

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Henry VI, Pt. 1. 1591

Shakespeare

Overview. The loss (then reoccupation) of England's territories in France lead into the conflictual situation of the present play, which deals both with the efforts of England to retain its numerous French possessions, which the French are besieging, and at the same time with the intra family struggles that led up to the so called War of the Roses in England--a war that pitted against each other the families of Richard Plantagenet and the Duke of Somerset. Among the French armies appears Joan of Arc, who for a time sows terror among the English, before losing her visionary power. The play is one of Shakespeare's earliest, and least acclaimed works, though its appearance, along with two or three other of his earliest works, was the foundation for his initial popularity, which was already at the time growing rapidly. As the first play in the so-called *Henriad* trilogy, *Henry VI Part I* is followed by *Henry VI parts II and III*, and (by a frequent addition) by *King Richard III*.

ChHARACTERS

KING HENRY the Sixth
DUKE OF GLOUCESTER, uncle to the King, and Protector
DUKE OF BEDFORD, uncle to the King, and Regent of France
THOMAS BEAUFORT, Duke of Exeter, great-uncle to the King
HENRY BEAUFORT, great-uncle to the King, Bishop of Winchester, and afterwards Cardinal
JOHN BEAUFORT, Earl, afterwards Duke, of Somerset
RICHARD PLANTAGENET, son of Richard, late Earl of Cambridge, afterwards Duke of York
EARL OF WARWICK
EARL OF SALISBURY
EARL OF SUFFOLK
LORD TALBOT, afterwards Earl of Shrewsbury
JOHN TALBOT, his son
EDMUND MORTIMER, Earl of March
SIR JOHN FASTOLFE
SIR WILLIAM LUCY
SIR WILLIAM GLANSDALE
SIR THOMAS GARGRAVE
Mayor of London
WOODVILE, Lieutenant of the Tower
VERNON, of the White-Rose or York faction
BASSET, of the Red-Rose or Lancaster faction
A Lawyer, Mortimer's Keepers
CHARLES, Dauphin, and afterwards King, of France
REIGNIER, Duke of Anjou, and titular King of Naples
DUKE OF BURGUNDY
DUKE OF ALENCON
BASTARD OF ORLEANS
Governor of Paris
Master-Gunner of Orleans and his Son
General of the French forces in Bordeaux

A French Sergeant A Porter
An old Shepherd, father to Joan la Pucelle

MARGARET, daughter to Reignier, afterwards married to King Henry
COUNTESS OF AUVERGNE
JOAN LA PUCELLE, Commonly called Joan of Arc

Lords, Warders of the Tower, Heralds, Officers, Soldiers, Messengers, and Attendants
Friends appearing to La Pucelle

PLOT

Backdrop. The story involves the early kingship of Henry VI, who had been thrust onto the throne by the sudden and unexpected death of Henry V, the great victor over the French and the herald of British Oceanic Greatness. That early kingship was fraught with threats—from the direction of France, but also from within, where powerful squabbling families—like those of the Plantagenets and Somersets, who were to play a decisive role in the present work—were jockeying for power and dignity from the very inception of Henry V's kingship.

Funeral. The present play opens with the funeral of Henry V, but is soon interrupted by a succession of messengers, announcing serious British losses among their possessions in France. (The mature Shakespeare's adeptness at interspersing scenes from scattered points of creative interest—at court, on a field of battle, in the midst of an intimate conversation—is evident already in these earliest plays.) We soon realize that the English are in a growing state of panic. Shifting onto the French field of battle, we become aware of a new factor, which has emboldened the French army, and given them a temporary sense of invincibility, namely the arrival of Joan of Arc, La Pucelle.

La Pucelle. Shakespeare's dramatic eye is quick to hone in on the startling apparition of Joan, a visionary girl who is obsessed with the importance of driving the English off of French territory. Haunted by visionary encounters with the Virgin Mary, Joan rides for a while on transcendent powers, which enable her to beat up on the commander of the French army, who quickly accepts her offer to take over his post. It is not until much later, when the tide has turned against her, and fiends have dispelled her visions, that Joan, and the army with her, concede victory to the English. Prior to that loss, however, Joan has reached such heights of power that her inspiration has been sufficient to retake the city of Orleans for the French, while the new Regent of France, Charles d'Orléans, has offered to share his throne with Joan.

The British culturescape. While the battle rages in France, leading eventually to a British managed peace, in which the French Charles d'Orléans serves as vice regent, the great families of England—the power forces whose alignments will ultimately survive as the giant factors of the British Empire—the Somersets, Plantagenets, Mortimers, Talbots, Suffolks—jockey for position under the management of the new king: Winchester and Gloucester quarrel bitterly, in the Tower; the Countess of Auvergene tries to win Talbot over to the French side; Mortimer, long imprisoned in the Tower of London, recounts to Richard Plantagenet the noble lineage of his family; and the King himself prepares to travel to France, to reinforce his nation's battlefield victories. We might say that Shakespeare is building up for us the image of the complex ruling-force England over which Henry VI will be presiding throughout the *Henriad*.

The present play. Though in a way disjointed, stretching its emphasis over thinly scattered events in France and events in England, and though the protagonist, if there is one, is a monarch who is new to the job, and not yet of pronounced personality, the present play might be thought of as a building block, or a sketch on its author's part of a stage of historical development and the setting in which it finds itself. It is to be of little surprise that the following play, *Henry VI part 2*, will show us Henry preoccupied with precisely the problem heralded in this first play: how to deal with the clamorous and conflicting nobles,

who will be the constituency for his reign. The final play, carefully laid upon the first two, will take us through the bitter consequences of the unsuccessful effort to bring harmony to England.

THEMES

History. Shakespeare's 'history plays' are all about power and effective rulers who use or abuse it. Much of the present play is concerned with the bickering and squabbling, among Englishmen from prominent families—Platagenets, Somersets, Mortimers—who in their conflicts are slowly building state policy, and the fault lines along which, in the next two centuries, England will be constructing itself into a leading world power, 'ruling the seas' and the produce thereof.

Sacred/demonic. Joan of Arc, of course, represents the visionary militant expression of one strand of early modern French culture, and her presence, both sacred and driven by demons which eventually destroy her, adds a dimension of the miraculous to this entire play. To the English she is a wild military woman, capable of inflicting great harm. In the end, as she tries to save her life from the stake, she reinvents herself several times, in a crafty but unsuccessful effort to save herself.

Death of chivalry. We are living, here, the end of the feudal dimensions of early English society, and at the same time—economics shaping culture—at the end of that period of chivalry, which marked the last life sign of the mediaeval. Talbot, a gentleman and a courtier, would be the poster child for this behavior and we see him, as in his invited visit to the Duchess of Auvergne, most in chivalric role—and most in contrast with the dog eat dog aristocratic values of the ambitious English families surrounding Henry VI.

Patriotism. While the present play concludes by the failure of the English, to recover their French possessions, it does present the new King of England as power sharer with France, as a significant symbol of coalescing English values; while England itself proudly takes center stage, as the launching pad from which the military and political enterprises of the play unfold.

Warfare. The present play is crowded with fighting—there are few rich characters or situations, which rise either to poetry or to reflection, but there is a succession of military encounters around which the narrative builds, and the positions of the characters define themselves. The English, and this speaks too to the issue of patriotism, are on the whole objects of French respect, substantial, persistent and durable opponents to the lighter Gallic team.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Henry VI

Character. Henry VI is but a young man, as the play opens, and Shakespeare will show us the behaviors of this youngster, as he is drawn into the politics of international struggle, and by play's end into marriage with a captured French princess. Except for a rather blushing admission of attraction to Margaret, his bride to be, Henry shows little distinctive personality. That, however, is all that is needed from him, for in this first play of the *Henriad* all we need is to see the structure of history unfolding before us.

Parallels. For a royal destined to serve his country, but hardly prepared for the bruising battles of politics, Shakespeare provides his own model, in the type of Hamlet, who is as we meet him just being thrown into the implications of a power play initiated by his lustful stepfather, Claudius. Greek antiquity naturally furnishes its stock of applicable parallels. One thinks of Orestes, a noble scion, thrust by destiny into the obligation of avenging his father's death, an awesome burden incumbent on an untried youngster, or of Telemachus, tossed into the world to seek for his seemingly lost father, Odysseus, and without guidelines until he falls under the guidance of Nestor.

Illustrative moments

Doubted. Henry VI has been thrust into big time military politics, plus internal political struggle, by the unexpected death of Henry V. None of the coterie of nobles, who make up the English family-power phalanx, feels confident that Henry will be up to the job.

Readied. An essential step, in the preparation for Henry's royal life, is his coronation, which the Duke of Exeter is in charge of. With this event the ritual of historicizing Henry is underway.

Reinstatement. As Shakespeare presents it, one of the first actions of Henry's kingship is to confirm, to Richard Plantagenet, all the rights and privileges of the Plantagenet clan.

Departure. Not long after his coronation, Richard sets sail for France, with the English navy, to participate in the back and forth struggle for the occupation of the city of Rouen.

Romance. The Earl of Suffolk has captured the young French princess, Margaret. Henry falls for her, and launches on preparations for the royal wedding.

Discussion questions.

Henry VI Part I has been criticized as one of Shakespeare's weakest plays. Do you see weaknesses in this play? Do they lie in characterization? In plotting—are you engaged by the story? In the inherent interest of the 'material' of the play? Does it seem to you relevant, to the evaluation of this play, that it is part of a trilogy, or tetralogy?

Some critics, having been puzzled by the seemingly extravagant behaviors of Joan of Arc—from sublime and visionary to the down to earth and rough tongued—have concluded that Joan is (more or less) a comic character. Do you see any case for that view? The same critics incline to think that the French as a whole, in this play, are presented as caricatures of themselves. How does this view sound to you?

Do you find any presence of the 'common man' in Shakespeare's historical drama? You will recall that, in *Richard II*, Bolingbroke seems to have owed some of his popularity to being appealing to the little guy. Are there 'little guys' in the play before us? If so are they part of military forces? Is there any grumbling, here, against people of wealth and privilege?

Henry VI, Part I, is viewed as an historical play. Does Shakespeare present his material, here, as though it had occurred long before the time of his telling? How do you know? How long, in fact, did the events you are reading here precede Shakespeare's discussion of them?