

1 Henry VI (Early 2005)

Shakespeare's earliest plays almost certainly include the three parts of *Henry VI*, though exactly when he wrote each part—and whether other writers collaborated—remains less certain. Modern editors tend to damn with apologetic praise: David Bevington finds “nothing in these plays inimical to Shakespeare's budding genius” [498], while Janis Lull, in her introduction to The Pelican Shakespeare's edition of *1 Henry VI*, concedes that “all three of Shakespeare's plays about the reign of King Henry VI have been overshadowed by other works, such as *Richard III* and *Henry V*, in which strong protagonists transform English history into dramas of individual psychology” [xxxii]. Such comments imply there are few strong protagonists and little individual psychology in the earliest histories. Fair enough, perhaps. But how much drama can we uncover?

Emphasizing the full sweep of the historical backstory with which Shakespeare's audience would have been painfully familiar, W. H. Auden argues in his *Lectures on Shakespeare* that “Henry IV was a usurper. Richard II was a bad king, but not a tyrant. The child king, Henry VI, affords an opportunity—it is not a necessity for things to go wrong” [5]. Is this true, at least onstage? Shakespeare's King Henry VI does not make his first appearance until Act III of the first part of his trilogy, which begins instead in the prodigious shadow of that killer of Frenchmen—and unifier of Englishmen—Henry V; the leading English peers offer hyperbolic nostalgia and much handwringing over “bad revolting stars” and “captives bound to [Death's] triumphant car” [I.i.4 & 22], but little if any hope for the future. The first lines spoken by the Duke of Exeter—who shall become the play's makeshift chorus, prophesizing “envious discord” and “furious raging broils” in several soliloquies [III.i.191–205; IV.i.182–194] unheard by any other characters and

so entirely unheeded—despairingly proclaim that “Henry is dead, and never shall revive” [I.i.18], hardly the vote of confidence Henry’s namesake and heir might desire. By the time the new king is old enough to contemplate intervening, France has revolted several times over and the servants of uncle Gloucester and great-uncle Winchester, unchecked by their feuding masters, are knocking out each other’s “giddy brains” with stones [III.i.86].

Meanwhile, the two central figures in France—the chivalrous yet doomed Lord Talbot and the demoniac and equally doomed Joan of Arc—seem more like fixed symbols of virtue and vice than the dynamic humans who eventually would become the cornerstones of Shakespeare’s art. That said, *I Henry VI* is not totally devoid of such, shall we say, *self-possessed* characters, one of whom does to a certain extent shape his destiny—though he is shaped to a much greater extent by the context in which he lives and acts:

Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York

Richard makes his first appearance in Act II, already treading the path that shall lead in Parts Two and Three to civil war, though how much of that path he sees at this point in the drama is, I think, debatable. How an actor answers this question will partly be determined by his answer to a related question: What exactly is the “argument” between Richard and Somerset, prior to their initial entrances? As the *Henry VI* plays ultimately turn on the question of royal succession—specifically, is the Yorkist claim to the throne (predicated upon Richard’s descent from the third son of Edward III) superior to the Lancastrian claim (the several Henrys descend from Edward’s *fourth* son)—it is tempting to assume Richard and Somerset are dancing around the issue of succession from the

start. Such an interpretation provides the actors with urgent motivations and explains why Suffolk was anxious to move the quarrel from the public sphere of the Temple hall to the relatively private rose garden where the scene unfolds.

Unfortunately, this interpretation also strips Richard of much of what makes his journey through the play interesting. Shakespeare never specifies the point of law in question, and—at least initially—Richard and Somerset seem more like schoolboys one-upping each other than true adversaries debating weighty—and potentially treasonous—issues of kingship:

Richard: Tut, tut, here is a mannerly forbearance.
 The truth appears so naked on my side
 That any purblind eye may find it out.
Somerset: And on my side it is so well appareled,
 So clear, so shining, and so evident,
 That it will glimmer through a blind man's eye.

[II.iv.19–24]

Everyone remains relatively congenial—someone even proposes a vote—until Vernon plucks a white rose on Richard's behalf. This breaks the tie and prompts Somerset to break his promise to “subscribe in silence” [II.iv.44] to the vote's outcome:

Prick not your finger as you pluck it off,
 Lest, bleeding, you do paint the white rose red,
 And fall on my side so against your will.

[II.iv.49–51]

When a fourth vote goes Richard's way, Somerset cuts off the banter with a threat that is startlingly direct:

Richard: Now Somerset, where is your argument?
Somerset: Here in my scabbard, meditating that
 Shall dye your white rose in a bloody red.

[II.iv.59–61]

To this point, Richard has behaved respectably enough, not at all like one who is, to borrow Suffolk's forthcoming phrase, "choked with . . . ambition" [II.iv.112]; as threats commingle with insults, however, he loses his temper:

Somerset: Well, I'll find friends to wear my bleeding roses,
That shall maintain what I have said is true,
Where false Plantagenet dare not to be seen.

Richard: Now, by this maiden blossom in my hand,
I scorn thee and thy fashion, peevish boy.

Suffolk: Turn not thy scorns this way, Plantagenet.

Richard: Proud Pole, I will, and scorn both him and thee.

Suffolk: I'll turn my part thereof into thy throat.

[II.iv.75–79]

Here Suffolk may reach for his sword, because Somerset quickly intercedes—"Away, away, good William de la Pole"—and as a parting shot spits the line that hurtles the play—indeed, the whole tetralogy through *Richard III*—in a violent direction: "We grace the yeoman by conversing with him" [II.iv.81].

For all Richard's reputation as the scheming progenitor of usurpers (he does not live to enjoy the crown himself), his obsession in *1 Henry VI* is to restore his family's honor and titles, lost when his father, the Earl of Cambridge, was sent by Henry V to the executioner for plotting to install Edmund Mortimer on England's throne. Soon enough, the aging Mortimer shall plant in young Richard's mind the seeds of rebellion; for now, it is crucial to note how deeply Somerset's insults cut not only Richard but also the Earl of Warwick, who wears on his breast a white rose and responds with the scene's first true notes of outrage—that is, outrage not prompted by adolescent male posturing:

Now, by God's will, thou wrong'st him, Somerset.
His grandfather was Lionel, Duke of Clarence,
Third son to the third Edward, king of England.
Spring crestless yeomen from so deep a root?

[II.iv.82–85]

But the posturing returns, for though Richard believes his father was wronged, he cannot yet (for reasons that shall soon become clear) offer much of a defense; instead, he exchanges even bloodier threats with Somerset and Suffolk and the Wars of the Roses are on, a point not lost on Warwick, who joins Exeter in the role of prophetic chorus:

. . . this brawl today,
Grown to this faction in the Temple garden,
Shall send, between the red rose and the white,
A thousand souls to death and deadly night.

[II.iv.124–127]

For now, this brawl concerns family honor and personal vendettas, not usurped royalty. When he next appears, to bid farewell to his imprisoned and dying uncle, the aforementioned Mortimer, Richard still burns with shame and wounded pride. Though Shakespeare piles on the pathos—Mortimer is so enfeebled he can neither embrace nor kiss his nephew without his Keeper’s assistance—Richard seems mostly oblivious to his uncle’s suffering, focusing instead on the slanders uttered by the Red Rose faction:

This day in argument upon a case
Some words there grew ’twixt Somerset and me;
Among which terms he used his lavish tongue
And did upbraid me with my father’s death;
Which obloquy set bars before my tongue,
Else with the like I had requited him.

[II.v.45–50]

Somerset’s taunts, it turns out, weren’t the only “bars” set before Richard’s tongue, for he proceeds to ask Mortimer to “declare the cause / My father, Earl of Cambridge, lost his head” [II.v.53–54]; when Mortimer explains the Earl died for the same reasons that caused Mortimer’s imprisonment, Richard admits to even greater ignorance, upon which cue Mortimer recites the entire story—how Henry Bolingbroke deposed Richard II and usurped the throne of England; how Mortimer was imprisoned before he could press his

own claim to the throne; how his brother-in-law, the Earl of Cambridge, lost his life plotting on Mortimer's behalf—and closes with a tantalizing hint:

. . . thou seest that I no issue have,
And that my fainting words do warrant death.
Thou art my heir. The rest I wish thee gather—
But yet be wary in thy studious care.

[II.v.94–97]

And what is Richard's response to the news he might in fact be king of England?

Hardly that of a schemer:

Thy grave admonishments prevail with me.
But yet methinks my father's execution
Was nothing less than bloody tyranny.

[II.v.98–100]

Had Richard been questioning the legitimacy of the Lancastrian claim to the throne as early as the scene in the Temple garden, he would not need Mortimer now to spell out the arguments on his behalf. And had Richard already been desiring the crown, he would surely display more enthusiasm—or at least interest—upon hearing those desires justified. But Richard remains obsessed with his father. True, he is not deaf to Mortimer's insinuations, for when the old man finally dies he pledges to “lock his counsel in my breast, / And what I do imagine, let that rest” [II.v.118–119]; several moments later, however, he returns to his favorite theme:

Here dies the dusky torch of Mortimer,
Choked with ambition of the meaner sort.
And for those wrongs, those bitter injuries,
Which Somerset hath offered to my house,
I doubt not but with honor to redress.
And therefore haste I to the parliament,
Either to be restored to my blood,
Or make mine ill th' advantage of my good.

[II.v.122–129]

The first two lines echo Suffolk's parting words to Richard in the previous scene; the final lines put a period on the only scene in *1 Henry VI* in which Mortimer exerts any influence. In the scene that follows, Richard is restored to his family's title as the Duke of York. He shall not mention Mortimer again.

Admittedly, a director could stage the action so as to suggest Mortimer's words have an immediate effect that Richard must suppress lest others suspect him of treasonous ambition. Mortimer is attended by several Keepers, and their relative proximity could easily influence the behavior of nephew toward uncle. Yet so emphasizing Richard's villainy reduces his character to the role of chief bad guy, whose schemes are known to the audience even before he enters. Richard will have time enough to play the villain; *1 Henry VI* suggests he *grows* into his villainy, though largely through external circumstances rather than the workings of his mind and will—for this is still an early Shakespearean play, and the characters remain servants of the plot. It is growth nevertheless, and it lends Richard a complexity lacking in nearly every other character onstage. In the wake of a juvenile quarrel over a musty and forgotten point of law, Richard is poised to dominate the second part of the *Henry VI* trilogy, his potency culminating in the person of his son and namesake, who shall be Shakespeare's first great achievement in the dramatic representation of the self.

Some closing remarks on Richard: His final scenes as Regent of France do not show him at his best; indeed, his refusal to come to Talbot's aid, preferring instead to curse Somerset, ranks as perhaps the most despicable action in the play, a point underscored by the stage directions, for Shakespeare has Richard enter with "many soldiers," undermining his claim that he "cannot help the noble chevalier" [IV.iii.14]. (In

the following scene, Somerset enters with simply “his army.”) Despite this initial hesitation to fight, Richard seems to morph overnight into a warmonger on par with the great Talbot himself (albeit without Talbot’s chivalric courtesy), and he is even granted the honor of capturing Joan, though historically the duke was not given charge over the French wars until nearly five years after Joan’s death; in their two scenes together he displays a knack for mocking her professions to virginity (though this hardly makes him unique in the play). His final speeches, in response to the news that England desires to make peace with France, are more consistent with the overreaching York of Parts Two and Three:

Is all our travail turned to this effect?
 After the slaughter of so many peers,
 So many captains, gentlemen, and soldiers
 That in this quarrel have been overthrown
 And sold their bodies for their country’s benefit,
 Shall we at last conclude effeminate peace? . . .
 Speak, Winchester; for boiling choler chokes
 The hollow passage of my poisoned voice
 By sight of these our baleful enemies.

[V.vi.102–122]

Silenced long ago by Somerset’s petty mockeries in the Temple garden, Richard now finds himself “choked” by a government that no longer desires bloodshed. His adventures in France have introduced him to the pleasures of the battlefield; denied the opportunity to plague the French “with incessant wars” [V.vi.154], he shall instead declare war on his countrymen.

Joan la Pucelle

Richard Plantagenet may be the most complex character in *1 Henry VI*, but Joan la Pucelle—the maid or whore of Orléans, depending on your point of view (and nationality)—seems to draw the bulk of critical attention, much of it outrage over the

normally generous Shakespeare's cruel treatment of the woman whom even the Catholic Church forgave (and then canonized). Others defend the characterization as either consistent with Shakespeare's inexperience as a dramatist and the Elizabethan mindset toward the French, or admittedly offensive but still the most entertaining part in the play.

It can be difficult to see Joan with clear eyes, for the context in which Shakespeare sets her is so overwhelmingly prejudiced; her French admirers are without exception fools who would rather follow her into bed than battle, and the English to a man dismiss her martial achievements as witchcraft and her subtler powers as harlotry. By the time her own father calls her "cursèd drab" [V.vi.32], one wonders if Joan's costume should include a push-up breastplate. Yet if we can look past such distractions and focus on her own words and actions, it becomes clear that Shakespeare has endowed Joan with a depth that rivals—and would probably surpass—Richard's, were it not for the travesty that is her final appearance.

Bernard Shaw acknowledges as much in the preface to his own stab at the legend, though he can't forgive Shakespeare a Joan that is anything but saintly. "The impression left by it," he writes, "is that the playwright, having begun by an attempt to make Joan a beautiful and romantic figure, was told by his scandalized company that English patriotism would never stand a sympathetic representation of a French conqueror of English troops, and that unless he at once introduced all the old charges against Joan of being a sorceress and a harlot, and assumed her guilty of all of them, his play could not be produced" [1004]. I find this as likely an explanation as any, for I too am disheartened by "the blackguardly scurrility of the concluding scenes" [1004]. Unsurprisingly, for all Shaw's insight, his more "historical" representation of Joan—who, with her propensity

for uttering howlers such as “thou art a rare noodle, Master,” comes across as an anachronistic amalgam of Medieval Times and Eliza Doolittle—is far less interesting than Shakespeare’s “blackguardly scurrility.” At the very least, Joan la Pucelle is capable of this:

Glory is like a circle in the water,
Which never ceaseth to enlarge itself
Till, by broad spreading, it disperse to nought.

[I.iii.112–114]

Shakespeare’s Joan makes her first appearance in the wake of a particularly bad French rout at the hands of Lord Talbot. Three French lords, including the Dauphin himself, have just spent twenty-four lines marveling at the manly prowess of their English counterparts (in the process belittling their own), when the warrior-maid strides before them in full battle-gear. Her first speech to the Dauphin is revealing:

Dauphin, I am by birth a shepherd’s daughter,
My wit untrained in any kind of art.
Heaven and Our Lady gracious hath it pleased
To shine on my contemptible estate.
Lo, whilst I waited on my tender lambs,
And to sun’s parching heat displayed my cheeks,
God’s mother deignèd to appear to me,
And in a vision, full of majesty,
Willed me to leave my base vocation
And free my country from calamity.
Her aid she promised, and assured success.
In complete glory she revealed herself —
And whereas I was black and swart before,
With those clear rays which she infused on me
That beauty I am blest with, which you may see.
Ask me what question thou canst possible,
And I will answer unpremeditated.
My courage try by combat, if thou dar’st,
And thou shalt find that I exceed my sex.
Resolve on this: thou shalt be fortunate,
If thou receive me for thy warlike mate.

[I.iii.51–71]

I quote this speech in its entirety not because it is particularly memorable but because it is so different from what much criticism of Joan might lead us to expect—indeed, it is different from any speech we have heard thus far in the play. Gone is the portentous rhetoric of the late King Henry’s funeral; neither is there a trace of the self-deprecating buffoonery that has already grown stale in her countrymen, unless one counts the double-entendre on “warlike mate” that closes the monologue.

Granted, an actress could drown out Joan’s voice in shallow ironies, especially if her appearance, despite the Virgin Mary’s best efforts, remains “black and swart.” Joan’s sexuality—whether conscious or unconscious—subverts practically every line spoken by or directed at her, and one cringes to imagine her giggling like Marilyn Monroe as she proclaims, “I’ll ne’er fly from a man” [I.iii.82]. (For that matter, whatever could she have in mind when she tells the Dauphin, “When I have chasèd all thy foes from hence, / Then will I think upon a recompense” [I.iii.94-95]?) But to play Joan as a whore from start to finish would be, as with villainous Richard, to reduce her complexity to the level of melodrama or farce; furthermore, it requires taking the words of the decadent Charles, the unimaginative Talbot, and the rest of this witless crew over her own. Despite the sexual ambiguities that corrupt her speech, Joan is refreshingly frank, especially when contrasted with the generic boasting that bogs down all of Shakespeare’s early histories. Her reaction to her successful raising of the siege of Orléans comprises all of three lines:

Advance our waving colors on the walls;
Rescued is Orléans from the English.
Thus Joan la Pucelle hath performed her word.

[I.viii.1–3]

Joan’s greatest moment, though, comes much later. Talbot lies dead, cradling his son’s corpse in his arms, their appropriated Pietà presumably the emotional climax of the

play. Sir William Lucy, who earlier cursed both Richard and Somerset for failing to ride to Talbot's aid, eulogizes his fallen captain with an attention to detail that becomes ludicrous (and struggles mightily against the blank verse):

But where's the great Alcides of the field,
Valiant Lord Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury,
Created for his rare success in arms
Great Earl of Wexford, Waterford, and Valence,
Lord Talbot of Goodrich and Urchinfield,
Lord Strange of Blackmere, Lord Verdun of Alton,
Lord Cromwell of Wingfield, Lord Furnival of Sheffield,
The thrice victorious Lord of Falconbridge,
Knight of the noble order of Saint George,
Worthy Saint Michael and the Golden Fleece,
Great Marshal to Henry the Sixth
Of all his wars within the realm of France?

[IV.vii.60–71]

Joan's response to Lucy's catalogue—which is merely an extreme instance of much of what passes for heroic style throughout—is so wonderfully apt it could serve as prologue to the whole play:

Here's a silly, stately style indeed.
The Turk, that two and fifty kingdoms hath,
Writes not so tedious a style as this.
Him that thou magnifi'st with all these titles
Stinking and flyblown lies here at our feet.

[IV.vii.72–76]

If I were to identify one speech in all of *1 Henry VI* as recognizably “Shakespearean,” it would be this. Though vicious and devoid of empathy, in the respect—if not quite awe—it pays to the true lord of our mortal lives, Time, one apprehends the seeds of Hamlet in the graveyard and Falstaff at Shrewsbury field. Perhaps Hamlet and Falstaff seem illustrious company for poor Joan. Still I cannot help but wonder whether Shakespeare—perhaps revising this play under the influence of such early breakthroughs as Richard III, Launce, and Kate and Petruchio, and increasingly frustrated with the amateurism of his

earliest efforts—allowed Joan for a moment to speak for the author. If so, it offers some recompense for the scenes to come.

Ultimately, my quarrel with the way Shakespeare sends Joan screeching to her death is not that, in her desperation to survive, she lies about consorting with demons and grasps at the straw of a fictitious pregnancy. What I object to is his throwing Joan to the English wolves with no defense but her seamy reputation:

Joan: I am with child, ye bloody homicides.
 Murder not then the fruit within my womb,
 Although ye hale me to a violent death.
Richard: Now heaven forfend—the holy maid with child?
Warwick: The greatest miracle that e'er ye wrought.
 Is all your strict preciseness come to this?
Richard: She and the dauphin have been ingling.
 I did imagine that would be her refuge.
Warwick: Well, go to, we will have no bastards live,
 Especially since Charles must father it.
Joan: You are deceived. My child is none of his.
 It was Alençon that enjoyed my love.
Richard: Alençon, that notorious Machiavel?
 It dies an if it had a thousand lives.
Joan: O give me leave, I have deluded you.
 'Twas neither Charles nor yet the duke I named,
 But René King of Naples that prevailed.
Warwick: A married man?—That's most intolerable.
Richard: Why, here's a girl, I think she knows not well—
 There were so many—whom she may accuse.
Warwick: It's sign she hath been liberal and free.
Richard: And yet forsooth she is a virgin pure!
 Strumpet, thy words condemn thy brat and thee.
 Use no entreaty, for it is in vain.

[V.vi.62–85]

In vain indeed! Joan shall not be the last Shakespearean villain whose career ends in torture and death, but who else suffers such humiliation at the hands of unworthy captors? Can you imagine Iago or Macbeth enduring similar treatment? Again, perhaps Joan does not deserve such company, yet consider the final moments of Aaron the Moor,

chief villain of *Titus Andronicus*, quite possibly a more tedious read than *1 Henry VI*.

Even Aaron, unrepentant killer that he is, maintains his dignity in the face of the executioner, and his tender address to his infant son is among the play's few moments of authentic feeling.

Perhaps the problem is that Shakespeare does not seem to know what to do with Joan. Is she the farcical French villainess of a patriotic romp through British "history," or the multifaceted warrior-maid whom we first meet? Despite "evidence" that Joan was a witch, did Shakespeare consider the possibility that her inspiration came from someplace higher? If so, he chose the wrong moment in his career to pursue this question, for the Joan he left us, though quite capable of demolishing her enemies, in the end finds herself without the support even of her creator. Such a fate would defeat the mightiest of Shakespearian personalities, let alone one of his first sketches.

Lord Talbot

Of Talbot I have considerably less to say, though he is the closest thing the play has to a hero. Talbot's first few speeches, relating his treatment at the hands of French captors, tell us most of what we need to know about him:

In open marketplace produced they me,
To be a public spectacle to all.
"Here," said they, "is the terror of the French,
The scarecrow that affrights our children so."
Then broke I from the officers that led me
And with my nails digged stones out of the ground
To hurl at the beholders of my shame.
My grisly countenance made others fly.
None durst come near, for fear of sudden death.
In iron walls they deemed me not secure:
So great fear of my name 'mongst them were spread
That they supposed I could rend bars of steel
And spurn in pieces posts of adamant.
Wherefore a guard of chosen shot I had

That walked about me every minute while;
 And if I did but stir out of my bed,
 Ready they were to shoot me in the heart.

[I.vi.18–34]

We have no reason to distrust this description, for Talbot’s enemies heap even greater praise upon his mighty shoulders. But his power to fascinate the French (if not the audience) is mere brute strength; indeed, the primary image this speech conjures is of a bear in an arena breaking free of its chains and charging the spectators.

This is not to dismiss Talbot as a brainless war god, for in his final scenes with his son he reasons as eloquently as Shakespeare’s undeveloped powers will allow. Nevertheless, his few memorable lines tend more to the grotesque than the glorious. Gazing upon the dying Salisbury, Talbot’s blood-soaked imagination provokes unintentional comedy:

Speak, Salisbury—at least, if thou canst, speak.
 How far’st thou, mirror of all martial men?
 One of thy eyes and thy cheek’s side struck off?

[I.vi.51–53]

Am I wrong if his next lines—“Accursèd tower! Accursèd fatal hand / That hath contrived this woeful tragedy!”—remind me of the Peter Quince-penned tragicomedy *Pyramus and Thisbe*? At least when Bottom plays the lead, we know we’re not supposed to take him seriously. But Talbot is very serious indeed, and the most one can say of him is that it is his good fortune to appear in the play *1 Henry VI*, with Sir John Fastolf, as opposed to the play *1 Henry IV*, with Sir John Falstaff. “How would it have joyed brave Talbot, the terror of the French,” wrote Thomas Nashe in 1592, “to think that after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb, he should triumph again on the stage, and have his

bones new embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least. . . .” Falstaff would have offered a less flattering epitaph.

King Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou

Henry and Margaret have little to do in *1 Henry VI* other than prepare for significantly larger roles in Parts Two and Three (and, in Margaret’s case, *Richard III*). This Shakespeare achieves crudely but effectively. Henry’s pious but ineffectual naivety is evident in his very first lines:

Uncles of Gloucester and of Winchester,
The special watchmen of our English weal,
I would prevail, if prayers might prevail,
To join your hearts in love and amity.

[III.i.66–69]

A stronger king would have chosen an earlier moment to intervene—Gloucester and Winchester have been bickering for several acts already—but the son, as Shakespeare makes crystal clear, is not the father, to the ruination of the realm. Henry VI pleads with “sighs and tears” [III.i.111], not “wrathful fire” [I.i.12], and in this play at least is too fond of the phrase “my tender years.” Is there a more characteristic action in all of *1 Henry VI* than Henry’s pitiful attempt to resolve the escalating feud between the Red and White Roses?

Let me be umpire in this doubtful strife.
I see no reason, if I wear this rose,
That anyone should therefore be suspicious
I more incline to Somerset than York.

[IV.i.151–154]

Unfortunately, no one takes the king aside here and smacks a little sense into him. Even if someone did, Henry would probably neither listen nor understand. His rash acceptance of

Suffolk's marriage proposal on behalf of the dowerless Margaret concludes the play with another mind-boggling political blunder.

As for Margaret, she and Suffolk engage in perhaps the lengthiest string of asides in the canon [V.v.16–63]; though I imagine Shakespeare intended the scene to be comical, one is left with the impression that Margaret, without even trying, has played Suffolk—and by extension all England—for a fool. Their first exchange establishes once and for all the power dynamic in their relationship:

Suffolk: Oh fairest beauty, do not fear nor fly,
 For I will touch thee with but reverent hands,
 And lay them gently on thy tender side.
 I kiss these fingers for eternal peace.
 Who art thou? Say, that I may honor thee.
Margaret: Margaret my name, and daughter to a king,
 The King of Naples, whosoe'er thou art.

[V.v.2–8]

To Suffolk's lusty groans Margaret offers only proud aloofness. When, several lines later, he actually "frees" her, she calls his bluff and begins to walk away; Suffolk is then reduced to the awkward—and, doubtlessly for Elizabethan audiences, uncomfortable—position of begging his prisoner to return, and the rest, as they say, is history.

* * * * *

In writing about a play that is among Shakespeare's weakest—and is for some too weak to attribute to Shakespeare, even at this early stage in his career—I have been amazed to discover how much I have to say, and how much more I could have said, had I not wished to preserve some measure in this project. Whatever the failings of *1 Henry VI*, scenes such as the confrontation in the Temple garden, and characters such as Richard and Joan, suggest to me a writer blessed with an intuitive understanding of how to develop both plot and personality, who needed mainly the tutor of experience to shape his

intuitions into art. Though it shall not achieve full form for many years, that shape is discernable even in these first histories—including, at least for one exhilarating burst, the play I shall consider next.

Works Cited

- Auden, W. H. *Lectures on Shakespeare*. Ed. Arthur Kirsch. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. Print.
- Bevington, David, ed. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Updated 4th ed. New York: Longman, 1997. Print.
- Nashe, Thomas. From *Pierce Penniless, His Supplication to the Devil*.
<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/penniles.htm>. Web. 31 August 2015.
- Shakespeare, William. *Henry VI, Part I*. Ed. William Montgomery. Introduction by Janis Lull. New York: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.
- Shaw, Bernard. “Preface” to *Saint Joan*. Published in *Nine Plays*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1935. Print.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from *1 Henry VI* are from the Pelican Shakespeare edition of the text, published by Penguin Books (cited above).