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Henry VI, Part 2

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Theme

posted Aug 5, 2013, 12:48 PM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 5, 2013, 12:48 PM**]

1 *Henry VI* depicts England's struggle to retain its military and political control over French territories gained by Henry V. The play reenacts, in somewhat truncated order, some of the events of the early reign of Henry VI, including infighting among the English lords and eventual loss of half the French lands.

This is one of Shakespeare's many history plays. Another 16th-century British playwright, Thomas Nashe (often credited with coauthoring this play), wrote about the importance of the history play as a genre, stating that they helped to preserve the memories of glorious English heroes such as the chivalrous Lord Talbot in this play. Nashe said that the history play creates a collective memory of the national past for the masses, celebrating the realm's heroes and particularly patriotic moments in English history.

In the modern age, Shakespeare's histories have fallen in popularity behind his tragedies and comedies. Many people, assuming them to be accurate textbook accounts of the events depicted, associate them with tedious story lines or imagine that they must lack dramatically interesting material. But this is not the case. Shakespeare drew on historical records of the times about which he wrote, but he condensed dates and events, reordering things if necessary in order to create dramatic tension and compelling plots. In this play, he makes Henry VI older than he was at the time of his succession; he was actually only nine months old, but in the play is of marriageable age. Moreover, some of the play's most striking scenes are of his own invention, not based in fact: for example, the scene in the [Temple Garden](#), in which the followers of Richard Plantagenet and Somerset pick white and red roses as emblems of

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their opposing opinions on a point of law. This scene provides an explanation as to the origin of the War of the Roses, an affair whose actual origins are characterized by stultifying complexity and politics, not the spare aesthetic elegance of this scene.

Shakespeare's "history," then, actually takes the form of drama. Thus, he gives events a variety of different explanations. Without developing any consistent philosophy of history, Shakespeare gives equal voice to two predominant theories on the cause of 15th-century British turmoil: one theory reasons that history is the result of human choices and actions; another posits that a higher power watches and judges our actions and rewards or punishes accordingly--by this theory, the violence of the 15th century came as punishment for Britain's illegal dethroning of Richard II. In this play, some events certainly result from human decisions--and particularly human rivalries, yet we also see evidence of other, higher powers at work, particularly in Talbot's apparently inevitable fall and in Joan's ability to communicate with the supernatural world.

1 Henry VI's plot is driven by conflict. On one hand, there is the conflict between Henry's forces and the forces of the Dauphin Charles. Then, the argument between York and Somerset, echoing the struggle between Winchester and Gloucester in Henry's court, causes the Englishmen to give inadequate support to Talbot in the battlefield, thus, exacerbating the primary conflict. The message within these court struggles is that petty rivalries and internal divisions among the nobility can be as dangerous to England as French soldiers. Henry seems to recognize this truth, when he speaks about dissention as the "worm" gnawing on his kingdom--yet he is unable to end the crisis.

The warrior culture of the age is changing around Henry. After Henry V's death, lords cease to struggle in unity for the sake of the kingdom and nation, instead scheming for their own advancement. War even loses its chivalrous quality; Talbot represents the end of a tradition of valiant knights whose sole desire is to fight for the glory of their homeland. He is a man from a lost world where valor and honor were communally shared masculine ideals passed from father to son. By the end of the play, both Talbot and his son lay dead, and the future of English chivalry has died with them.

The English army suffers defeats in this play because of infighting and the soldiers' failure to live up to the ideal of Talbot, but also because of the strength of the charismatic Joan of Arc. Although Joan claims to enjoy the praise of the French as a virginal maid, the English call her a whore and attribute her powers to witchcraft. As a woman dressed in men's armor and playing a man's role on the battlefield, Joan violates the assigned place of a woman; fearful people

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often respond to such transgressive anomalies by labeling them "witches." Like many public figures of women, Joan's identity slips between the two polarities of "innocent virgin" and "immoral whore," as people assume a woman able to influence men must draw her power from some extreme of sexual existence. Queen Elizabeth, too, had the body of a woman yet the role of a man; so too did her situation provoke both reverence and demonization, both the title "The Virgin Queen" and malicious rumors of infertility or a sexual defect. Both Joan of Arc and Queen Elizabeth were unique figures who could be read as exceptional people or as horrible fiends.

Joan is interesting not just for the way she is received but also for her own personality: at first she is decisive and pragmatic, promising the end of the siege of Orléans and telling Talbot it is not his time to die in battle yet. She is uninterested in extended elegies over the dead bodies of nobles, seeing them merely as smelly corpses. Yet later in the play she is unable to communicate with the demons she summons, and by the fifth act she is reduced to a frightened figure who is so desperate to escape death that she first cites her virginity, then pregnancy, as reasons to be spared. She defeats Talbot and ends her life having lost all dignity.

All the other women in this play are dangerous to varying degrees. The Countess of Auvergne lures Talbot to her castle with the intention of entrapping him, and Margaret so enchants Suffolk that he convinces the king to marry her and, thus, gains undue influence over the throne. While all three women function as threats to English men, they are also more complicated than merely being the vessels for the birth of more warriors. We see Suffolk's uncontrollable desire to turn Margaret into something greater than a pawn for international settlements, and we see the French unable to win without the extraordinary aid of a woman. And we see that even strong kings like Henry V do not necessarily create strong successors in their sons. This play creates heroes of a masculine world, but it also acknowledges the potential weaknesses of men. Sometimes, in the case of Queen Elizabeth, a woman must step in, even becoming king.

characters

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Henry

Called Henry VI, Henry is the king of England. Crowned at a young age when his popular warrior father died, Henry had a protector, Gloucester, to take care of the kingdom until he was old enough to rule. Prophecies at the time of Henry's coronation declared that Henry VI would lose all the land in France that his father Henry V won. *1 Henry VI* depicts wars in France to save those lands, but in this play France is finally lost. Henry marries Margaret, a French girl with no money, giving the French two regions in return for her hand; this horrifies Henry's nobles, who see France slipping out of their grasp. Henry's overall weakness allows his nobles and his wife to create complex plots against each other and against him, culminating in a full-fledged civil war with York. Throughout the play Henry is unable to assert his power.

Gloucester

Named the protector of England until Henry is old enough to rule, Gloucester has long-standing tension with Beaufort. Margaret dislikes Gloucester because she believes he holds too much power over the throne. The other nobles believe Gloucester desires to seize the crown. However, Gloucester seems to be a genuinely noble man; he sticks up for the common people, and he believes his honorable behavior should speak for itself. Yet plots against him are too large, and Gloucester is murdered in his bed through the scheming of Suffolk, Somerset, Beaufort, and Margaret.

Somerset

Somerset and York first disagreed in *1 Henry VI* over a point of law, causing all their followers to align themselves behind one or the other through wearing the emblem of the white or red rose. Somerset stood for the red rose. He still hates York, but he also schemes against Gloucester in this play.

Buckingham

Another lord of the court, Buckingham joins Somerset, Suffolk, Beaufort and Margaret to plot against Gloucester. Later, he delivers the news that the Duchess has been arrested. He serves as a messenger to York when York marches to London, and he fights on the side of the king.

Beaufort

Beaufort is the head of the English church. Known in *1 Henry VI* as Winchester, he and Gloucester have a long-standing dislike for each other. Beaufort suspects Gloucester of wanting the throne for himself, though Beaufort himself is guilty of that crime. When it is revealed that Gloucester was murdered, Beaufort falls ill and dies miserably, signifying the fact that he had sins on his conscience.

York

York believes he is heir to the throne of England, and this motivates his every action. Throughout this play and *1 Henry VI*, he tries to stay calm

and wait until Henry is weaker and can be more easily ousted, but his patience runs thin. Already involved in disputes against Somerset, York allies with Warwick and Salisbury against the other lords of the court. He explains to these two men that he is heir to the third son of Edward III, and Henry is heir to Edward III's fourth son. Richard II was wrongfully removed from the throne by Henry IV, meaning the Lancaster line, including Henry VI, held the throne illegally. York intends to correct that, and he is delighted to be sent to Ireland to put down rebellions, for that means he is given an army. When he leaves, he hires Jack Cade to stir up trouble by pretending to be a York claimant to the throne, intending to return should Cade's campaign prove popular. When he does return, he can no longer wait, and he declares his intentions to Henry.

Suffolk

A lord of the court, Suffolk convinced the king to marry Margaret, a woman he captured in France and wooed for the king, since he was himself already married. Suffolk is infatuated with Margaret and hopes to influence Henry through her. Margaret and he plot together against each of the lords. Yet Suffolk is banished when the commoners demand he be punished for the wrongful death of Gloucester, and he is beheaded by pirates at sea.

Salisbury

A lord of the court, Salisbury joins Warwick in supporting York as the true king.

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Margaret

A French woman, Margaret was captured during the French wars by Suffolk, who wooed her for Henry since he could not have her himself. In exchange for Margaret, the French keep two pivotal regions of French territory, which upsets Gloucester. Margaret had imagined that Henry would be just like chivalrous Suffolk, so she is disappointed in the weak king. She plots against Gloucester and gradually gains more power. She is devastated when Suffolk is exiled, for she had begun an affair with him.

Duchess

Wife of Gloucester, the Duchess is very ambitious and wants Gloucester to desire the throne as much as she does. She hires practitioners of the occult to help her find out about the future of Henry's kingdom so she can figure out how to position herself to gain the most power. When she is caught, she is banished after being led through the streets of London. Her fall spells the end for Gloucester.

Hume

The Duchess hires Hume to bring conjurers to her house to help her talk to the spirit world. Hume has also been bribed by Beaufort to encourage the Duchess to try the occult, which was illegal at the time. Beaufort hopes she will be caught and Gloucester may topple also.

Peter

A working man, Peter brings a claim to the court, falsely reporting that his master, Horner, spoke treasonous words in saying that York is the true heir to the throne. Gloucester decides the case by commanding that the two men engage in single combat. Peter is terrified but kills Horner because Horner shows up drunk.

Horner

Accused by Peter of treason, it is Horner's word against Peter's, so Gloucester decides the case by commanding the two men to fight, believing that the innocent man shall win. As it turns out, Horner loses because he fights while drunk, and the innocent man dies.

Witch

Hired by the Duchess, the Witch helps raise a spirit to answer the Duchess' questions about the king.

Bolingbroke

A conjurer, Bolingbroke is hired by the Duchess to help raise a spirit to answer the Duchess' questions about the king.

Simpcox

Simpcox is a poor man who pretends he has been blind since birth and has had his sight restored by a miracle. Gloucester sees through his lies and has him publicly beaten.

Jack Cade

A common man and fierce warrior, Cade is hired by York to raise a ruckus in England while York is away. He tells Cade to pretend he is a Yorkist claimant to the throne, to see how the public responds. York plans to return and take over if Cade is successful. In fact, Cade is very successful; he takes London, kills Stafford and his brother, and puts to death a number of literate people, including Lord Saye, who he accuses of ruining the commonwealth with grammar. Cade metes out great violence throughout the country. When his troops betray him under the influence of rhetoric of the king's nobles, Cade flees. Starving in the countryside, he steals from Alexander Iden's garden, and they come to blows. Cade dies.

Captain

Leader of the ship that captures Suffolk at sea, the Captain orders Suffolk be put to death after enumerating the bad things he has done in the English court. Suffolk can't believe he can be

killed by such low men, but the Captain orders it.

Whitmore

One of the Captain's men, Whitmore kills Suffolk.

Rebels

- Common people led by Jack Cade.

Butcher

The Butcher is one of Jack Cade's men. He rapes the Sergeant's wife, but when the Sergeant reports it to Cade, Cade orders the Butcher to kill the Sergeant as well, showing his bloodthirsty nature.

Weaver

Another of Jack Cade's men.

Stafford

Stafford and his brother are two nobles of the court who come to challenge Jack Cade, but when the commoners refuse to lay down their arms, their armies fight. Stafford and his brother die, and their bodies are dragged behind Cade's horse to London.

Lord Saye

Jack Cade and his men search out Lord Saye and kill him. They blame him for having lost Normandy to the French but more for having set up grammar schools and printing presses throughout the kingdom.

Sergeant

The Butcher rapes the Sergeant's wife, but when the latter complains to Jack Cade, he is put to death. Cade explains that all women are available to anyone in his new kingdom.

Clifford

A lord of the court, Clifford helps convince Jack Cade's troops to lay down their arms. Later, Clifford is called on to judge York when he makes his claim to the throne. In battle, York kills Clifford, and Clifford's son decides he is finished with pity for any Yorkist after he finds his father's body.

Alexander Iden

Iden is a landholding noble, who, unique among nobles, prefers to stay on his property rather than come to London and deal in the intrigues of the court. Seemingly kinder than the other nobles, Iden has no desire to fight with Jack Cade, who appears in his garden and insults him; but he is forced to fight and kills the starving Cade. Iden's loyalties are always clear; he takes Cade's head immediately to the king.

Edward

York's son, brought in to testify on behalf of his father after York marches his army back from Ireland. Edward will be the next king of England.

Richard

York's son, brought in to testify on behalf of his father after York marches his army back from Ireland. Richard will become Richard III, subject for Shakespeare's play of the same name, and one of the most bloodthirsty and depraved kings in English history.

Summary

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Suffolk delivers Margaret of Anjou to Henry VI, with no dowry and the surrender of Anjou and Maine back to France. Gloucester (Duke Humphrey) loudly complains that these actions betray his brother Henry V's accomplishments and risk the loss of France entirely. Cardinal Beaufort (Winchester) disagrees, trying to calm him. The Duke of York and Warwick grieve that Suffolk (arbiter of the peace settlement) also betrayed England by returning two well-fought-for counties of France. Gloucester storms out prophesizing France will be lost soon. Buckingham suggests that he, Somerset, and the Cardinal oust Gloucester from his position as Protector of the King, though Somerset fears the Cardinal will become the new protector. Salisbury, his son Warwick, and York agree to oppose the aforementioned nobles and support Gloucester, though York has the ulterior motive of becoming England's King, claiming rights through the House of York while Henry VI claims through the House of Lancaster. At Gloucester's house his wife Eleanor (Nell) tells Gloucester she wishes to be Queen of England to which Gloucester tells her not to be so ambitious. Nell even pays Priest Hum to convince two conjurors to help her gain the crown. Unfortunately, the Cardinal and Suffolk have paid off Hum so that he may encourage Nell's fantasy and use her ambition to incriminate and oust Gloucester.

Queen Margaret complains to Suffolk (her secret lover) of everyone's desire for the crown, worst of all Eleanor's. The King and nobles enter with Somerset wishing to take York's place as Regent to France. Margaret boldly tells Gloucester to resign the Protectorship and all begin to rail on him. Additionally, Margaret drops her fan then slaps Eleanor after she refuses to pick it up. Stemming from accusations that a man said York should be king and Henry VI is an usurper, Gloucester and Henry VI decide Somerset shall be the French Regent. At Gloucester's house, Eleanor holds a witch seance with Hum and others, but is discovered and arrested for treason after York and Buckingham ambush the ceremony. At Saint Albans, Gloucester charges the bastard Cardinal Winchester to a duel. Buckingham arrives with news of Eleanor's treachery and Gloucester banishes her from his house and bed. Richard (3rd Duke of York) confers with Warwick and Salisbury (Neville) of his intentions for the crown and they agree to help him.

In London, Henry sentences the conjurers to death and Eleanor to banishment on the Isle of Man to which Stanley takes her. At an abbey, Queen Margaret rails on Gloucester and calls for his immediate downfall. Somerset brings news that France

is completely lost, greatly disappointing York. Gloucester arrives and the Cardinal, Suffolk, and York immediately arrest him of treason. Gloucester goes to prison predicting Henry VI's downfall. Henry VI runs away mourning and the Cardinal tells Suffolk he'll provide an executioner for Gloucester. News of uprisings in Kent causes the Cardinal to send York there to suppress them. York himself has enlisted John Cade of Ashford to create problems in Kent. Gloucester is murdered in his sleep and Henry VI faints at the news. Warwick inspects Gloucester's body and declares murder by suffocation. Warwick, Salisbury, and the Commoners accuse Suffolk of the murder, so Henry VI banishes him forever. Romantically, the Queen says goodbye to Suffolk, only to hear the news that her other companion, the Cardinal, is deathly ill. He dies with Henry VI watching. Suffolk is captured and killed by pirates who charge him with betrothing Henry VI to a nobody, losing Anjou and Maine, and murdering Gloucester. Walter Whitmore kills him.

In Ireland, John Cade aims to become King of England, declaring those who can write or speak French to be enemies. They fight Sir Humphrey Stafford and his brother William. Humphrey is killed and Cade wears his armor. Cade takes London, killing all nobles in the city. Henry VI and Margaret flee to Killingworth. Cade declares himself Lord John Mortimer, then burns London Bridge and the Tower of London. Cade captures Lord Say and his son-in-law Sir James Cromer and beheads them. Buckingham and Clifford then convince the commoners to disperse, forcing Cade to flee. However, York arrives from Ireland with troops -- ready to capture Somerset. Alexander Iden slays Cade (and beheads him) in his garden. York meets Buckingham and tells him he wants Somerset dead. When this does not occur, York declares his desire to the crown openly to Henry VI. York's sons Edward IV and Richard III; Warwick; and Salisbury support York. Somerset, Clifford, and Buckingham support Henry VI. The Battle of St. Albans ensues. York kills Clifford of Cumberland. Young Clifford finds his dad and vows revenge of York. Deformed Richard III kills the Duke of Somerset.

