

Humanities Institute
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

King Henry VI, Part Two. 1591

Shakespeare

Overview. *Henry VI Part 1* is the central play in the *Henry VI* trilogy, which opens with *Henry VI, Part I*, and closes with *Henry VI, Part III*, in which the calamitous struggles of mid-fifteenth century England come to a close. (Another classification adds *Richard III* to the sequence—something of a survey of the whole period between the death of Henry V and the rise to power of Henry VII—which then becomes a tetralogy.) It is noteworthy that Shakespeare first arouses dramatic acclaim with this sequence of plays, and with the line of the Henrys, to which he will revert twice in the future (*Henry IV*, 1597; *Henry VIII*, 1612-13).

Commencement. The present play tracks the tumultuous conflicts which follow in England, after the return of Henry VI from France, still a recently crowned King, and in the process of marrying. It is that marriage process that opens the present play, but at the same time links it to its predecessor. One point then is crucial, as we launch into a plot survey: the marriage of King Henry to Margaret of Anjou has been prearranged, as a convenience to the monarch, by the Earl of Suffolk, at the end of the first play of the trilogy. What this means is that Suffolk enters the play as the lover of Margaret, then hands her over to Henry. From the outset it is the plan, of Suffolk and Margaret, to exercise their own will over the already weak new monarch.

Characters

Henry VI Party

King Henry VI, King of England
Queen Margaret, Queen to Henry VI
Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, uncle of Henry VI
Duchess, Eleanor of Gloucester, Gloucester's wife
Cardinal Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester
William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, lover of Queen Margaret
Duke of Buckingham
Duke of Somerset
Lord Clifford, military commander
Young Clifford, Lord Clifford's son

Duke of York's Party

Richard Plantaganet, 3rd Duke of York
Edward, Earl of March, Richard's son
Richard Plantagenet, Richard's son
Earl of Salisbury
Earl of Warwick, Salisbury's son

The Petitions and the Combat

Thomas Horner, armourer
Peter Thump, his apprentice
Petitioners, Prentices, Neighbors

The Conjuraton

John Hum, priest
 John Southwell, priest
 Marjery Jourdayne, witch
 Roger Bolingbroke, conjurer
 Asmah, a spirit

Cade's Rebellion

Jack Cade, rebel leader
 Dick the Butcher, rebel
 Smith the Weaver, rebel
 George Bevis, rebel
 John Holland, rebel
 John, rebel
 Emmanuel, Clerk of Chatham
 Sir Humphrey Stafford, military commander

Plot

Marriage. The marriage of Henry and Margaret opens the play, and soon acquaints us with the cast of noble characters whose infighting will dominate the play, reminding us of the universal truths concerning power politics, whether high stakes or low: the drive for governance, power, and wealth easily turns friends into enemies, unleashes suppressed feral instincts, and turns public policy into individual greed.

Gloucester. For Henry, who is a weak king from the start, the presence of a single ally, the Duke of Gloucester, is a precious advantage. The Duke is a popular figure, as Bolingbroke had been in *Richard II*, and has the complete confidence of the King. It is however characteristic, of the power play intricacy of Shakespeare's history plays, that even the security assured by Gloucester, is counterbalanced by the ambition of Gloucester's wife, who—with the aid of agents of Suffolk-- lets herself be lured into necromancy, by which she imagines herself able to depose the new king. Unfortunately for her, she is caught in the midst of her nefarious rituals, arrested and banished, leaving behind Gloucester, whom we remember as the most reliable support of the king. Substantial complexities interrelate the King, Margaret, Suffolk, Gloucester, and Gloucester's wife, and we have barely immersed ourselves in the battle to the death this play chronicles.

Suffolk. Suffolk, hating Gloucester, charges him with treason, has him imprisoned, then arranges to send assassins to kill this one true ally of the King. For his efforts, Suffolk is then banished, and killed by pirates as he is leaving England. Margaret, the Queen but still lover of Suffolk, is horrified by the way this scenario plays out: Suffolk's head arriving on her door step.

York. Meanwhile—and these transitions interlace rapidly with each other in the early Shakespeare—the Duke of York decides to press his case for the kingship, and, having been appointed a four star general, he decides to try a test run, to evaluate his popularity. He arranges for a popular public figure, Jack Cade, to stage a popular rebellion, to find out the sentiments of the man on the street. Cade's move has its ups and downs—at one point he is elected Lord Mayor of London--but a few days later he is killed. York returns from Ireland, and after considerable manoeuvring presses his own case for occupying the kingship.

Flight. In the ensuing political shakedown, after York has begun to claim rights to the kingship through the Plantagenet line, there is a sharp split between the adherents of the House of Lancaster, home lineage for King Henry VI, and the armies and adherents of the House of York. A fierce battle at St. Albans results in a rout of the King's forces, and Margaret's urging of the King to flee. He does so, and the play concludes with the forces of York in hot pursuit of the army of King Henry VI.

Themes

National history Much scholarly debate swirls over the nature of Shakespeare's achievement as an historian, but many are struck by the boldness with which he brings national history onto the stage. The British critic E.P. Wilson argued that no British playwright rivalled Shakespeare in his capacity to bring British history face to face with a British audience. It has subsequently been pointed out that, as a matter of fact, many other British playwrights had put pre-Armada British history on stage, but conceded that Shakespeare was the first to do so in a mature and plausible way. In the present play Shakespeare is reaching back into formative national history from a period of monarchical struggle which precedes his own moment by at most a century and a half. He brings that tumultuous period, leading up to the War of the Roses, into boiling life.

Weakness Henry VI is a mild and timid figure, in a brawling time when high political stakes are up for grabs among the British nobility. The very manner of Henry's marriage, proposed for him by one of his courtiers who was himself the lover of Margaret—Henry's queen to be— suggests the degree of Henry's fecklessness. Henry takes few apparent steps, to protect himself or his followers, while he is under conspicuous threat from Suffolk and York. It is only Queen Margaret who prods Henry to flee, when the pressure from the House of Lancaster starts breathing down his neck.

Discord The entire play deals with civil discord, from Henry's marriage to his flight from York's forces. The chief driver of discord is the power of the great aristocratic families—Lancashire, York, Somerset—who were political power blocks, eyeing the behavior of the common people, and the newest personal threats at court. A religious man, short of ambition, Henry is a ready target for the swirling politics of this political environment.

Populism. A popular rebellion of major proportions takes place in 1450, centered around the figure of one Jack Cade. Cade was a man of the lower classes who was attuned to popular discontent, and led into London, as an armed populist movement, a group of laborers and workers who shared his opinion that Henry VI and his administration were too weak to govern, and were mishandling public finances. This rejection of Henry is characteristic of a kind of populism we see often in Shakespeare's *Henriad*, as well as in a character like Bolingbroke, in *Richard II*.

Main Character

Henry VI is the 'main character' of the present play, in the sense that the balance of power remains with him—even in his indecisiveness, he is the referral point to which others' dissatisfaction recurs. He is a gentle and trusting person, expecting the best of others, though regularly plotted against by them, and stunned when he is misused. He is a religious man trusting in God to bring about the best outcomes, but unable to make those gestures of personal intervention—to support his trusted friend Gloucester, or to engage in the issues of the French succession—which would be necessary to bring God's justice to play in the real world.

Parallels. Royals are placed in a complex position; they must meet the protocols of their positions, and yet, to be successful as 'symbols for the state,' they must be able to take the requisite initiative at the right time. The ancient king Agamemnon, who directs the Greek forces at Troy in Homer's *Iliad*, and appears in various ancient plays, was not a naturally executive, or even diplomatic leader, and, like Henry VI, he withdrew from active endeavors. Under pressure, as in the case where he must sacrifice his daughter to make the winds blow, he can act, but only under such duress is he more than simply pious, polite, and responsible. Shakespeare's own King Lear, created fifteen years later than Henry VI, is of an ancient power, which has faded from him with age, and which has left him as vulnerable to opinion and casual hearsay as is Henry VI, who is blown this way and that by people's opinions. Lear's inaccurate impression, that his truth-telling daughter is not committed to him, is the trigger to his madness and total loss of self-understanding.

Illustrative moments

Welcoming. Upon the initial arrival of Suffolk and Queen Margaret at court, Henry welcomes them cordially, innocent (or is he?) that his queen to be is already the lover of Suffolk, who is introducing her to Henry.

Trusting. Having welcomed Margaret, expressed his emotional joy, Henry, with a bevy of other top courtiers, received the news that England is not to recover all its French possessions immediately. Henry is instinctively trusting of the possession-contract established by the French.

Believing. For Henry it is an axiom that God rules all events, and nothing is left to fate or chance. When he is under pressure he deepens in himself, and looks for the will of god in his inner self.

Unsteady. Despite the fact that Gloucester is the most loyal friend of the King, at court, the King is unable to stand by his ally, when the man is arrested. Henry is too saddened to endure any talk of the matter, and leaves the court to retire within his own thoughts.

Fleeing. At play's end, terrified at the approach of Jack Cady and his rebellious troops, persuaded by the stronger figure of his wife, King Henry flees, and leaves his throne.

Discussion questions

Shakespeare is a master of creating and dealing with male characters who are weak or flawed; one thinks of the great figures like Hamlet and Macbeth, who are obvious instances, but also of such less developed characters as Henry, in the present play. It would be widely thought, that Henry is a simplified version of the weak male character—cf. to Hamlet, say—but if so, what were the striking advances Shakespeare made, between Henry VI, Pt. 2, and Hamlet, in the creation of vulnerable male royalty?

Where does Shakespeare find the meaningful lines of development in the human historical record? Does he see history being made by great individuals—that was the view of the nineteenth century thinker, Thomas Carlyle, who believed that individual leaders were the soul of historical development. Or is Shakespeare, as in the play before us, more interested in the flaws, even tragic flaws, that leave their mark on history?

Does the present play remind us of our own post Industrial, western European or American societies? No sooner does Henry put on his throne, and take a bride, than do his political rivals—the nobility of the land—move in to make their own cases for rulership. (The basic struggle, between the Houses of Lancashire and York, is decisive for the future of England itself.) Does this endemic struggle not remind us, in our time, of the enduring conflict of parties and interest groups, and of their refusal to yield personal greed for the sake of constitutional legitimacy?