

## 2 Henry VI (Spring 2005)

The second part of Shakespeare's history cycle about the devastating reign of King Henry VI picks up right where the first part leaves off—with the soon-to-be Duke of Suffolk delivering his Neapolitan Helen, Margaret of Anjou, to young Henry—though the play that follows is quite different from its predecessor (if indeed the two were composed chronologically); whether *2 Henry VI* is a better play, as seems to be the critical consensus, it is generally a tamer one. The first three acts are steeped in treachery, witchcraft, and more than a few foolish commoners, yet the overriding impression they leave is oddly subdued.

Shakespeare's greatest gifts involve excess—the ability to bestow upon a character more vitality than the role requires, to the point where his most memorable creations threaten to overwhelm the elaborate plots in which they find themselves. (As Shakespeare is apocryphally rumored to have confessed about *Romeo and Juliet*: “I killed Mercutio lest Mercutio kill me.”) How blandly straightforward, then, seem Henry, York, Suffolk, Margaret, Gloucester, Winchester—each passing dutifully across the stage to further England's downfall. I'd rather spend my time with Joan and Talbot, vulgar cartoons though they be—at least in the vasty fields of France one can gaze up at the heavens. The men and women of *2 Henry VI* are little people maneuvering within their castles and cathedrals; there is an oppressive stuffiness about the play, with its superficial order and hissing decorum, exemplified by York's after-dinner lecture in which he outlines his claim to the throne as though vomiting forth the chronicles in iambic chunks:

Edward the Third, my lords, had seven sons:  
The first, Edward the Black Prince, Prince of Wales;  
The second, William of Hatfield; and the third,  
Lionel Duke of Clarence; next to whom

Was John of Ghent, the Duke of Lancaster;  
The fifth was Edmund Langley, Duke of York . . .

[II.ii.10–15]

I could go on, but why bother? Suffice it to say that York counts off the names of Edward's remaining sons, and others, before Warwick replies, with considerable (though probably unintended) irony, "What plain proceedings is more plain than this?" [II.ii.53]. Edmund Mortimer, York's now-deceased uncle, delivered a similar speech in *I Henry VI*; the rhetoric is much the same in both plays, but in Part One the speaker is a sick old man who might have been king had fate been kinder, and his wretchedness charges his words with an emotion entirely lacking in his nephew's paint-by-numbers Machiavellianism.

In such an atmosphere the slightest breeze gives wondrous relief, and in Act Four Shakespeare unleashes a tempest, turning—however briefly—this tiresome world on its head:

### Jack Cade

We hear about Jack Cade before we meet him—first from York, who incites the "headstrong Kentishman" to rebel against King Henry as a warm-up to his own anticipated coup:

In Ireland have I seen this stubborn Cade  
Oppose himself against a troop of kerns,  
And fought so long till that his thighs with darts  
Were almost like a sharp-quilled porcupine;  
And in the end, being rescued, I have seen  
Him caper upright like a wild Morisco,  
Shaking the bloody darts as he his bells.

[III.i.360–366]

This is fine poetry, inspired—unlike too many other lines in these early plays—by Shakespeare's childhood in the English countryside rather than the classical mythology

he absorbed in school there. Cade himself—and the mob he represents—would probably better appreciate the prose uttered just before his first entrance:

*First Rebel:* I tell thee, Jack Cade the clothier means to dress the  
commonwealth, and turn it, and set a new nap upon it.  
*Second Rebel:* So he had need, for 'tis threadbare. Well, I say it  
was never merry world in England since gentlemen came up.  
*First Rebel:* O, miserable age! Virtue is not regarded in handicraftsmen.  
*Second Rebel:* The nobility think scorn to go in leather aprons.  
*First Rebel:* Nay more, the King's Council are no good workmen.  
*Second Rebel:* True; and yet it is said "Labor in thy vocation"; which  
is as much to say as "Let the magistrates be laboring men";  
and therefore should we be magistrates.  
*First Rebel:* Thou hast hit it; for there's no better sign of a brave mind  
than a hard hand.

[IV.ii.5–22]

As in York's description, we are immersed in the concrete poetry of everyday life. Indeed, it is typical of 2 *Henry VI*'s commoners that, notwithstanding their contempt for nouns and verbs ("such abominable words as no Christian ear can endure to hear" [IV.vii.37–38]), they possess an admirable command of English. As far as I can find, Cade and his crew of rowdies—though outrageously illogical—are not guilty of a single malapropism, rarities amongst the denizens of Shakespeare's lower classes.

When Cade finally enters, he twists his followers' calls to use "the skins of our enemies to make dog's leather of" (famously followed by "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers") into an impressive bit of social criticism:

Nay, that I mean to do. Is not this a lamentable thing that of the  
skin of an innocent lamb should be made parchment? That  
parchment, being scribbled o'er, should undo a man? Some say the  
bee stings, but I say 'tis the bee's wax. For I did but once seal to a  
thing, and I was never mine own man since.

[IV.ii.25-26 & 81–87]

A few scenes later we meet the doomed Lord Saye, whose eloquence is no match for Cade's vicious wit:

*Saye*: This tongue hath parleyed unto foreign kings  
 For your behoof —  
*Cade*: Tut, when struck'st thou one blow in the field?  
*Saye*: Great men have reaching hands. Oft have I struck  
 Those that I never saw, and struck them dead.  
*Rebel*: O monstrous coward! What, to come behind folks?  
*Saye*: These cheeks are pale for watching for your good —  
*Cade*: Give him a box o' th' ear, and that will make 'em red again.  
*One of the Rebels strikes Saye.*  
*Saye*: Long sitting to determine poor men's causes  
 Hath made me full of sickness and diseases.  
*Cade*: Ye shall have a hempen caudle, then, and the health o' th' hatchet.  
*Butcher*: Why dost thou quiver, man?  
*Saye*: The palsy, and not fear, provokes me.  
*Cade*: Nay, he nods at us as who should say "I'll be even with you." I'll  
 see if his head will stand steadier on a pole or no. Take him away,  
 and behead him.

[IV.vii.76–94]

Saye continues to plead, and Cade briefly turns from the mob to acknowledge the unexpected potency of language:

I feel remorse in myself with his words, but I'll bridle it. He shall die an it be but for pleading so well for his life. Away with him — he has a familiar under his tongue; he speaks not a God's name.  
 [IV.vii.102–105]

In his final scene, Cade arrives at a sort of mini-epiphany that may parallel Shakespeare's own increasing awareness of the subtleties of his art. Forced by hunger to break into a stranger's garden, Cade reflects on the reversal of fortune that has plunged him from a Mars amongst men to a desperate forager for vegetables. Turning suddenly from the world of the stage play, he glimpses that inexhaustible world of cognitive play we shall eventually recognize as quintessentially Shakespearean:

I think this word "sallet" was born to do me good; for many a time, but for a sallet, my brainpan had been cleft with a brown bill; and many a time, when I have been dry, and bravely marching, it hath served me instead of a quart

pot to drink in; and now the word “sallet” must serve me to  
feed on.

[IV.ix.9–14]

For whatever reason, at his lowest moment Cade grasps at the wholly impractical link between “salad green” and “sallet,” a kind of light helmet; rather than suppress this impulse he pursues it, anticipating the virtuosic delight in language that shall infuse Shakespeare’s greatest characters.

The question, then, is why Shakespeare allows this delight to manifest itself in a petty thug who executes the literate and whose first proclamation as “Parliament of England” is to “Burn all the records of the realm” [IV.vii.13–14]? For despite Cade’s occasional moments of clarity and the legitimacy of many of his grievances against the aristocracy, Shakespeare is clearly unnerved by the power of the charismatic over the masses (and Jack Cade qualifies as charismatic, at least when judged by the low standards of this play). This anxiety shall recur throughout Shakespeare’s career—most directly in *Julius Caesar*, when the murder of the poet Cinna by the unthinking mob recalls Cade’s execution of the clerk Emmanuel, hung “with his pen and inkhorn about his neck” [IV.ii.111–112]—and it seems to have inspired something in Shakespeare quite different from his distaste for Yorkist and Lancastrian factionalism. Nobody in *2 Henry VI* particularly *likes* Jack Cade—his fellow rebels undercut his bravado with sarcastic asides, and they desert him at the mere mention of Henry V, whose ghost has yet to be exorcised from these early histories. Yet does anyone prefer Cade’s executioner, the insufferable Sir Alexander Iden, who apparently begins each day with a thematically appropriate ode to the Great Chain of Being:

Lord, who would live turmoiled in the court  
And may enjoy such quiet walks as these?

This small inheritance my father left me  
 Contenteth me, and worth a monarchy.  
 I seek not to wax great by others' waning,  
 Or gather wealth I care not with what envy;  
 Sufficeth that I have maintains my state,  
 And sends the poor well pleasèd from my gate.

[IV.ix.15–22]

Cade, by contrast, speaks with endearing gusto to the death. “Zounds,” he cries upon spotting Iden, “here’s the lord of the soil come to seize me for a stray for entering his fee simple without leave” [IV.ix.23–25]; later he responds to Iden’s routine boasting (“if mine arm be heavèd in the air, / Thy grave is digged already in the earth” [IV.ix.49–50]) with an oath that is all the more amusing for its apparent sincerity: “By my valor, the most complete champion that ever I heard” [IV.ix.54–55]. In sum, Jack Cade’s lines are *fun*, and Shakespeare surely had as much fun writing them as we have reading and hearing them. He could not have approved of Cade, whose murderous anti-intellectualism threatened Shakespeare’s very existence, but in the Kentishmen’s outrageousness Shakespeare found an outlet for his own love of language, of theatricality, of *excess*. Cade and his thwarted rebellion are not necessary for *2 Henry VI* to make sense; once York returns from Ireland proclaiming Somerset a traitor, events proceed as though the rebels were still mending clothes in the boondocks. But from another, more essential perspective, Jack Cade is the most necessary thing onstage.

### **Queen Margaret and Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester**

Henry’s queen and uncle I lump together for convenience, not because there are particularly meaningful connections between them. That said, both Margaret and Gloucester exert considerable influence over Lancastrian policy, albeit at different times and in quite different ways. In a sense, as his star falls hers rises, cresting in the next play,

when her most memorable scenes happen. Already in Part Two there is an air of the grotesque about Margaret, most startlingly in her first appearance following the execution of her lover, Suffolk, when she enters cradling his severed head to her breast [IV.iv]. Henry must pretend not to notice, for he never asks his wife to set aside—at least until he has exited—the head of the man who murdered his uncle and cuckolded him. To Margaret’s credit, her devotion to Suffolk even in death suggests their teary-eyed farewell, several scenes earlier, was heartfelt.

Usually, however, Margaret seems little more than shrill. She is as insensitive—and with far less cause—to her husband’s grief for Gloucester as he is to hers for Suffolk, yet somehow she claims Henry’s loss for herself:

*Margaret:* What know I how the world may deem of me?  
 For it is known we were but hollow friends,  
 It shall be judged I made the duke away.  
 So shall my name with slander’s tongue be wounded  
 And princes’ courts be filled with my reproach.  
 This get I by his death. Ay me, unhappy,  
 To be a queen, and crowned with infamy.

*Henry:* Ah, woe is me for Gloucester, wretched man!

*Margaret:* Be woe for me, more wretched than he is.

[III.ii.65–73]

Unless she has just been strangled in bed, this is an outrageous claim. Were Margaret innocent of Gloucester’s death, she might have legitimate grounds for complaint—her husband has, after all, announced that “in the shade of death I shall find joy; / In life, but double death, now Gloucester’s dead” [III.ii.54–55], a point she later makes herself:

Is all thy comfort shut in Gloucester’s tomb?  
 Why, then Queen Margaret was ne’er thy joy.

[III.ii.78–79]

But Margaret is hardly innocent—along with Winchester, Suffolk, and York, she assented to the plot against Gloucester’s life—and so her words, however artfully constructed, are hollow and cruel.

As for Gloucester, the complete title of the play as it appears in the First Folio—*The second Part of Henry the Sixt, with the death of the Good Duke Hvmfrey*—suggests he is this part’s Lord Talbot: a bulwark of the realm, shamefully cut down by malicious inferiors who thereby hasten England’s downfall. While his intentions doubtlessly are nobler than most, if Gloucester is the best England can offer, the realm leaves much to be desired. The Duke wears his virtue on his sleeves for all to peck at. Perhaps he is not guilty of the egregious “cruelty in execution / Upon offenders,” as Buckingham charges [I.iii.135–136]—for we have no reason here to believe Gloucester’s obviously biased enemies—but his insistence that Peter Thump, who by his own admission “cannot fight,” to prove his case against his master “fight or else be hanged” [I.iii.219–223] is cruel enough. Likewise, his exposing of the Simpcoxes as frauds becomes increasingly sadistic, culminating in his order to “Let them be whipped through every market town / Till they come to Berwick, from whence they came” [II.i.160–161]. Especially curious about both cases is that, as even Gloucester’s mortal enemy, the Cardinal of Winchester, acknowledges,

. . . the common people favor him,  
 Calling him “Humphrey, the good Duke of Gloucester,”  
 Clapping their hands and crying with loud voice  
 “Jesu maintain your royal excellence!”

[I.i.156–159]

One wonders what Peter Thump or Simon Simpcox might say about “the good Duke Humphrey,” but no one bothers to ask them.



One wonders even more about Gloucester's wife, Dame Eleanor. Theirs seems a cold marriage, though this is hardly unique in Shakespeare. Still, we might expect a bit more emotion from Gloucester when he hears of his wife's arrest for conjuring spirits:

Noble she is, but if she have forgot  
Honor and virtue and conversed with such  
As, like to pitch, defile nobility,  
I banish her my bed and company,  
And give her as a prey to law and shame  
That hath dishonored Gloucester's honest name.

[II.i.206–211]

True, their final parting in the streets of London contains poignant moments (though unlike Margaret and Suffolk under similar circumstances, Gloucester and Eleanor speak more of politics than love). But what should we make of this exchange, the last words they shall ever say to each other:

*Eleanor:* What, gone, my lord, and bid me not farewell?

*Gloucester:* Witness my tears—I cannot stay to speak.

*Exit Gloucester.*

*Eleanor:* Art thou gone too? All comfort go with thee,  
For none abides with me. My joy is death.

[II.iv.86–89]

Perhaps Gloucester truly is too moved to bear a kinder farewell. This is a choice for the actor to make; it is not inconceivable to imagine tenderness here between husband and wife. For my part, I do not hear much tenderness or comfort from Gloucester; he is gloomy throughout, and so I am inclined to leave him, as he does Eleanor, without another word, and proceed to the play's main event: the onset of the Wars of the Roses.

### **Richard, Duke of York**

In *1 Henry VI*, Shakespeare shows sufficient interest in the developing character of young Richard Plantagenet that we might expect at least a modicum of depth in the York of Part Two. When last we saw the duke he was burning Joan of Arc at the stake

and cursing the peace forged between England and France, but he did not yet seem determined to wrest the crown from King Henry. Not so in *2 Henry VI*, which begins with the unfortunate marriage of Henry to Margaret and the news that Margaret's reverse-dowry has cost England several key French territories. York, ever the hawk, does not brook well the losses—"France should have torn and rent my very heart / Before I would have yielded to this league," he rants [I.i.123–124]—but when left alone onstage for the first of his several soliloquies he reveals his true motives:

A day will come when York shall claim his own,  
And therefore I will take the Nevilles' parts,  
And make a show of love to proud Duke Humphrey,  
And, when I spy advantage, claim the crown.

[I.i.239–242]

York does have legal grounds for his ambition—he traces his ancestry to an older son of King Edward III than does Henry—but his arguments throughout the play scarcely mention his pedigree. (The single exception is the aforementioned history lesson to Warwick [II.ii.9–52]). Indeed, when York finally announces his rebellion to a baffled Henry, he says nothing of genealogy. Instead he emphasizes the differences in character between himself—"Whose smile and frown, like to Achilles' spear, / Is able with the change to kill and cure" [V.i.100–101]—and the pious but woefully inadequate Henry, whose "hand is made to grasp a palmer's staff" [V.i.97]. However accurate these assessments may be, they reduce the question of kingship to a personality contest between manly York and "bookish" Henry [I.i.259], whose masculinity is further undermined by his adulterous and increasingly martial wife. As Dame Eleanor warns Henry, regarding the queen, "She'll pamper thee and dandle thee like a baby. / Though in this place most master wear no breeches" [I.iii.148–149].

These are relevant tensions, as Shakespeare knew; he returned to wind them throughout his second history cycle, beginning with *Richard II* and culminating in *Henry V*. But here the questions lead only to superficial answers. The Duke of York is no Bolingbroke—merely the most prominent of many schemers, he lacks the inherent authority that shall draw crowds to the future King Henry IV. The best York can offer is neither inspiring nor convincing:

*Clifford [to King Henry]:* Health and all happiness to my lord the king.  
*York:* I thank thee, Clifford. Say, what news with thee?  
 Nay, do not fright us with an angry look—  
 We are thy sovereign, Clifford; kneel again.  
 For thy mistaking so, we pardon thee.

To which Clifford pointedly replies:

This is my king, York; I do not mistake.  
 But thou mistakes me much to think I do.

[V.i.122–128]

With so little about York that is attractive, the play really boils down to the character of King Henry himself. Unfortunately, he is not a credible alternative.

### **King Henry VI**

The murder of Gloucester midway through Act Three sets Henry on a path to authentic, if impractical, wisdom, but for much of the play the young king is merely naïve. Too often he seems oblivious to the festering corruption at court, and he has no sense of political urgency. Informed that his marriage to Margaret comes at the steep cost of Anjou and Maine—plus traveling expenses—and deaf to all but his new bride’s sugared words, Henry’s only response is “They please us well” [I.i.60]. He stands by, silent, on several occasions as factions accuse Gloucester of myriad crimes; finally he

insists his slandered uncle is “virtuous, mild, and too well given / To dream on evil or to work my downfall” [III.i.72–73]. He longs to believe this of everyone.

Henry’s disconnect from the world around him is epitomized by his reaction to Gloucester’s murder. It is clear to all, even the commons, that Suffolk and Winchester had hands in the deed; indeed, Warwick calls Suffolk “false murd’rous coward” [III.ii.220], and the two storm offstage to duel. Yet as his kingdom slips perilously toward chaos, Henry fails to take any positive action to restore order; instead, he prefers to moralize:

What stronger breastplate than a heart untainted?  
Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just;  
And he but naked, though locked up in steel,  
Whose conscience with injustice is corrupted.

[III.ii.232–235]

To whom exactly is Henry speaking? To Warwick and Suffolk, perhaps, since he seems not to have noticed the two furious lords have left the room; when a moment later they re-enter, their intended duel interrupted by the belligerent commons, Henry is genuinely surprised:

Why, how now, lords? Your wrathful weapons drawn  
Here in our presence? Dare you be so bold?

[III.ii.239–240]

But the implications of Gloucester’s demise are not entirely lost on the king; though he shall never be able to lead men, he begins to understand them, and more importantly, to understand himself. As Gloucester is led to prison, Henry compares himself to a helpless cow watching its calf led to slaughter, who “runs lowing up and down, / Looking the way her harmless young one went, / And can do naught but wail her darling’s loss” [III.i.214–216]. When his fears prove to have been prophetic, Henry

struggles to assimilate his growing awareness of human evil with his childlike faith in God's sovereign goodness:

O thou that judgest all things, stay my thoughts,  
 My thoughts that labor to persuade my soul  
 Some violent hands were laid on Humphrey's life.  
 If my suspect be false, forgive me God,  
 For judgment only doth belong to thee.

[III.ii.136–140]

Interestingly, these reflections seem to comfort Henry, as does the approach of the commons, who according to Salisbury vow to protect their king, “whe'er [he] will or no, / From such fell serpents as false Suffolk is” [III.ii.269–270]. Henry masters both his hysteria and his despair and acts swiftly to banish Suffolk from the realm, in the process speaking for the first time like England's rightful king:

*Margaret:* O Henry, let me plead for gentle Suffolk.  
*Henry:* Ungentle queen, to call him gentle Suffolk.  
 No more, I say! If thou dost plead for him  
 Thou wilt but add increase unto my wrath.  
 Had I but said, I would have kept my word;  
 But when I swear, it is irrevocable.

[III.ii.295–300]

Jack Cade's rebellion pushes Henry back toward melancholy and self-pity, though it leads him to an insight that Shakespeare shall pursue further in *3 Henry VI*—in fact, it shall be a recurring theme throughout the histories:

Was ever king that joyed an earthly throne  
 And could command no more content than I?  
 No sooner was I crept out of my cradle  
 But I was made a king at nine months old.  
 Was never subject longed to be a king  
 As I do long and wish to be a subject.

[IV.viii.1–6]

This refrain—we might call it the Lancastrian lament—shall be picked up and elaborated on by both Henry IV and Henry V in their respective plays. For the moment, though,

Henry VI isn't doing too badly—Buckingham and Clifford quell the uprising and Henry pardons “multitudes” of former rebels, who gratefully exclaim “God save the king” and depart in peace [IV.viii.7–22]. Even the news that York has returned from Ireland leading an army, ostensibly against the Duke of Somerset, does not entirely shake the king's resolve; he calmly sends Buckingham to defuse the situation and closes the scene with perhaps his finest line in the play: “Come, wife, let's in and learn to govern better” [IV.ix.48].

But Henry still fears that “yet may England curse my wretched reign” [IV.ix.49]; the subsequent defections of Salisbury and Warwick to York's cause exacerbate this fear:

Why, Warwick, hath thy knee forgot to bow?  
 Old Salisbury, shame to thy silver hair,  
 Thou mad misleader of thy brainsick son!  
 What, wilt thou on thy deathbed play the ruffian,  
 And seek for sorrow with thy spectacles?  
 O, where is faith? O, where is loyalty?  
 If it be banished from the frosty head,  
 Where shall it find a harbor in the earth?

[V.i.159–166]

Despite all he has seen and learned of human nature in recent weeks—or however much time is supposed to have elapsed in this patchwork plot—Henry clings to his ideals, for they are founded on unflagging piety:

*Henry:* Hast thou not sworn allegiance unto me?  
*Salisbury:* I have.  
*Henry:* Canst thou dispense with heaven for such an oath?

[V.i.177–179]

A churchman to the end, Henry is profoundly shaken by the onset of war, which seems to dispel whatever lingering illusions he maintained about his fitness to govern. In the play's final four scenes, he speaks only once, choosing words unlikely to inspire confidence in his troops, who have been routed by York's army; too dazed—or

fatalistic—to order the retreat, Henry cries, with perhaps more than a touch of mocking irony, “Can we outrun the heavens? Good Margaret, stay” [V.iv.2]. But Margaret is as determined as her husband is despairing, and somehow the House of Lancaster survives to fight another play.

Shakespeare leaves us, then, with no attractive political alternatives: York lacks the charisma to be anything more than a usurper, but Henry is even less qualified; based strictly on genealogical grounds, York should be king, but Shakespeare expends very little energy in pursuing this argument, and besides, Margaret is not the type to hand over the crown on a technicality; meanwhile, Gloucester is dead and the remaining peers are practically indistinguishable. Is anarchy the solution? Shakespeare’s answer is Jack Cade. Perhaps this is why Shakespeare pays increasing attention in *3 Henry VI*—and especially in *Richard III*—to the Tudor myth of Divine Providence, which argued that the Wars of the Roses were sanctioned by heaven to punish a generation of English sinners. It is therefore not a question of alternatives but survival, until God lifts His curse from the land by placing Henry VII, grandfather to Queen Elizabeth I, on the throne.

That this official explanation dissatisfied Shakespeare is suggested by the fact that he revisited the chronicles a decade later to produce the masterful quartet of *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*. Of course, these plays present even fewer answers than do the *Henry VI* plays. The chief difference in the later histories is rather their abundance of compelling individuals striving for the crown . . . or abstaining from and critiquing the strivings of others. Perhaps Richard II is no better a monarch than Henry VI; perhaps Henry IV creates as much trouble for his subjects as does the House of York. But in the former cases we find ourselves powerfully drawn to one side or the

other, or suspended in tense limbo between; or perhaps we curse both factions and join Falstaff in the tavern. Such options do not exist in *2 Henry VI*, unless we dare trust our heads to the whims of Jack Cade. It is not until the final parts of the story that someone worth noting takes charge of the realm, and he shall prove more dangerous than anyone we have met thus far.

### **Works Cited**

- Shakespeare, William. *Henry VI, Part II*. Ed. William Montgomery. New York: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.