, ***jabber***, ***blabber***, and ***babble*** all appear to be a type of onomatopoeia. So the word is based on the actual sound of the thing it's describing, like the word ***buzz*** for the sound of a bee, or ***moo*** for the sound of a cow, or ***meow*** for the sound of a cat. Words like ***gibberish*** were coined because people who spoke gibberish sounded like they were saying 'gibber, gibber, gibber.'

Linguists sometimes describe these types of words as imitative or echoic. Again, the sound of the word mimics the sound of the thing it describes. We have another interesting example of this process at work in certain song lyrics that survive from this period in the 1400s. The songs were sung to babies and infants to help them fall asleep. Many of these songs contain words like ***lullay***, ***lullow***, ***lully***, or other variations. Those words were often repeated in the songs, and scholars think those words were common because the 'luh' sound tends to soothe and comfort babies. So the words didn't really have a specific meaning. They were just used for the sounds they made.

Many linguists think that words like ***lullay*** and ***lully*** were derived from the word ***lull*** as in 'to lull someone to sleep,' but the word ***lull*** itself is also apparently derived from the same soothing 'luh' sound. And as you may have guessed by now, those soothing sounds that 'lull' babies to sleep gave us the word ***lullaby***, which appeared in the following century.

Now this type of word forming process was certainly not new in the 1400s. It's probably as old as speech itself, and it's especially common when people are talking about the sounds that animals make. The best way to describe the sound of an animal is to imitate it. Again, that's how we got words like ***buzz***, ***moo***, ***meow***, ***purr***, ***bow wow***, and so on. And it's also how we got most of our words related to bird sounds.

When people live close to nature, they tend to pay more attention to the different sounds that various birds make. As people mimicked those sounds, new words were coined. Through this process, English has acquired a lot of words based on the sounds of birds. And many of those

words appeared for the first time in the periods of Middle and early Modern English. From the early Middle English period, we find the word ***hoot*** for the sound of an owl and ***cackle*** for the sound of a hen. We also find the words ***chitter*** and ***chatter*** which are probably related, and originally referred to the sounds made by birds like magpies and starlings. Of course, over time, ***chatter*** has been extended to sounds made by people as well.

We also find the word ***gaggle*** for the sound of a goose. And if you're a fan of social media, you'll probably be delighted to find out that the word ***twitter*** appeared in Middle English for the sound of a bird. The related word ***tweet*** was used for the sound of a small bird and appeared a couple of centuries later in the 1500s.

We also find words like ***chirp*** and ***peep***. The word ***croak*** appeared near the end of the Middle English period. Today, we tend to associate the word ***croak*** with frogs, but it originally represented the sound of a raven. In the Modern English period, we find words for bird sounds like ***quack*** for the sound of a duck, ***caw*** for the sound of a crow or raven, ***coo*** for the sound of a dove or pigeon, ***gobble*** for the sound of a Turkey, and ***cock-a-doodle-doo*** for the sound of a rooster. The fact that we have all of those unique words shows how attuned people were to those various bird sounds. And again, linguists think that all of those words were imitative. They were based on the sounds that people heard when birds made those noises.

And in fact, we can take this one step further. Many common bird names are actually based on the sound that the bird makes. For example, it appears that the original Indo-Europeans had a word for the sound that a goose makes. It was something like ****ghans***, and that's the original version of the word ***goose***. The name of the ***raven*** and a related bird called a ***rook*** are both thought to be derived from another Indo-European root word that mimicked the sound of those types of birds.

The original Indo-Europeans apparently thought the sound made by an owl was something like ****ul***, and that's the source of the English word ***owl***, as well as the word ***howl***. They also apparently thought the sound of a duck was something like ****pad***. We don't have any English words from that root, but it is the root of several words in other Indo-European languages. So whereas we might describe the sound of a duck as 'quack quack,' the original Indo-Europeans probably would have said something like 'pad pad.'

The early Germanic tribes apparently noticed the sound of certain birds and described it with a word that became ***caw*** in Modern English. Well, it appears that the same sound also produced the word ***crow***. That's not to say that the words are necessarily cognate. It's just that they are both derived from similar bird sounds.

One of the best examples of a bird named after the sound it makes is the ***cuckoo***. In addition, the words ***chick***, ***cock***, ***finch***, ***quail***, ***heron*** and ***egret*** are all thought to be derived from root words that originally mimicked the sound that various birds make.

The word ***pigeon*** is thought to be cognate with the word ***peep***, as well as ***pipe*** and ***piper*** in the sense of a small wind instrument and the person who plays it. They are all thought to be derived from the Latin word ***pipire*** which meant 'to make a peeping or chirping noise' and was based on that type of sound.

The main point here is that we usually think of language as this very abstract, symbolic way of describing the world around us. But sometimes, a word began as a literal representation of a particular sound, and that was especially true for animals, and even more so for the sounds made by birds. These examples cover the entire period of spoken English, but some of them like ***buzz***, ***peep***, ***chirp***, and ***croak*** are recorded for the first time around the current point in our story in the 1400s. And as such, they confirm that people were still using that traditional naming technique to coin new words during the transition from Middle English to Modern English.

We also have a modern word that links birds sounds and words like gibberish and chatter. It's the word ***gobbledygook***. It means nonsense, gibberish or overly technical jargon, but its formed from the sounds made by birds. Of course, ***gobble*** is the sound a turkey makes, and the Oxford English Dictionary says that ***gook*** is also imitative of a clucking bird. So ***gobbledygook*** apparently combines two different bird sounds to form a word meaning gibberish or nonsense.

And speaking of funny-sounding nonsense words, we also have another example from mid to late 1470s that illustrates the way people were playing around with words and coining new terms during that period. In 1473, shortly after Edward IV re-secured his position as king of England, we find a new turn of phrase in one of the Paston letters. I discussed the letters written by the Paston family a few episodes back. At that time, I mostly focused on the first couple of generations of the Pastons, but the letters continued to be written by subsequent generations. One of those letters includes a line where the writer can't recall a person's name. And he refers to the person as "whatcalle-ye-hym," literally 'what call you him,' which was an early version of 'what d'ye call'em' or 'what d'ye call it' or 'whatcha ma call it.' This is one of the first recorded uses of those types of playful nonsense words to refer to someone or something that can't be named.

What we see in all of these examples are cases where people were playing around with words and coming up with new terms. They weren't using those words with formality or precision. They were just using them for the sounds they made or using them where there wasn't really a better word available. Again, this was part of a long linguistic tradition, but with the expansion of literacy and books, we can see some of these terms being coined during this period in the 1400s.

Of course, the new words formed in this way were added to all of the loanwords that had been borrowed over the prior few centuries. It's estimated that the overall vocabulary of English had doubled since the Norman Conquest from around 50,000 words in Old English to around 100,000 words in the mid-1400s. [*SOURCE: Spell It Out, David Crystal, p. 41*] Most of those new words came from Latin, Greek and French, with French being the main source. By the mid 1400s, somewhere between one-quarter and one-third of the English vocabulary could be traced back to French. [*SOURCE: The Stories of English, David Crystal, p. 154*].

That expanded vocabulary gave English lots of different ways of expressing the same or similar ideas. And that expanded vocabulary was another factor that allowed English speakers to play around with words. They no longer had to rely on a small handful of words to express an idea. They could pull from an extensive vocabulary with different words having different shades of meaning. And we can start to see that playfulness in writing.

For example, rather than referring to a group of things with a generic word like ***group***, or ***collection***, or ***bunch***, writers started to come up with other terms – specific terms for specific groups of things like a 'school of fish' or a 'gaggle of geese.' This naming trend apparently began with animals that were commonly hunted. So it started as a type of hunting jargon, but this naming trend became such a popular fad that it was soon extended to people as well.

There is some evidence that French speakers did the same thing, and some of those French terms were adopted into English. And there are a few occasional uses of such terms in earlier Middle English documents. But now, in the mid-1400s, we start to come across manuscripts with long lists of these types of words. A lot of these collective nouns appear to be newly coined terms, and many of them were based on a type of word play.

One of the first documents to contain such a list was a handwritten text called the Egerton Manuscript which was composed around the year 1450. Then, when Caxton set up his printing press in England, he published a long extended poem called 'The Horse, the Goose, and the Sheep.' The poem had been composed a few decades earlier by John Lydgate, who was a prominent poet who lived shortly after the time of Chaucer.

The poem included a passage with a long list of these collective terms – one for almost every kind of animal and for different types of people as well. The list is almost comical in its terminology, and it shows how exaggerated this naming fad had become.

A few of the terms are still in common use today. For example, we find a pride of lions ('a Pryde of lyons'), a flock of sheep ('a Flock of shepe'), a school of fish ('Scole of fysshe'), and a swarm of bees ('a Swarme of bees'). We also find collective terms for other things like a cluster of grapes and a host of men ('an Hoost of men').

Some of those terms had been around for a while. For example, ***flock***, ***swarm*** and ***cluster*** were used in similar ways even in Old English. But ***pride*** in reference to lions and ***school*** in reference to fish were brand new to English. The term ***pride*** in reference to lions may have been borrowed from French and was apparently based on the perception of lions as powerful and proud creatures. The word ***school*** in reference to fish is based on an older Germanic term that referred to a group of fish or other animals. A version of the word existed in Old English, but it fell out of use after the Norman Conquest. The modern word ***school*** used in this way was borrowed from Dutch around the current point in our story. Of course, we have a 'school' of fish and a 'school' where students go to learn. So are those words related? Well, the answer is not entirely clear. The former is a Germanic word and the latter is a Latin word, but some scholars think they are ultimately cognate and related in sense of a collection or group of things – either a group of fish or a group of students. Again, the ultimate history is unclear.

In addition to some of the familiar terms I just mentioned, this poem published by Caxton also contains other collective terms that are a bit more obscure like a business of flies (‘a Besynes of flyes’), a trip of hares (‘a Trippe of hares’), a skulk of foxes (‘Skulke of foxes’), a drift of tame swine (‘a Drifte of tame swyn’) and a sounder of wild swine (‘a Sondre of wilde swyn’).

There are also a lot of terms for people. We find a bevy of ladies (‘a Beuye of ladyes’), a fellowship of yeomen (‘a Felouship of yomen’), a raffle of knaves (‘a Rafull of knaues’), a lordship of monks (‘a Lordship of monkes’), a state of princes (‘a State of princes’), a fighting of beggars, a glorifying of liars (‘a Glorifyeng of lyers’), a skulk of thieves (‘a Skulke of theues’), and a hastiness of cooks (‘a Hastynes of cookes’). We also find a lying of pardoners (‘a Lyeng of pardoners’), which is clearly a commentary on the way people viewed the church officials who sold pardons from sin.

One interesting thing about the list is the large number of terms for birds. Almost every grouping of birds is given a specific name. We find a herd of swans (‘an Herde of swannys’), a nye of pheasants (‘a Neye of fesantes’), a bevy of larks (‘a Beuye of larkes’), a siege of herons (‘a Siege of heyrons’), a sord of mallards (‘a Sourd of malardes’), a muster of peacocks (‘a Muster of pecoks’), a charm of finches (‘a Chyrme of fynches’), a host of sparrows (‘an Hoost of sparowes’), a gaggle of geese (‘a Gagyll of ghees’), an exaltation of larks (‘a Exaltacion of larkes’), a flight of doves (‘a Flight of douues’), a descent of woodpeckers (‘a discecion of wodewalis’), and a covey of partridges (‘a Coueye of partrichs’).

But two of the most interesting terms for birds are reserved for two related black birds that are often associated with bad luck, loss and even death. Those are the raven and the crow.

The poem tells us that a collection of those birds should be referred to as an unkindness of ravens (‘an vnkindnes of rauons’) and a murder of crows (‘a Murther of crowes’). That’s quite a contrast to a charm of finches. It appears that people found finches to be charming and adorable, thus a charm of finches. But they perceived ravens and crows to be threatening or unlucky. So they were referred to with terms like ***unkindness*** and ***murder***.

Of course, not everyone considered ravens and crows to be bad luck. And in fact, there’s an interesting anecdote about England’s reliance on ravens to this very day. For the past few centuries, perhaps dating as far back as the 1600s, a small flock or ‘unkindness’ of ravens has been maintained in the Tower of London. The Tower even has a Ravenmaster whose job is to take care of the ravens there and to make sure that they are fed and maintained. So why are ravens kept in the Tower of London? Well, in part due to a legend that say if ravens ever leave the Tower, England will fall and disaster will visit the kingdom. So if one chooses to believe the legend, England’s very survival depends on the presence of ravens in the Tower of London. It’s a superstition that links the Tower with ravens. But the Tower is also associated with murder. Not necessarily a murder of crows, but the murder of political figures. And it’s also associated with the apparent murder of the two young sons of our current king Edward IV. So let’s turn our attention back to our historical narrative and the tragic story of the two boys known the Princes in the Tower.

The story of the Princes in the Tower is one of the great mysteries of English royal history. And it began with the death of their father Edward IV. After over 20 years of a briefly interrupted reign, Edward died of natural causes in April of 1483. He was survived by five daughters and those two young sons. The eldest son Edward was 12 years old and the heir to the throne. He is officially known to history as Edward V, though he was never crowned and was merely a pawn in the political maneuvering that took place in the weeks following his father's death. His younger brother was 9 years old and was the next in line to the throne if something should happen to the new boy king Edward. Together, they ensured that the House of York would continue to rule England for the foreseeable future. The only problem is that they were both young boys – and England had a rough history with boy kings.

Without an adult on the throne, there was an immediate split within the Yorkist faction that controlled the government. The boy's mother Elizabeth Woodville wanted to maintain her family's influence at court. I mentioned Elizabeth in an earlier episode. You might remember that her marriage to the king was controversial at the time. She was a commoner, and her marriage to Edward IV was conducted in secrecy. It was only revealed when plans were being made for Edward to marry the French king's sister. He had to shoot down the arranged marriage and admit that he was already married to a commoner – Elizabeth Woodville. That secret marriage stunned many of the nobles at court, and then Edward had compounded the problem by giving his wife's family many prominent positions throughout the country. The fallout caused a split with the Yorkist faction that never completely healed. Now that split was about to play out again.

The queen mother's family – the Woodvilles – wanted to maintain control over the court, and they hoped that the new boy king would be enable them to do that. As the boy's mother, Elizabeth could serve as his regent and protect the interests of her family, but her recently deceased husband had other plans. Before he died, her husband Edward IV had designated his brother to serve as the boy's guardian and Protector. His brother was Richard, also known as Richard of Gloucester, and he had been a loyal supporter of his older brother. Richard also resented the Woodvilles, so the stage was set for a confrontation between the two factions.

The queen mother – Elizabeth Woodville – decided to undercut Richard's position by having her son immediately crowned as king even though he was only 12 years old. Once he was crowned, there was legally no role for Richard as guardian or Protector. The coronation was scheduled to take place a few days later on May 4, but Richard soon received news of the plan. He was in the north of England, and he quickly headed south to intercept the royal entourage on its way to London with the boy. Richard was able to take position of the young boy since Richard was his legal guardian. Together, Richard and his nephew continued the trip to London. But once they were there, the coronation was postponed, and the young boy was placed in the royal apartments located in the Tower of London. Richard soon took possession of the boy's brother and placed him in the Tower as well. [*SOURCE: The Last Plantagenets, Thomas B. Costain, p. 384-5.*]

At this point, nothing really seemed all that sinister or unusual. Richard was the guardian of boys and Protector of the Realm. He had taken possession of the boys to protect them until young Edward's coronation, but that coronation never took place.

Richard soon put forth a priest who claimed that the marriage between his brother (the recently deceased Edward IV) and the queen mother (Elizabeth Woodville) was illegal and invalid. The priest claimed that Edward was already married to another woman when he married Elizabeth. The details of the accusation are somewhat obscured by history, but supposedly Edward had either married or entered into a contract to marry a noblewoman named Lady Eleanor Talbot before his marriage to Elizabeth. It might have seemed like a crazy accusation, but Edward's actual marriage to Elizabeth had been conducted in secrecy, so maybe that was his thing. It was certainly 'possible' that he had more than one secret marriage. At any rate, Edward's brother Richard seized upon the accusation. If Edward was already married when he married Elizabeth, then that meant the second marriage was bigamous and illegal. And it also meant that any children born to that marriage were illegitimate and had no right to serve as king. Richard now saw his path to the throne. The accusations were put before Parliament, and Parliament accepted them. Without a legitimate child to inherit the throne, Richard then claimed the throne for himself as the surviving brother. He thereupon became Richard III – one of the most controversial kings in English history. [*SOURCE: The Last Plantagenets, Thomas B. Costain, p. 390.*]

As Richard maneuvered to claim the throne, his two young nephews remained in the Tower. And after a few weeks, they were never seen again.

Historians still debate what happened to the so-called 'Princes in the Tower.' The general consensus for many centuries was that Richard had them murdered to secure his claim to the throne. That was the general view of the chroniclers, and it was the view of William Shakespeare in his famous play about Richard III. Shakespeare cemented Richard's reputation as a scheming monster who murdered his young nephews in order to seize the throne for himself.

After Richard's death, a member of his retinue named James Tyrell came forward and confessed to the murders. He claimed that he had been directed to kill the boys, and that they had been buried at the bottom of a stairwell, and then later moved to an unknown location. [*SOURCE: The Story of Britain, Rebecca Fraser, p. 237-8.*] Many years later, two skeletons were actually discovered at the bottom of a stairwell in the Tower. DNA evidence didn't exist at the time, but it was determined that the bones were in fact the remains of the two princes.

Now to be fair, there has been a movement in recent history to revisit Richard's reputation. His defenders point out that the Tudors eventually defeated Richard and took the throne for themselves. So they and their chroniclers had every reason to discredit Richard and paint him as a monster. And Shakespeare was very much a product of that age. They also point out that there is little or no hard evidence to prove Richard's culpability. The later confession by James Tyrell may have been forced or fabricated. And with respect to the remains that were found, Tyrell said the remains had been removed from the stairwell, so why were they still there? And Richard's defenders point out that so many people died in the Tower over the years that there's no way to know for certain that the discovered bones actually belonged to the young princes. The bones were never DNA tested, so the identification has never been confirmed. So for those who choose to defend Richard's reputation, the ultimate fate of the princes remains a mystery.

The fact is that Richard did have a motive to eliminate his nephews, and he certainly had the ability and opportunity to do so. And regardless of his actual guilt, the disappearance of the young princes led to rumors that they had been murdered. And Richard never presented them to the public to prove otherwise.

Richard also didn't hesitate to execute many other nobles during this period who were accused of treason or otherwise opposing his rule. One of those nobles was named William Hastings – a nobleman who had been loyal to both Richard and his elder brother Edward. But Richard turned on him and accused him of treason. He was promptly executed. This development is covered by Shakespeare in his version of the story, and Shakespeare's version features the first known use of a very common term – the phrase 'short shrift.'

A ***shrift*** was a confession to a priest, including the type of confession that one might give before being executed. It could also refer to the absolution obtained in exchange for the confession and penance. In the play, Hastings is about to be executed, and he is told that Richard is eager for his dinner, so there is only time for a 'short shrift' or a quick confession. The line is:

"...the duke would be at dinner:
Make a short shrift; he longs to see your head."

Of course, today if we give something 'short shrift,' we handle it quickly and give it very little attention, but that line from Shakespeare about one of Richard's executions is the first known use of that phrase in the English language. By the way, the sense of the word ***shrift*** as a confession can still be found in name of the Christian holiday known as 'Shrove Tuesday' – ***shrove*** being a version of ***shrift***. It was traditionally a day when many Christians went to confession to be 'shriven' or absolved from sin. Of course, Shrove Tuesday is known as Mardi Gras in French, and is often referred to as Pancake Day in the UK. But 'Shrove Tuesday' is the traditional English name which first appeared around this same time period in the 1400s.

Now even though Richard's reign was short and controversial, it did have a notable impact on the English language. At the time, many of the laws and statutes were still written in French and Latin. Apparently, Richard directed many of the laws to be translated into English so the common people could understand them. Another law adopted during his short reign was designed to restrict the trading activities of foreigners in England, but the law contained a broad exemption for foreigners involved in the printing and sale of books. So as the people of England began to have access to relatively cheap books thanks to the new printing press, Richard protected foreigners involved in the book trade, and that ensured that people could get access to books printed on the continent as well as those being printed by the new printing presses in England.

Richard's defenders also note that he adopted other legal reforms during his reign. For example, he helped to initiate the modern bail system whereby people charged with minor crimes could post bail in order to avoid jail while they were awaiting their trial. He also limited the ability of the government to confiscate a person's property before a conviction had been obtained in court.

Some modern scholars suggest that these laws were an attempt by Richard to shore up his support among the common people who might have seen him as a usurper, and perhaps even a murderer.

Whatever the motivation, it does appear that there was a significant amount of opposition to Richard's reign. A short time after he was crowned, revolts began to break out around the country. The revolts reflected the entrenched divisions in the country that had existed for decades. The Wars of the Roses had been dormant for a while, but now the conflict started to flare up again.

And much of the opposition to Richard's reign came to be centered around a rival claimant to the throne – a distant heir of John of Gaunt who continued to pursue what remained of the Lancastrian claim to the throne.

The rival claimant was Henry Tudor, and it's at this point that we can finally introduce the Tudors to our overall story. So who was Henry Tudor, and why did he have a claim to the throne? Well, as with pretty much everything else associated with the Wars of the Roses, it goes back to Edward III. All the claimants to the throne traced their lineage and their claims back to him. He was the king who launched the Hundred Years War, won the Battle of Crecy, and ruled for 50 years in the middle of the 1300s.

Edward's eldest child was known as the Black Prince, and there were no living descendants from that line. The next oldest child was Lionel, and the Yorkists – like the current king Richard III – all traced their lineage back to him. The third child was John of Gaunt, and the Lancastrians all traced their lineage back to him. The Tudors also traced their lineage back to Gaunt. So in that regard, they were holding on to what remained of the Lancastrian claim to the throne. So let's look a little closer at John of Gaunt to determine how the Tudors fit into the picture.

Gaunt was married three times and had children from each marriage. The main line of Lancastrian kings – Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VI – were all descended from Gaunt and his first wife Blanche. But as I noted earlier, that line basically came to end when the last of those kings, Henry VI, died in the Tower of London after his supporters were defeated in battle. So for a while, it looked like the Lancastrians had been vanquished, but it wasn't that simple.

Gaunt also had other descendants that are important to our story. First, he had a daughter from that first marriage to Blanche. Her name was Phillipa and she married the King of Portugal. Her descendants became kings of Portugal. After Blanche died, Gaunt married Constance of Castile – a princess from modern-day Spain. The descendants from that marriage went on to become kings and queens of Castile and Spain I mentioned all of that in an earlier episode, and those descendants are going to play an important role in our next episode because they were busy launching the age of exploration and discovery. But again, they were down in Portugal and Spain, and not really a factor in English politics.

Now during the time when Gaunt was married to Constance of Castile, he was actually carrying on an open affair with his mistress, Katherine Swinford. You might remember that Katherine's sister was married to Geoffrey Chaucer. Well, during that second marriage to Constance, Gaunt had four illegitimate children with Katherine. So they had no right to the throne, and in fact, they were legally barred from inheriting the throne at one point. But after his second wife Constance died, he decided to marry Katherine in part to legitimize those children. And that's where the Tudors came from. The male descendants from this third marriage were known as the Beauforts, and one of those descendants was a great-granddaughter named Margaret Beaufort. She married a Welsh nobleman named Edmund Tudor. And together, they had a son named Henry Tudor. Even though he was a Tudor, he was technically part of the House of Lancaster being a direct descendant of John of Gaunt. And he emerged as the main rival of the Yorkist king Richard III.

Now I'm not sure if you followed all of that genealogy, but the important thing to take from all of that is that Tudor claim to the throne wasn't really all that great. The claim basically relied on the old Lancastrian claim, which was a bit tenuous to begin with since it based on descent from John of Gaunt who was a younger brother and represented a junior branch of the family. Also, the Tudor line was originally an illegitimate line which had been barred by law from inheriting the throne. The line had been made legitimate when Gaunt married Katherine, but it still wasn't clear if the descendants were barred from claiming the throne. The Tudor claim also suffered from another weakness. It wasn't based on a direct male lineage. The strongest part of the traditional Lancastrian claim was that it was based on direct male descent from Edward III, whereas the Yorkist claims went through female ancestors. Well, the Tudors couldn't even justify their claims based on direct male descent since Henry Tudor claimed the throne through his mother, Margaret. And in fact, his father was not a Plantagenet at all. So any way you look at it, the Tudor claim was weak compared to the Yorkist claim.

But by this point in history, precise royal lineage wasn't as important as it had once been. It's one thing for two princes to argue over their father's throne, but by this point, the claims were being disputed by distant cousins. They based their claims on long, complicated and remote genealogies that were difficult to follow. Most people probably couldn't trace those lines back to Edward III if their life depended on it. But in order to secure the throne, you didn't really need the best line of descent, you needed something much more practical. You needed the support of the nobles and parliament, you needed broad support among the common people, and you needed a strong army to back up your claims. And Henry Tudor was quickly amassing all of those things.

As a rival claimant, Henry had been living in safety in Brittany. And a specific plan was put in place to enable Henry to take the throne and reunify the fractured kingdom. Henry was essentially the heir of the House of Lancaster, and the plan was for him to marry the heir of the House of York. As we know Richard was the Yorkist king, but he didn't have any living sons to inherit the throne from him. His two young nephews were the Princes in the Tower, so they could have theoretically continued the House of York, but no one had seen those princes in over a year, and they were already rumored to be dead by that point. But those two young princes had an older sister named Elizabeth – known to history as Elizabeth of York. So she was Richard's niece, and she was basically the heir to the House of York. Since Elizabeth was the heir to the House of York, and Henry Tudor was the heir to the House of Lancaster, the plan was that Elizabeth and

Henry would marry each other, thereby reunifying the houses of York and Lancaster within the House of Tudor. [*SOURCE: The Story of Britain, Rebecca Fraser, p. 239-40.*] The marriage was actually arranged by the couple's respective mothers, Elizabeth Woodville and Margaret Beaufort.

The marriage was planned, but it wasn't scheduled to take place until Henry had returned to England and pressed his claim to the throne. In August of 1485, he sailed back to England and began to gather forces to challenge Richard. Many of the nobles and commoners flocked to Henry's side, and Henry and Richard's respective armies met at Bosworth Field outside the Town of Leicester in the center of the country. The Battle of Bosworth Field is one of the most well-known battles in English history because it brought a final end to the Wars of the Roses.

During the battle, the Yorkist king Richard III was thrown from his horse. In Shakespeare's version of the story, he has Richard utter the famous line, "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse." But Henry's soldiers were able to get to Richard, and after a great deal of fighting, Richard was killed and the battle soon came to an end. Richard's body was taken to the nearby town of Leicester and buried in a poorly marked gave in a churchyard.

Henry Tudor had emerged victorious, and he soon returned to London where he was crowned as Henry VII – the first Tudor monarch. Since his father was a Tudor, not a Plantagenet, his victory brought an end to the Plantagenet dynasty. As the 1400s gave way to the 1500s, the Plantagenet era gave way to the Tudor era.

As planned, Henry soon married Elizabeth of York, thereby unifying the Houses of York and Lancaster, and bringing a permanent end to the Wars of the Roses. As I noted in an earlier episode, the House of Lancaster was represented with a red rose and the House of York was represented with a white rose. The new House of Tudor came to be symbolized with a new rose design called the Tudor rose. It was a white rose superimposed on top of a larger red rose. Henry Tudor incorporated that Tudor rose into the uniform design of the bodyguards at the Tower of London. Those bodyguards are known today as the Beefeaters, and they still wear that Tudor rose on their uniforms. [*SOURCE: The Story of Britain, Rebecca Fraser, p. 242.*]

That's the same uniform worn by the ravenmaster at the Tower – the person responsible for maintaining those ravens in the Tower to this very day. As I noted earlier, ravens are closely related to and often confused with crows. Both are associated with death and foreboding, just like the Tower itself. But using the terminology that appeared in the 1400s, the Tower is only home to an unkindness of ravens, not a murder of crows.

And speaking of those old terms for collective nouns, it was still very much a fad to coin those types of terms when Henry Tudor became king in 1485. The following year a book was published by a brand new printing press that had been established at the monastery of St. Albans north of London. This particular book is known as the Book of St. Albans, and it contains what is considered to be a somewhat definitive list of these types of terms for groupings of animals and people. The list was apparently compiled from a variety of other sources and seems to contain

most of the terms that were in use at the time, including those that we looked at earlier in that poem published by William Caxton.

This second book is mainly a treatise on hawking, hunting and heraldry. It's attributed to Dame Juliana Barnes, but virtually nothing is known about her. It's not even clear if she was a real person or just a pen name used by someone else. The book proved to be very popular and was re-printed many times over the course of the 1500s. One chapter of the book is called "the compaynys of beestys and fowlys" – 'the company of beasts and fowls' – and it contains over 160 terms for various collections of animals, people and other things. It appears that the popularity of the book helped to perpetuate many of these terms and allowed these terms to pass into general use over time.

In addition to some of the terms I mentioned earlier, we find terms like a sleuth of bears ('a Slewthe of beerys'), also sometimes rendered as a sloth of bears. We find a leap of leopards ('a Lepe of leberdes'), a business of ferrets ('a Besynesse of ferettes'), a kindle of young cats or kittens ('a Kyndyll of yonge cattys'), a rag of colts ('a Ragge of coltys'), and a barren of mules ('a Baren of malys'). For groups of people, we find terms like a prudence of vicars ('a Prudence of vycaryes'), an observance of hermits ('an Obseruans of heremytes'), and a school of clerks ('a Scole of clerkes'). Many of these terms are clearly a play on words which was so popular at the time like a doctrine of doctors ('a Doctryne of doctours'), a converting of preachers ('a Conuertynge of prechers'), an eloquence of lawyers ('an Eloquens of laweyers'), a sentence of judges ('a Sentence of Iuges'), and a damning of jurors ('a Dampnynge of Iuryours'). Some are just a humorous commentary on certain groups of people like a drunkenness of cobblers ('a Dronkenshyp of Coblers') and an abominable sight of monks ('a bomynable syght of monkis').

But as I noted, the chapter is titled 'the company of beasts and fowls,' so it also contains a list of terms for groups of birds. It contains many of the same terms mentioned in that earlier book published by Caxton, but it also contains a few new terms not found in that earlier text. For example, we find a general term birds of all kinds – a dissimulation of birds ('a Dyssymulacon of byrdes'). We also find new terms for specific kinds of birds like a bevy of quails ('a Beuy of quayles'), a watch of nightingales ('a watche of nyghtyngalys'), a walk of snipes ('a walke of snytes'), and a murmuration of starlings ('a Murmuracon of stares'). The text also repeats the common term for a group of ravens – an unkindness of ravens ('an Vnkyndnes of rauens'). And it also contains a term for a group of choughs, which is a bird in the crow family. The term is a chattering of choughs ('a Claterynge of choughes').

But interestingly, there is no specific term for crows. A 'murder of crows' doesn't appear in this manuscript. And it's a curious omission. Perhaps it was a simple oversight. But for a collection that appears to be a definitive list pulling from earlier works, and for a collection that includes most of the other terms used in those other works, it seems strange that crows would be omitted, especially with the inclusion of ravens and choughs which are related to crows. Perhaps the author objected to the term 'murder of crows' sensing that it seemed out of place among other all of the humorous and playful words.

In fact, the term a 'murder of crows' almost completely disappeared from English from this point on for several centuries. The Oxford English Dictionary doesn't cite a single case of the term's use between the 1470s and the 1900s when the term was finally revived within English.

So that old term ***murder*** for a bunch of crows reappeared in the 1900s. And something else also reappeared in recent years. Or maybe I should say 'someone' else reappeared in recent years. That someone was Richard III. The presumed 'murderer of princes' disappeared around the same time that the term 'murder of crows' disappeared. Both were lost to history for several centuries. I noted earlier that when Richard was killed at the Battle of Bosworth Field, his body was taken to Leicester and buried in a poorly marked grave in a churchyard. The church was torn down a few years later, and the specific location of the grave was lost. The churchyard was paved over in recent years as development occurred throughout the city. It was assumed that Richard's remains were still out there in the ground somewhere, but nobody knew where. But in 2012, an effort was made to research the location of the churchyard and the grave. It turned out to be located beneath a car park or parking lot. The researchers excavated the area and found a skeleton. DNA testing soon confirmed that the remains were indeed those of the last Plantagenet king – Richard III.

The examination of the bones also revealed something else very interesting about Richard. The bone evidence allowed researchers to determine his diet. Different bones regenerate over time at different rates. By examining those bones, researchers can not only determine certain aspects of a person's diet, they can also see how the diet changed and evolved over the course of person's life. By examining Richard's bones, researchers determined that late in his life, while he was king, he consumed a lot of alcohol. It appears that he was drinking about a bottle of wine everyday.

And the DNA also revealed something else very interesting about his diet. While he was king, he apparently loved to eat wild birds. The evidence indicates that his diet included a very large proportion of expensive and luxurious fowl. In order to satisfy his tastes, his cooks apparently had to maintain a herd of swans, a siege of herons, a congregation of egrets, a muster of peacocks, and a herd of cranes. But apparently not a murder of crows.

So we've now taken the story up to the mid-1480s and the beginning of Tudor England. This is a period associated with early modern England and early Modern English. This is the period of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the exploration and discovery of the New World. And speaking of that period of exploration and discovery, we'll turn our attention to those very important developments in the next episode. We'll look at the race to find a new way to the Indies, Christopher Columbus's voyage to the New World, and the often overlooked English expeditions in North America. These developments had profound consequences for the people of Europe, Africa and the Americas. And it set the stage for the export of English to a new continent.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.