The play opens in the aftermath of the death of King Henry V of England (although it was written before Shakespeare's play, Henry V). News reaches England of military setbacks in France, and the scene shifts across the English Channel, to Orleans, where "La Pucelle" (Joan of Arc) is encouraging the Dauphin to resist. She defeats an English army led by Talbot (Sir John Talbot, 1st Earl of Shrewsbury).

While in France, Talbot and fellow Englishmen are trapped in the castle of a countess, but Talbot is prepared and foils her plan. In England, Richard, Duke of York quarrels with John Beaufort, 1st Duke of Somerset. The lords select red or white roses to indicate whose claim they believe is correct. King Henry innocently selects a red rose, aligning himself with Somerset and setting in motion the Wars of the Roses between the House of Lancaster, represented by the red rose, and the House of York, represented by the white. Edmund Mortimer, a leading claimant to the throne, is a prisoner in the Tower of London, and declares Richard his heir. The young Henry VI honours both Richard and Talbot. The faction between Somerset and York deepens, ultimately costing the lives of Talbot and his son in battle against the French. On top of this dissention lies a long-running dispute between the Protector Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, Henry V's brother, and the powerful Bishop of Winchester (later Henry Cardinal Beaufort). Meanwhile, Henry is under pressure from the pope and other heads of state to end the war quickly, and toward this end agrees to marry the daughter of the Earl of Armagnac.

Back in France, York leads the English to victory in Angiers and captures Joan, who is sent to the stake. Beaufort arrives to organize a truce that dissatisfies everyone: York resents having the opportunity for complete victory snatched from his grasp, while the King of France resents becoming a viceroy under Henry. The Earl of Suffolk has captured a young French princess, Margaret of Anjou, with whom he falls in love. He arranges to have her marry Henry, intending to dominate the king through her.

HENRY VI, 2

This play begins with the marriage of King Henry VI of England to the young Margaret of Anjou. Margaret is the protégée (and possibly lover) of William de la Pole, 4th Earl of Suffolk, who aims to influence the king through her. The major obstacle to this pair is the regent of the crown, Duke Humphrey (Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester), who is immensely popular with the common people. Queen Margaret vies with his wife, Eleanor, for precedence at court. Eleanor is lured by an agent of Suffolk into dabbling in necromancy, and then apprehended, to the embarrassment of Gloucester. Nevertheless, the demon she has summoned delivers some accurate prophecies concerning the fates of several characters in the play. Gloucester, who is busy exposing the imposture of an old beggar and his wife, is then accused of treason and imprisoned, and afterwards assassinated by agents of Suffolk and the Queen. Meanwhile, as this struggle plays itself out, Richard, Duke of York, reveals his claim to the throne to the Earls of Salisbury and Warwick, who pledge to support him.

The Earl of Suffolk is banished for his role in Gloucester's death and killed by Walter the pirate ("by Wa'ter shall he die" proclaimed the demon), leaving Margaret without her mainstay. Margaret is soon portrayed holding Suffolk's gory head in her lap and weeping. Meanwhile, Richard of York has got himself appointed commander of an army to suppress a revolt in Ireland. York enlists a former officer Jack Cade to lead a rebellion that threatens the whole kingdom, in order that he may bring his army from Ireland into England and seize the throne.

York returns to England with his army, but not before Cade's rebellion is put down. Robbed of this pretext for his army's presence, York claims his intent is to protect the King from Somerset. Opposed by Margaret and Lord Clifford, York exerts his claim to the throne, supported by his sons, Edward (the future King Edward IV of England) and Richard (the future King Richard III of England). (Shakespeare is building up to making Richard III one of his greatest villains, with little concern for historical veracity -- Richard, at this date, would have been a small child, and thus easily beaten in combat).

The English nobility now take sides, and the Battle of St. Albans is fought. The Duke of Somerset is killed by the future Richard III. Young Lord Clifford, whose father has been killed by the Duke of York, vows revenge on the Yorkists, and allies himself with King Henry's other supporters.

HENRY VI, 3

The play begins with a confrontation between Richard, Duke of York and the reigning King Henry VI and their respective supporters. Threatened with physical violence by the Earl of Warwick (Richard Neville), the king brokers a deal to make York his heir. Disgusted at his cowardice, his supporters abandon him. The Queen, Margaret of Anjou, makes it clear that she will not agree to this, and declares war on the Yorkists, with the assistance of the young Lord Clifford and other supporters, including her son, Edward, Prince of Wales.

At the Battle of Wakefield, the Yorkists are defeated, and there follow some of the bloodiest and most heart-rending scenes in all of Shakespeare, as Clifford murders York's young son, the Earl of Rutland. (In reality, Rutland was seventeen and had taken full part in the battle.) Margaret and Clifford then taunt the Duke of York before killing him. The Earl of Warwick now takes York's eldest son, Edward (King Edward IV of England) under his wing. At the Battle of Towton, they take revenge on Margaret's army, and Clifford is killed. Following the battle, Edward is proclaimed king, and his two brothers, George and Richard are created Dukes of Clarence and Gloucester respectively. Richard is already showing signs of turning into one of Shakespeare's most famous villains, though in reality he was less than ten years old at the time of the battle.

Warwick turns against Edward when he marries Lady Grey (Elizabeth Woodville) while Warwick is in France courting the French king's sister on Edward's behalf. Queen Margaret, in France with the Prince of Wales to beg military aid from France, accepts the reconciliation; the Prince agrees to marry Warwick's daughter. The Duke of Clarence goes over to Warwick, marrying his other daughter. The invasion succeeds, and Edward IV is taken prisoner. Henry is restored to the throne and Warwick and Clarence are appointed as protectors. However, Edward is soon rescued by his brother Richard and the faithful Lord Hastings. News of this reaches Henry's court, and the young Earl of Richmond (the future King Henry VII of England), a descendant of John of Gaunt and therefore a potential Lancastrian heir, is shipped into exile in France for safekeeping. Edward defeats and kills Warwick at the Battle of Barnet. In the subsequent Battle of Tewkesbury, he kills the Prince of Wales and captures Queen Margaret. Richard of Gloucester begins his campaign to remove all obstacles in his path to the throne by murdering King Henry VI who is a captive in the Tower of London. Henry prophesies Richard's career of villainy and his future notoriety. The play ends with the Yorkists apparently established for good: The Lancastrians are dead or exiled and the king's son has just been born.

RICHARD III