

3 Henry VI (Spring 2005)

The difference between the second and the third parts of *Henry VI* is the tale of two soliloquies. When in the earlier play Richard, Duke of York, steps forward at the close of the first scene to reflect on his treasonous ambition, he focuses almost entirely on external matters of plot. Shakespeare adds just enough of a sneer to distinguish York's voice from those of his fellow schemers:

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,
For that's the golden mark I seek to hit.
Nor shall proud Lancaster usurp my right,
Nor hold the scepter in his childish fist,
Nor wear the diadem upon his head
Whose churchlike humors fits not for a crown.
Then, York, be still a while till time do serve.
Watch thou, and wake when others be asleep,
To pry into the secrets of the state—
Till Henry, surfeit in the joys of love
With his new bride and England's dear-bought queen,
And Humphrey with the peers be fall'n at jars.
Then will I raise aloft the milk-white rose,
With whose sweet smell the air shall be perfumed,
And in my standard bear the arms of York,
To grapple with the house of Lancaster;
And force perforce I'll make him yield the crown,
Whose bookish rule hath pulled fair England down.

[2*HVI*, I.i.239–259]

When York meets his grisly end early in Part Three, he bequeaths the role of villain-in-chief to his son and namesake. As young Richard of Gloucester takes center stage, for the first of many times, to soliloquize on his own ambition, his words both echo his father's and infuse them with new life:

Ay, Edward will use women honorably.
Would he were wasted, marrow, bones, and all,
That from his loins no hopeful branch may spring

To cross me from the golden time I look for.
 And yet, between my soul's desire and me—
 The lustful Edward's title buried—
 Is Clarence, Henry, and his son young Edward,
 And all the unlooked-for-issue of their bodies,
 To take their rooms ere I can place myself.

[III.ii.124–132]

For the “churchlike” Henry, Richard substitutes “the lustful Edward” and a host of as-yet-unborn crown princes, but unlike his father he does not dwell long on rivals. Instead, he turns his focus inward:

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
 And cry “Content!” to that which grieves my heart,
 And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
 And frame my face to all occasions.
 I'll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall;
 I'll slay more gazers than the basilisk;
 I'll play the orator as well as Nestor,
 Deceive more slyly than Ulysses could,
 And, like a Sinon, take another Troy.
 I can add colors to the chameleon,
 Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
 And set the murderous Machiavel to school.
 Can I do this, and cannot get a crown?
 Tut, were it farther off, I'll pluck it down.

[III.ii.182–195]

In place of the political we have the psychological; where previously Shakespeare gave us elaborate plotting, he now gives vigorous bursts of self-analysis. And Richard is only getting started: greater self-consciousness leads to greater depths of villainy, further reshaping the self. As he stares down at the corpse of King Henry, the blood still warm on his knife, Richard realizes the insight that shall guide his career:

If any spark of life be yet remaining,
 Down, down to hell, and say I sent thee thither—
He stabs him again.
 I, that have neither pity, love, nor fear.

[V.vi.66–68]

Ostensibly Richard is apostrophizing Henry's soul, but he might as well be speaking of his own, for with the cold-blooded murder of the saintly king Richard turns forever from heaven's light, if indeed he ever faced it. Paradoxically, by embracing everything in his nature that is vicious, Richard gains life: he is reborn, a creature of his own invention, free to utter the most chilling lines Shakespeare had yet written:

I had no father, I am like no father;
I have no brother, I am like no brother;
And this word "love," which graybeards call divine,
Be resident in men like one another
And not in me—I am myself alone.

[V.vi.80–84]

Richard is more perceptive than he may realize. No one in Shakespeare has until this moment spoken like this, though many will in plays to come, including the very next, *Richard III*, in which Richard so totally dominates his rivals for our attention—let alone the English crown—that Shakespeare is forced to appropriate the Tudor myth of Divine Providence to justify his eventual downfall. Only God, it seems, is powerful enough to challenge Richard, and He certainly takes His sweet time to do it.

There will always be more to say where Richard is concerned—he says much of it himself—but I shall leave him for the moment, as he shall demand most of my attention when I turn to consider his own play. In the meantime, *3 Henry VI* offers at least one other character who deserves closer inspection:

King Henry VI

Henry is Richard's antithesis in nearly every respect, but he does share with his eventual murderer one crucial quality: self-knowledge. Perhaps more importantly, Henry, like Richard, has the ability to articulate to an audience that knowledge. Even before Richard delivers his two triumphant soliloquies, Henry captivates us with a beautifully

crafted meditation on the virtues of a life far removed from oppressive castles and gilded corruption:

O God! Methinks it were a happy life
 To be no better than a homely swain.
 To sit upon a hill, as I do now;
 To carve out dials quaintly, point by point,
 Thereby to see the minutes how they run:
 How many makes the hour full complete,
 How many hours brings about the day,
 How many days will finish up the year,
 How many years a mortal man may live.
 When this is known, then to divide the times:
 So many hours must I tend my flock,
 So many hours must I take my rest,
 So many hours must I contemplate,
 So many hours must I sport myself,
 So many days my ewes have been with young,
 So many weeks ere the poor fools will ean,
 So many years ere I shall shear the fleece.
 So minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years,
 Passed over to the end they were created,
 Would bring white hairs unto a quiet grave.
 Ah, what a life were this! How sweet! How lovely!
 Gives not the hawthorn bush a sweeter shade
 To shepherds looking on their seely sheep
 Than doth a rich embroidered canopy
 To kings that fear their subjects' treachery?
 O yes, it doth—a thousandfold it doth.

[II.v.21–46]

So complete is Henry's peace of mind here that it pains me to note the reality: If in fact this earthly bliss exists, not once does Shakespeare dramatize it, at least not in his histories. Who shall confirm Henry's vision, the demoniac Joan la Pucelle? May his innocent shepherd be found amongst the looters and rapists of Jack Cade's rebellion? (Years later in *As You Like It*—which also features a ruler who is ousted from power and realizes he does not miss it—might Shakespeare be remembering Henry's fond musings when he has the caustic Jaques exclaim, "A fool, a fool! I met a fool i' the forest, / ...

[who] drew a dial from his poke, / And looking on it with lackluster eye, / Says very wisely, 'It is ten o'clock'" [II.vii.12–22].)

Despite Henry's best wishes for peace—and due largely to his inability to deliver anything but wishes, however eloquent—the specter of civil war haunts every man, woman, and child who stumbles blindly across the stage. No sooner has the king concluded his fantasy than he is confronted with one of the bleakest spectacles in his trilogy: A soldier enters bearing the corpse of a man he has killed in battle and intends to rob, only to discover the man is his father; moments later Shakespeare presents us, and Henry, with its mirror image, as a father lugs on the freshly-slaughtered corpse of his son. These men have not asked to share in the ambitions of despicable nobles—only yesterday they might have been lounging in a hawthorn's shade, tending their sheep—yet they die anyway with their masters, clad in the emblems of the red rose or the white.

That Henry is the most moral figure in this long history of the Wars of the Roses is hardly debatable; in his refusal to condemn his own murderer—"O, God forgive my sins, and pardon thee" [V.vi.60]—he not only echoes Christ on the cross but anticipates perhaps the most virtuous character Shakespeare created, Desdemona. But however much we may admire Henry's virtues, we must not lose sight of the fact that nearly every action he takes (or neglects to take) as king proves costly—if not devastating—to his people. Harold Goddard claims Henry "nearly succeeded in accomplishing what the astute and 'practical' men around him were powerless to effect: an understanding between the warring factions of Lancaster and York" [31]; to support this claim, Goddard emphasizes as "possibly the three most significant lines in these plays" several lines spoken to Queen Margaret by York's eldest son, the future King Edward IV:

Hadst thou been meek, our title still had slept,
 And we, in pity of the gentle king,
 Had slipped our claim until another age.

[II.ii.160–162]

Considered in context, these lines are an effective capper to a diatribe in which Edward exhausts the greater part of his imagination formulating insults to hurl at Margaret from across the battlefield. But why should we believe him? Presumably, the “understanding between . . . Lancaster and York” to which Goddard refers is Henry’s suggestion, early in *3 Henry VI*, that he remain king and name Richard of York heir to the throne, a suggestion that York happily accepts for obvious reasons. But this offer has several problems that have nothing to do with Queen Margaret, not the least of which being that Henry’s tone suggests desperation more than authority. As York sits smugly on the chair of state, Henry turns to the audience and whispers, “I know not what to say—my title’s weak” [I.i.135]; later, when the Duke of Exeter defects to the Yorkist cause, Henry fears the worst: “All will revolt from me and turn to him” [I.i.152]. Thus, when Warwick stamps his foot and York’s private army bursts into the room, I hear no voice but that of expediency in Henry’s sudden cry, “My Lord of Warwick, hear me but one word— / Let me for this my lifetime reign as king” [I.i.171–172].

Henry’s disinheriting his son infuriates the queen, to be sure, but she is not alone in her determination to fight on despite Henry’s attempt at peacemaking. In rapid succession the Earls of Westmorland and Northumberland and Lord Clifford turn their backs on Henry and lead away their respective armies; Clifford’s parting curse, “In dreadful war mayst thou be overcome, / Or live in peace, abandoned and despised” [I.i.188–189], is typical of the sentiments expressed by all three. And even if everyone in Henry’s camp, from Queen Margaret and Prince Edward down to the humblest foot

soldier, agreed to such a deferred transfer of power, in the very next scene York allows his own family to persuade him to break his oath and re-foment civil war. Never mind that Margaret's army is already marching to besiege his castle: York does not learn this until after he vows, "I will be king or die" [I.ii.35].

It is difficult, then, to see Henry's great (or near) accomplishment, even if one sets aside the question of whether in pacifying York Henry sins against his own son. More difficult to overlook is the question of whether Henry's desperate attempt to remain king squares with his professed desire—articulated most memorably in the aforementioned soliloquy—to be freed from the heavy burden of kingship. What should we make of this proclamation, so seemingly out of character for the peace-loving king:

Think'st thou that I will leave my kingly throne,
Wherein my grandsire and my father sat?
No—first shall war unpeople this my realm.

[I.i.125–127]

Clearly Henry does not mean this, for moments later he ignores the warmongering Northumberland and Clifford and names York his heir. A more accurate description of his intent comes earlier in the scene, when he argues, albeit naively, against the shedding of any more blood in his defense: "Cousin of Exeter, frowns, words, and threats / Shall be the war that Henry means to use" [I.i.72–73]. In vowing to "unpeople" his realm, then, Henry is merely reaching for the most extreme threat he can imagine; when York is unimpressed, Henry drops the charade for a more conciliatory solution. Yet this returns us to the original question: How can Henry cling to something he professes to despise? It seems wrong to call him a hypocrite in view of the various members of the York clan, who seem to be competing for the title of most ingenious sophist. Is it fairer to say Henry does not know himself as well as he claims?

Considered together, the *Henry VI* plays trace the dissolution of a social order into chaos. This chaos reaches its nadir in Part Three, which at times has the feel of a huge pendulum swinging from slaughter to slaughter. No character is beyond this pendulum's reach, yet as circumstances conspire to distance Henry from the action—he spends much of the play's latter half imprisoned in the Tower of London—his vision clarifies and he assumes the unexpected role of prophet. He accurately predicts the ascension of Henry Tudor, better known as the future King Henry VII, who shall end the Wars of the Roses and “prove our country's bliss” [IV.vii.70], and his final prophesy is a preview of *Richard III*, fixing in our minds the vision—however unhistorical—of Richard of Gloucester as crooked fiend:

. . . many a thousand
 Which now mistrust no parcel of my fear,
 And many an old man's sigh, and many a widow's,
 And many an orphan's water-standing eye—
 Men for their sons', wives for their husbands',
 Orphans for their parents' timeless death—
 Shall rue the hour that ever thou wast born.
 The owl shrieked at thy birth—an evil sign;
 The night crow cried, aboding luckless time;
 Dogs howled, and hideous tempests shook down trees;
 The raven rook'd her on the chimney's top;
 And chatt'ring pies in dismal discords sung.
 Thy mother felt more than a mother's pain,
 And yet brought forth less than a mother's hope—
 To wit, an indigested and deformèd lump,
 Not like the fruit of such a goodly tree.
 Teeth hadst thou in thy head when thou wast born,
 To signify thou cam'st to bite the world;
 And if the rest be true which I have heard,
 Thou cam'st—

[V.vi.37–56]

We never hear the conclusion, for Richard plunges his knife into the old king's breast, but anyone familiar with *Richard III* should easily fill in the blanks. How fitting

that these men, the one as good as the other is evil, should spend one last moment together, for their polarities create whatever tension this play has. And yet, as E. M. W. Tillyard rightly points out [209], neither man is the force driving the plot; that responsibility is shared by Queen Margaret and the Earl of Warwick. Richard and Henry are chiefly observers, and we remember them here, not for any actions they take or fail to take, but for their marvelous soliloquies, Shakespeare's first great achievements in the dramatization of inner life.

As for Margaret and Warwick: The latter, despite his importance to English history as "Kingmaker," is merely a prominent incarnation of a type Shakespeare scatters throughout all his early histories; his dying words—"Lo now my glory smeared in dust and blood. / My parks, my walks, my manors that I had, / Even now forsake me, and of all my lands / Is nothing left me but my body's length. / Why, what is pomp, rule, reign, but earth and dust? / And, live we how we can, yet die we must" [V.ii.23–28]—might just as easily have been Suffolk's, Somerset's, Winchester's. Margaret deserves further consideration, however, if only because she is the only character to appear in all four plays in the cycle, from *I Henry VI* through *Richard III*, and it is in Part Three that she sounds her most furious notes.

Queen Margaret

Despite the appeal she undoubtedly holds for many actresses,¹ I find little in Margaret to engage my interest. In Part One, she and Suffolk exchange one of the longest—and silliest—strings of asides in theatre history, while in Part Two, her few

¹ Peggy Ashcroft, who played the role to great acclaim, called Margaret "a Dark Lady if ever there was one—and prototype for Cressida, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth—[and] Shakespeare's first 'heroine'—if such she can be called." Ashcroft added, "It takes four plays to make her one of the great female characters in Shakespeare." [Ryan, 242]

moments of authentic pathos, in response to Suffolk's banishment, are counterbalanced by her self-serving response to Humphrey of Gloucester's murder. In Part Three, Shakespeare again grants Margaret a brief moment of tenderness, this time prompted by the cold-blooded murder of her only child, Prince Edward, yet once again my sympathies fade in light of her own complicity in the equally cold-blooded murders of York and his son, the Earl of Rutland. As Margaret herself boasts:

Look, York, I stained this napkin with the blood
That valiant Clifford with his rapier's point
Made issue from the bosom of thy boy.
And if thine eyes can water for his death,
I give thee this to dry thy cheeks withal.

[I.iv.80–84]

But cruelty by itself isn't the problem—when it comes to sheer malice, Richard of Gloucester easily surpasses Margaret, and he is the most fascinating character in the play. What Margaret lacks that sets her apart from Richard is any sense of self-awareness, the ability—or at least the inclination—to step back from her relentless, reckless fury and reflect upon *something* of greater consequence than the immediate present. Surely by this point in his career Shakespeare understood the fundamental relationship between such moments and the development of character: Richard stabs Henry and considers how that action's root lies in his very nature, and further, how it will shape his future self; Henry gazes upon his bleeding country, and each death feeds his ever-increasing hunger for a more spiritual existence. But Margaret's voice, even at its lowest ebb, in confronting the death of her son, is very different:

O Ned, sweet Ned—speak to thy mother, boy.
Canst thou not speak? O traitors, murderers!
They that stabbed Caesar shed no blood at all,
Did not offend, nor were not worthy blame,
If this foul deed were by to equal it.

He was a man—this, in respect, a child;
 And men ne'er spend their fury on a child.
 What's worse than murderer that I may name it?
 No, no, my heart will burst an if I speak;
 And I will speak that so my heart may burst.
 Butchers and villains! Bloody cannibals!
 How sweet a plant have you untimely cropped!
 You have no children, butchers; if you had,
 The thought of them would have stirred up remorse.

[V.v.50–63]

Margaret's complete ignorance of the ironies undermining these lines is astounding. "Butchers" unintentionally conjures up the epithet given by the Yorkists to her most pitiless general, Lord Clifford, who would be very surprised to hear that "men ne'er spend their fury on a child." Arguably, Clifford's slaughter of the young Rutland—a true innocent, as opposed to Prince Edward, who fights eagerly at his mother's side—is only the *second* cruelest action in the play; Margaret's taunting York with a handkerchief soaked in his son's blood earns that dubious honor, and costs her the right to curse her enemies' lack of remorse. Yet curse she does, till I find myself wondering with Richard, of all people, "Why should she live to fill the world with words" [V.v.43].

* * * * *

In asking this question, Richard proves unconsciously prophetic himself, for Margaret shall return in *Richard III*, unrepentant as ever, to fill our ears once more with tiresome words. Perhaps the nearer Shakespeare came to concluding the story of King Henry VI and beginning the story of King Richard III, the more he too looked forward to his next play. He seems to have poured much time and energy into the writing of the two great battle sequences that open *3 Henry VI*—the Lancastrian victory at Wakefield, leading to the death of York, and the Yorkist victory at Towton, leading to the crowning of King Edward IV—only to allow the final three acts to degenerate into near parodies of

themselves, a series of weakly motivated twists and reversals: No sooner is the imprisoned Henry freed by the Lancastrian army than he is recaptured by the Yorkist army; no sooner is the poorly guarded Edward captured than he is rescued from even more inept guards. Major players defect and then defect back as though governed by flips of a coin.

Can it be coincidence that Shakespeare's apparent loss of interest in his plot occurs at roughly the same place he discovers the twisted recesses of Richard of Gloucester? The three parts of *Henry VI* contain approximately one hundred distinct characters, of which perhaps two-dozen could be considered significant roles. *Richard III* has a similarly large cast, yet of all these characters—many of them holdovers from 3 *Henry VI*—only one matters: the hunchbacked king himself. Perhaps no other Shakespearean play is so overwhelmingly constructed around a single personality—even *Hamlet* gives us Claudius and the Ghost, Gertrude and Ophelia, Polonius and poor dead Yorick to consider. Has a single essay been written on the Duke of Buckingham? Richard seizes control of the stage from line one and never relinquishes it. Perversely, after the interminable chaos of the reign of Henry VI, the omnipresence of Richard III is a reassuring, terrifying constant.

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Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from *3 Henry VI* are from the Pelican Shakespeare edition of the text, published by Penguin Books (cited above).