

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Henry VI. Part 3. 1591

Shakespeare

Overview. The third part of *Henry VI* brings to a conclusion—with the stabbing of Henry in the Tower of London—a bloody, violent, and socially divisive period in the formation of a British nation. As a young king, just married, the Henry of Part 1 hesitatingly struggles to behave like a king, and to hold together the aggressive political factions which are only too ready to dethrone him and promote themselves. The second part of the trilogy concerns Henry's largely unsuccessful efforts to negotiate among his rivals, and to deal personally with the kingship role which refuses to grow congenial to him. (By the last play of the trilogy he has frankly admitted to himself that he prefers the solitary life of meditation, and is uninterested in his aggressive and self-promoting Queen, Margaret.) The trilogy as a whole can be compared to the trilogy composed of *Henry IV, Pt. 1*, *Henry IV, Pt. 2*, and *Henry V*—a trilogy written 1587-89, six or more years after the Henry VI sequence, but itself devoted to the sequence of historical events which immediately preceded the Henry VI sequence.

Opinions. It is a commonplace opinion, easily grasped, that Shakespeare was working as a novice in the earlier trilogy, which was created near the beginning of his playwright career, while in the later trilogy, equally wrapped up in the nature of monarchy and fate, Shakespeare had gained greatly in ability to characterize, and had made startling advances in understanding of the human situation—taking it on less as raw struggle, and more nearly as a subtle interplay of force, irony, humor, and bravoura. It is a useful counterposition, therefore, to notice the degree of social insight in *Henry VI*, into both the feral and fragile texture of society—its readiness to rip and collapse—and the inherent dynamic of the machinery of society, which rejects stasis, and ploughs ahead dangerously, without solutions to the problems it propounds.

Characters

Of the King's Party

King Henry VI

Queen Margaret

Edward, Prince of Wales; their son

Lord Clifford; military commander

Duke of Exeter

Duke of Somerset

Earl of Northumberland

Earl of Westmoreland

Earl of Oxford

Henry, Earl of Richmond (as a boy, later Henry VII non-speaking role)

Of the Duke of York's Party

Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York; would be King

Edward Plantagenet, Earl of March; later King Edward IV, York's eldest son

George Plantagenet; York's son

Richard Plantagenet, York's son

Edmund Plantagenet, York's son

Earl of Warwick

Duke of Norfolk

Montagu

Sir John Mortimer; York's uncle

Sir John Montgomery
 Lady Grey, later Queen Elizabeth to Edward

The French

King Louis XI of France
 Lady Bona of Savoy; Louis' sister-in-law

STORY

The play opens where the second play of the trilogy concluded, with the flight of Henry VI and his queen, Margaret, from the insurgent forces of the Duke of York. In London the opposed forces meet, at the Chambers of the Houses of Parliament. There Henry and York make a deal; Henry is to be allowed to continue in his kingship until his death, at which time the throne of England will pass over to the House of York.

The deal. This deal, however, is quickly to run aground on the furious objection of Queen Margaret, whose personality has unfolded since her marriage to Henry, and the birth of their son, the Prince of Wales, on whom Margaret desperately counts as her family membership card into the British line of succession to the throne. It might be said that the whole brutal story of the present play, which ends in Henry's death, turns on the extremely assertive and aggressive personality of Margaret, and her struggles to replace her weak-male husband Henry, for whom her contempt grows ever stronger.

Violence. Violence of every sort follows on the royal deal, in which Lord Clifford, top military commander of the King's party, sees to it that any gentleman's agreement between Lancashire and York will be shattered. Clifford murders York's twelve year old son, then stabs York himself to death; at the Battle of Albans Henry recovers his throne, discarding the deal made earlier with York, who is dead, and—at the heavy prodding of his wife—reassumes all the trappings of the Lancashire kingship. Then In 1461 the regrouped armies of the Party of York score a major victory against the King's forces. Edward Plantagenet is proclaimed king, but Richard is determined to dethrone his brother. By this point, so absolute has become the hostility between the rival claimants for the English throne, that separate delegations have been sent to France, to pay court to the French throne, to win allegiance and support back home in England. Edward is in fact wooing Lady Bona, the sister of the French king, to establish a French English throneship, while Margaret is doing all she can, with King Louis of France, to acquire military support for King Henry, her husband.

Denouement. One looks for a catchword to describe the general breakdown which follow the double expeditions to France by Margaret and Warwick, the leaders of Lancaster and York, respectively. *Denouement*, *untying* seems appropriate as our catchword, for what we see taking place, from the beginning of Act Three on, is the coming apart of what had been—check your sober history text or Shakespeare's own later portrayal, in *King Henry IV, Parts One and Two*, and *King Henry V*—a stable and developing culture, still tinged with mediaeval Christian culture values, still within memory of the culture of chivalry, and a place where paternal relations, such as those of Prince Hal to his father, or of Falstaff to himself, the rogue—were where these civilized settings were still daily life.

THEMES

Violence. In the Elizabethan theatrical tradition, as we find it in Nash, Marlowe, Kyd or Shakespeare in various plays—*Titus Andronicus*, the *Henry VI* sequence—it is common to use violent action as a crowd attracting element. (Shakespeare continues to employ thus stagecraft far into his most mature period—cf. *Macbeth*, where the violence in question is that of reported rather than depicted action.) Certainly the play before us is rich in reported battlefield scenes—four on stage—and with any amount of reported violence, faithlessness, the torture of York by Clifford, the stabbing murder of York's son, the outright murder of King Henry in the Tower.

Narrativity. It was long the contention, of the French critics of Shakespearean drama, that it is too rough and naturalistic. Not only were the Aristotelian unities ignored, but the plots were too ragged and natural. The play before us may be said to be rough as a theme: the action shifts at will, from England to France and back, and then from one camp to another court within England, and then, as occurs when Henry is captured in a meadow by game keepers, we have taken dramatic action in our own hands, and simply moved ourselves to a spot which suits the mood of the principal character. The Shakespearean rebuttal is clear enough, that the action of a drama should follow the course of nature, and that is just what happens in *Henry VI*.

Withdrawal. Henry VI himself must seem a precursor to those hypersensitive Shakespearean heroes—Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear, Othello—who crash into the hard limits of human destiny and shatter there. Henry is not a rich monarchical figure, dealing wits fate and its vanities, like King Henry IV, but he is no friend of action or violence, is prone to withdrawal and meditation, and has no executive bone in his body. His hard hitting wife, who has cuckolded him even before she marries him, gives him his marching orders at every turn.

Historicism. Shakespeare clearly takes it on himself, in the present trilogy, to think his national history right there on the stage before his audience, the British people. Perhaps this is what is 'natural' in his drama, that it unfolds out of itself, the conflicts of Margaret and Henry, that is, just developing out of their own premises, and one event leading outward into another. It is also to the point, here, that Shakespeare raises consciousness of his own epoch, by drawing attention to another; he is a living historian, as, in his greatest tragedies, he will be a remorseless student of human weakness.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Henry

Character. Throughout these three plays, we have willy nilly been obligated to treat Henry VI as the main character. He is titular, his presence is required for all formal state events, and yet he is for the most part a figurehead or, worse, a chicken. Margaret was brought to England to provide a spouse for Henry, but from the outset she called most of the shots, including the rousing command to flee York's forces at the end of the first act. It must be said, however, that in this third act Henry realizes his own nature, and, after once again reassuming the throne for the House of Lancaster, he decides to appoint two of his top men as replacement regents, and he makes it clear that he would like to retire into nature, and become a meditative. Only fate, though, insisted on the last word, the murder of this weak man in the Tower of London.

Parallels. One thinks, as parallels, of the later creations of Shakespeare himself, especially of Macbeth and Hamlet, and has to wonder what differentiates those masterpieces of (partial) weakness from the depiction of Henry VI, to whom Shakespeare has devoted three plays, without mining very deeply into the ore of a personality. The first answer seems this: that both Hamlet and Macbeth are painfully, even self-obstructively, aware of their own emotions and anxieties. As the plays develop, which enclose those two characters, we are drawn deeply into the mindsets of the principals characters. With Henry VI we remain outside of his personality, and are only very rarely interested in it.

Illustrative moments

Defiant. From the outset of the play, in rare bursts, Henry expresses his defiance at the way he is being pushed around. He declaims the importance of his ancestral kingship, and his refusal ever to relinquish it.

Startled. As the trilogy unfolds, and especially in this last of the three plays, Henry grows startled at the way his wife is taking control of his destiny. For a long time, because he is naïve and trusts her, he thinks she has his benefit in mind, but nearer play's end he becomes aware of how fiercely she is concentrated on one goal, her son's kingship.

Meditative. At the opening of a crucial battle for his kingship, Henry surveys the field in front of him, and reflects on the way human fortunes fluctuate like the clouds flowing back and forth before him. Fine language from a character who is starting to become real to us.

Deepened. One of the finest moments of the play occurs as Henry sits watching what has been a destructive field of battle, and observes a father who has killed his son, and a son who has killed his father. For Henry this observation epitomizes the meaningless brutality of war.

Discussion questions

Does Shakespeare take sides in the present play, or does he simply present a tableau of scenes from the disintegration of a society? Is he pro-English or pro-French? What does he think of Margaret, or of the unusual brutality of Clifford, in his treatment of York? Is there any 'message' in this play for the audience?

Does this third play, in the Henry VI trilogy, wrap things up, with the murder of Henry in the Tower? Do you feel that you have completed a unitary experience, or do you feel that you are only just beginning to explore the dimensions of a larger thought horizon, that Shakespeare is going to present to us?

Does the present play seem to you to shed light on the broad issues of power politics, wherever or whenever in the world, or do its points apply strictly to a particular period of time, and to a particular political structure, monarchy? Could events within a democracy be fraught with the murderous tensions we meet in the present play about monarchy?