INTRODUCTION

Henry VI: the reign and the plays

> Far better it were to loose a piece of right,
> Than limbs and life in sousing for the same.
> William Baldwin, 'Richard Plantagenet', 155–6, in *The Mirror for Magistrates*, 1559[1]

Thus was the principality posted over sometimes to Henry, sometimes to Edward, according to the sway of the party prevailing: ambition and disdain still casting faggots on the fire whereby the heat of hatred gathered the greater force, to the consumption of the peers and the destruction of the people.

Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 1587[2]

THE PROMISED END?

The opening shot of Jane Howell's 1983 television version of *3 Henry VI* is a close-up of a wounded corpse, the disposition of the body suggesting the dead Christ, a kind of *pietà*. The camera then withdraws, revealing that this corpse is but one of a whole heap of corpses. There is, it turns out, no transfiguration, only a holocaust. Spectators or readers coming to *3 Henry VI* after their experience of the first two parts of the play may, justly perhaps, be expecting an ending that is a conclusion, a redemptive or tragic vision to set against their overall experience of political duplicity and martial carnage. They will not, however, find it: just a relentless demonstration of political degradation as the turbulent warlords who rule England destroy what is left of the commonweal.[3] Horror, moral horror, rather than Aristotelian 'terror' might be the appropriate reaction. *1 Henry VI* concentrated on war, war between England and France. *2 Henry VI* focussed on the extinction of justice and equity by political intrigue and popular rebellion.[4] The struggle continues, but, given the absence of monarchical power and authority in *3 Henry VI*, 'rebellion' does not seem to be an appropriate label for the cause of the Yorkists. What we have instead is ritualised anarchy. As Francis Bacon wrote, 'For many a man's strength is in opposition, and, when that faileth, he groweth out of use.'[5] The 'case of truth'[6] has dissolved, the opposing

[1] *Mirror*, p. 190; 'sousing' means swooping (like a hawk) or striking blows.
[2] Holinshed, p. 301.
[3] Judith Hinchcliffe, *King Henry VI, Parts 1, 2, and 3*, Garland Shakespeare Bibliographies, 1986, provides an annotated survey of criticism. For a bibliographical essay, see Edward Berry, 'Twentieth-century Shakespeare criticism: the histories', in Stanley Wells (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, 1986, pp. 249–56. For other plays of the period dealing with the iniquities of civil war see Michael Hattaway (ed.), *1H6*, 1990, p. 33 n.; for an eloquent passage from Holinshed against the iniquities of the English peers for unleashing civil war, see Appendix 1, p. 210.
[4] See Michael Hattaway (ed.), *2H6*, 1991, pp. 14–17.
[5] W. A. Wright (ed.), *Bacon's Essays*, 1865, 'Of faction', p. 208.
[6] *1H6* 2.4.2.

1 Henry VI (artist unknown)

rights of York and Lancaster have been suppressed, suppressed by a struggle of might that serves only to establish men in positions of power.

This last play depicts the consequences of that primal act of faction-forming that occurred in the Temple Garden in 2.4 of *Part 1*, and, like the first play in the sequence, it concentrates on battles: the play moves from slaughter to slaughter on the battlefield – and elsewhere. In its first scene Henry declares that the very Parliament House, filled with bloodstained warriors, has become a

'shambles' (1.1.71) or butcher's shop: the motif of butchery is ironically echoed in Henry's lines to Gloucester, his murderer, as he faces him in his prison cell:

> So first the harmless sheep doth yield his fleece
> And next his throat unto the butcher's knife. (5.6.8–9)

Edward's last line, the last line of the play, 'For here, I hope, begins our lasting joy', expresses a wish and not a certainty.

Between opening and close Shakespeare fills the bulk of his chronicle history with the representation of four battles: Wakefield where York was butchered, Towton where Henry was given his emblematic vision of the horrors of internecine conflict, Barnet where Warwick was slain, and Tewkesbury where the Lancastrians were finally defeated. Is there anything of a theodicy here, a justification of the ways of God to man, or is it rather a story of what Yeats called 'blind ambitions, untoward accidents, and capricious passions'?[1] There are some signs that in *3 Henry VI* Shakespeare was laying down markers that were to be taken up in *Richard III* where the intrigue and murder goes on, although in another (Senecan) dramatic mode.[2] Does the play depict a divided kingdom or, by implication at least, the agonised throes of a society fatally divided between monarchy and aristocracy? Does the play demonstrate that royal prerogative is mere fiction, necessarily subject, to use a term from Holinshed, to 'imbeciling' by the nobles?[3] It is up to a critic or director to find transfiguration – if that can be done.

Rather than beginning with a description of the 'transgressions against history'[4] of which Shakespeare has been deemed to be guilty in his Henry VI plays – his account, that is, of the period from the funeral of Henry V in 1422 to the murder of Henry VI in 1471 and the ransoming of Queen Margaret in 1475 – or a rehearsal of arguments over what parts of the plays Shakespeare may or may not have written,[5] let us consider what might have drawn him to this complicated chapter in the history of fifteenth-century England. Complicated it is, and so it was inevitable that its very wealth of incident led the dramatist to begin his career as a writer of 'history plays' by concentrating as much on actions and their outcomes as on personalities and their motives: he could not avoid investigating politics and the secular as well as morality and the theological.

Unlike the reigns of Henry V and Richard III, that of Henry VI was not dominated by the personality of its monarch – Edward IV's rule during the last years of Henry's 'reign' is stark evidence of this. Rather it was a period of war

[1] 'At Stratford-on-Avon' (1901), in *Essays and Introductions*, 1961, pp. 106–7.
[2] See Dominique Goy-Blanquet, *Le Roi mis à nu*, 1986, pp. 366–79.
[3] Holinshed, p. 272; for a succinct discussion of the debate over the royal prerogative in Tudor times, see G. R. Elton, *The Tudor Constitution*, 1960, pp. 17–20.
[4] Theobald, IV, 390 n.
[5] The play is first attributed to Shakespeare in the Pavier Quarto of 1619 (see Textual analysis, p. 201). The evidence summarised in Wells and Taylor, *Textual Companion*, p. 112, does little to dislodge the tradition that the play is by Shakespeare.

between nations (the Hundred Years War) and within the kingdom (the Wars of the Roses). It was also a time of dynastic strife which manifested itself in both aristocratic factionalism and popular insurrection, a sequence of contests between allegiance to the monarchy and alliance among peers. Shakespeare offered to the playhouse audiences of sixteenth-century London a deliberate rearrangement of historical events into dramatic themes. For this reason, therefore, the plays are best regarded not simply as 'adapted history' or as vehicles for dramatic biography but as a set of complex essays on the *politics* of the mid-fifteenth century – essays which, of course, also offer reflections on Shakespeare's own times. For it was only after he had in this way learned to convert chronicle into political analysis that he turned to the kind of history that thrusts personality out into the foreground of the action: *Richard II, Henry IV*, and *Henry V* were written after the Henry VI plays and *Richard III*. The great sequence of studies of the history and politics of England was not composed in the order of the chronology of her Plantagenet rulers.

THE LOSS OF FRANCE AND THE WARS OF THE ROSES

Henry VI came to the throne as a nine-months-old infant in 1422,[1] and, while he was a minor, England was ruled through a council, his uncle 'good' Duke Humphrey of Gloucester being Protector. Henry's reign began with some military success: John Talbot, first Earl of Shrewsbury, displayed conspicuous heroism on the field of battle, and the champion of the French, Joan, la Pucelle, was overthrown and burned alive (*1 Henry VI* 5.3–4). However, by 1453 the French territory won back for England by virtue of his father Henry V's heroic victory at Agincourt in 1415 (*Henry V* 4.1–8) had been recovered for the French by their king Charles VII, Henry VI's maternal uncle.

In *1 Henry VI*, Shakespeare moved from the funeral of Henry V through to the marriage of his son. He took us through a sequence of battles – at Orléans (*1 Henry VI* 1.2 ff.), Rouen, and Bordeaux (3.2 ff. and 4.2 ff.) – which led to a truce which was called at Tours in 1444 (5.4) and which centred on a politic marriage for Henry (arranged with an eye to his own benefit by the Earl of Suffolk) with Margaret of Anjou, a cousin to King Charles. Although *1 Henry VI* thus ended, unhistorically, with success for the English, Shakespeare demonstrated *en route* that the empire had been irremediably weakened and that this was principally caused by internal sedition.

Part 1, therefore, constituted a historical prologue, a demonstration of the way in which the Hundred Years War affected the Wars of the Roses, which are dramatised in *Parts 2* and *3*. The title of the 'bad Quarto' of *Part 2, The First Part of the Contention betwixt the two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster*, therefore,

[1] Ralph Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI*, 1981, offers a modern history of the reign; see also K. B. McFarlane, *England in the Fifteenth Century*, 1982. W. G. Boswell-Stone, *Shakespeare's Holinshed, the Chronicle and the Historical Plays Compared*, 1896, reprints passages from the sources in the order Shakespeare deployed them; Peter Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings*, 1977, offers a modern account of the dramatic chronicle provided by Shakespeare.

2 Edward IV (artist unknown)

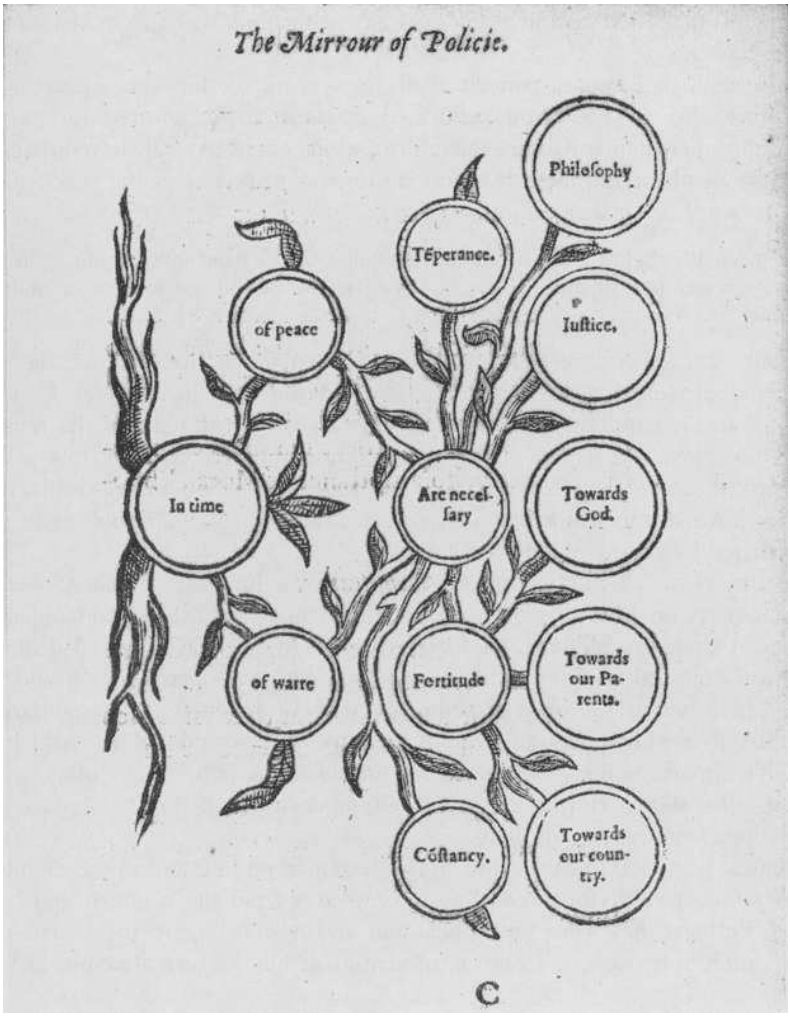
need not suggest that Shakespeare might have begun writing his sequence with the second play, but simply that he was following Holinshed, who clearly announced his intention of attending to happenings in England after he had completed his account of the Treaty of Tours:

Whilst the wars between the two nations of England and France ceased . . . the minds of men were not so quiet, but that such as were bent to malicious revenge sought to compass their prepensed purpose, not against foreign foes and enemies of their country, but against their own countrymen and those that had deserved very well of the commonwealth.[1]

The coronation, in 1445, of Margaret of Anjou as Queen of England marks the beginning of *2 Henry VI*. That play concentrated largely on the conspiracy of Buckingham, Somerset, and Cardinal Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester, to take power from Humphrey of Gloucester, Protector of the kingdom and father-figure to the king, and on the civil tumult of the Wars of the Roses. These had begun when Henry's cousin Richard, third Duke of York, laid claim to the throne. The claim was based on the grounds that York was the maternal great-great-grandson of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, third son of Edward III (1327–77), whereas Henry was great-grandson of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, the fourth son.[2] York chose as his badge a white rose, while the Lancastrians, led by York's enemy Somerset, wore red roses (*1 Henry VI* 2.4). (Henry VI's claim was further weakened by the fact that his grandfather Henry IV – 'Bullingbrook' – was commonly held to have usurped the throne and murdered the childless Richard II in 1400.) Moreover, rebellion broke out in Ireland, and York, who was assigned to put it down, took the opportunity to make his army serve his own ambition (*2 Henry VI* 3.1), winning the first battle of St Albans on 22 May 1455. This is depicted in the final sequence of *2 Henry VI*.

Part 3 begins when Henry is compelled to acknowledge York as heir apparent to the crown (1.1),[3] but York is defeated and savagely killed at the battle of Wakefield two months later (1.3–4), a battle in which the barbarous Clifford played a prominent part on the Lancastrian side. The Yorkists were defeated again at the second battle of St Albans in February 1461 (2.1), but the Lancastrians then withdrew north while York's eldest son Edward was proclaimed as King Edward IV in London. The next month Edward marched northwards and won the battle of Towton, which established him on the throne (2.3–6),[4] and Henry took refuge in Scotland (his wife and son going into exile in France) until he was captured (3.1). He was imprisoned in the Tower (3.2) from 1465 until 1470 when he was restored to the throne by the 'kingmaker', Earl of Warwick (4.2 and 4.6). Warwick had been enraged by the news that Edward, 'taking counsel of his own desire',[5] had made an impolitic marriage with the widow Elizabeth, Lady Grey (3.2) while Warwick was abroad negotiating for the hand of a French princess for the new king. In April 1471, after losing the battle of Barnet, in which Warwick was killed (5.2–3), Henry fell into the hands of Edward again, and Queen Margaret was defeated by Edward's younger brother

[1] Holinshed, p. 210.
[2] See the genealogical table, pp. 224–7.
[3] Historically this happened on 24 October 1460, but the play fuses the events of 1455 with this political capitulation by King Henry five years later.
[4] The famous scene (*3H6* 2.5) in which the king sees a father who has killed his son and a son who has killed his father is fictitious.
[5] Hall, p. 366.



3 Kingly ideals. Engraving from the anonymous translation of G. de la Perrière, *The Mirror of Policy*, 1598

Richard of Gloucester at the battle of Tewkesbury the next month (5.4–5). Henry was recommitted to the Tower, where, on the night of Edward's return, he was murdered (5.6) – it is supposed by Gloucester.[1] The sequence ends with a brief appearance by Edward's baby son, later Edward V, who, along

[1] Contemporaries suspected that the murder was done at the behest of Edward: see A. B. Hinds (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Milan*, 1912, 1, 157. Modern historians do not doubt that Henry died violently, possibly by order of Edward, but not necessarily at the hands of Richard of Gloucester (see Griffiths, p. 892).

with his brother Richard and at Gloucester's instigation, was also to be murdered in the Tower.[1]

The reign, then, was a pattern of disorder, a mirror for Shakespeare's contemporaries of the disastrous effect of dynastic strife, centred on personal ambition rather than any desire for reform, which could so easily have broken out upon the death of Elizabeth. Francis Bacon was to rejoice at the succession of King James, fearing that without it:

> after Queen Elizabeth's decease, there must follow in England nothing but confusions, interreigns, and perturbations of estate, likely far to exceed the ancient calamities of Lancaster and York.[2]

Not only were there 'vertical' divisions between the noble factions: the reign witnessed division between the populace and the élite in the Jack Cade rebellion.[3] In his handling of this event, Shakespeare suggested that the rebellion could be construed as an attempt at revolution rather than as just a riot,[4] although the text also demonstrates the way in which political conflagration occurred when the horizontal divisions manifest in popular discontent were exacerbated by aristocratic dissension.[5]

To dramatise all this was massively ambitious, innovative – there were no popular plays on English history before the Armada in 1588 – and potentially radical. A dramatic sequence as long as this must also have created distinctive theatrical conventions – as modern revivals have demonstrated. It would have been expensive to perform in sequence without recourse to a standardised repertory style with some uniformity in costumes and with doubling – which may itself have made telling political comments on the action. These plays are not vehicles for star performers – although modern actors have amassed great reputations from playing in them.

Political plays fell out of favour in the Jacobean period, and in the eighteenth century the plays disappeared almost completely from the canon of performed works. Perhaps they were too radical and anti-establishment; the female characters, moreover, were not objects of sentiment but seekers after power.[6] The

[1] See *R3* 4.3; Richard III, of course, was to be defeated and killed by Queen Elizabeth's Tudor grandfather, Henry VII, at the battle of Bosworth in 1485, so uniting the white rose with the red.
[2] *The Beginning of the History of Great Britain*, in James Spedding, R. L. Ellis and D. D. Heath (eds.), *Works*, 15 vols., 1857–74, VI, 276–7.
[3] See *2H6* 4.2–3, 5–9.
[4] See Hattaway (ed.), *2H6*, pp. 21–34.
[5] For an account of the military power of aristocratic magnates in the 1590s, see J. A. Sharpe, *Early Modern England: A Social History, 1550–1760*, 1987, p. 160.
[6] So we read in the introduction to Bell's *Edition of Shakespeare's Plays*, 1774: 'National transactions, however important they may be in their nature and consequences, are not likely to have a very popular effect, as they tend chiefly to indulge political reflection, but have very little to gratify taste. Such pieces as this are also very barren of female characters and affecting circumstances, without which the drama is too defective. Shakespeare has herein adhered to facts, and maintained just preservation of character, without producing one striking scene: it is not therefore to be recommended for representation' (VII, 89).

nineteenth century found them unsuited for performance with the naturalistic sets that were in vogue – and perhaps their analysis of empire was too extreme. In our own times literary critics have found them disappointingly based on narrative rather than significant structure, lacking both psychologically complex characters and the kind of verbal density that Shakespeare was to attain in his later plays. But this is to ignore the particular theatrical qualities – bold dramatic patterns, strong theatrical rhythms, the cumulative effects of deeply etched stage images – that modern directors have found in them, and their tough-minded anatomy of the political nation of England.

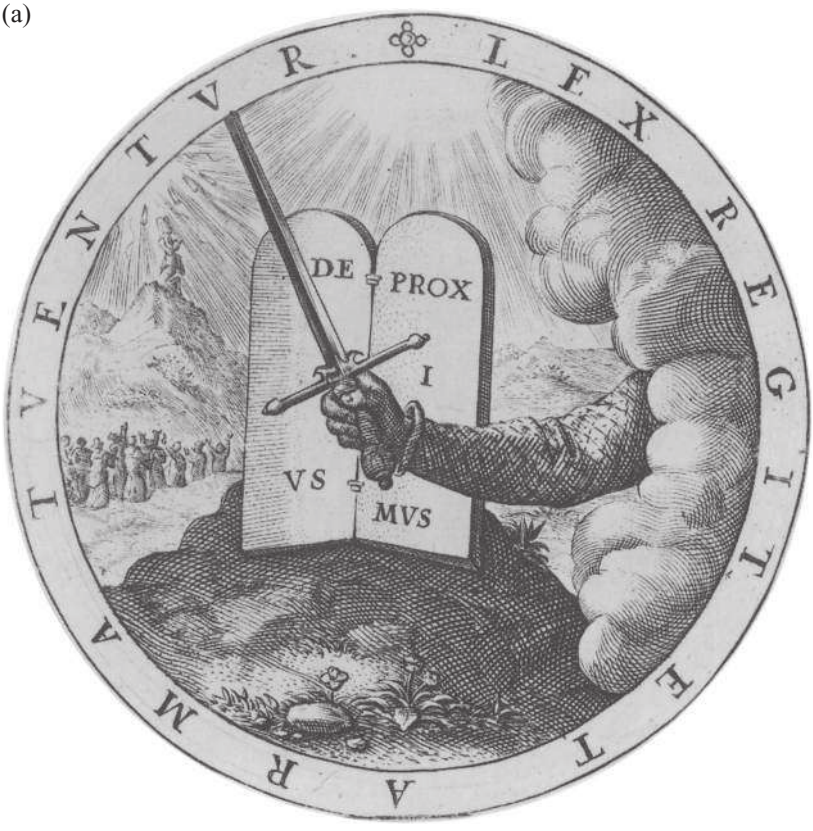
The play: 'what should be the meaning of all those foughten fields?'[1]

Part 3 will always be remembered for its scenes of death: those of the children Rutland[2] and Prince Edward, that of York,[3] those of the arch-enemies Clifford and Warwick the kingmaker, and that, finally, of King Henry. It may be that Shakespeare had in mind the chronicles of the falls of great men recorded in *The Mirror for Magistrates* – figures from the period of the Wars of the Roses count for about half the *exempla* found in the 1559 edition – but Shakespeare's treatment of their 'tragedies' is generally more complicated than that of William Baldwin and his collaborators.[4] As he has done throughout the sequence, Shakespeare explores not just the moral but the political dimensions of these noble lives. For despite the way that many die with a quotation or rhetorical figure on their lips, thus turning event into occasion, image into moral emblem, they may be simply cheering themselves up, dramatising themselves *in extremis* in a way that is not categorically different from the way their political antagonists had disguised their true motives under rhetorical shows of honour or compassion. A political theme is announced in the second line of the play's second scene when Edward claims to be best at 'playing the orator': the proverbial phrase will be repeated on two other occasions.[5] Rhetoric was traditionally distrusted: in this play eloquence, like prowess in battle, is always seen as a means to power and, as we have hinted, a way of giving understanding at least to an audience exposed, through spectacle, to what is almost intolerable.

Part 2 of the sequence was much concerned with trials: significantly the word 'trial' does not appear in *Part 3*, which is largely a succession of battles that stem

[1] Holinshed, p. 273; compare Appendix 1, p. 210.
[2] See plate 11, p. 37.
[3] York's death scene was obviously celebrated and probably suggested the title of the octavo version of the play *The True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York*. It is unlikely, however, that Shakespeare would have accorded the play this title, given that Richard dies in its first act (compare Textual analysis, p. 201 below). It was from this scene that Greene recalled the line 'O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide' (1.4.137).
[4] The title of Tragedy 13, for example, reads 'How Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, was slain through his over-rash boldness, and his son, the Earl of Rutland, for his lack of valiance' (*Mirror*, p. 182). Baldwin ascribes the fact that it was a headless arrow that killed Clifford to divine justice (p. 195), and holds Henry responsible for his own misfortunes by virtue of his betrayal of Duke Humphrey (p. 218).
[5] 2.2.43, 3.2.188.

(a)



4 (a and b) Two emblems from George Wither, *A Collection of Emblems Aucient and Modern*, 1635, pp. 3 and 163. The mottoes on 4a read 'The law reigns and arms protect' and 'God is close[st]', on 4b 'By laws and arms'. Their implications are explored in Ernst H. Kantorowicz, 'On transformations of Apolline Ethics', *Selected Studies*, 1965, 399–408

from feuds. Ethical systems have been suppressed by political mechanisms of the crudest variety. In 2.4 and 2.6, for example, where we see the last fight and the death of Clifford, Shakespeare departs from the chroniclers who report that Warwick 'remitted the vengeance and punishment [for his brother's death[1]] to God'.[2] A few lines thereafter we read of the death of Clifford, shot through the neck by 'an arrow without a head': it is at least implied by Holinshed that his death is no accident but an act of divine retribution.[3] Shakespeare, however, has Clifford confront his Yorkist adversary Richard of Gloucester, and thereby

[1] See 2.3.14–15.
[2] Hall, p. 255; Holinshed, p. 277.
[3] The text of Holinshed offers a marginal comment, 'Cruelty paid with sudden mischief' (p. 277); for other examples of these sardonic marginalia see Hattaway (ed.), *2H6*, pp. 31–2. Many were probably written by the antiquary Abraham Fleming (1552?–1607), whose name often appears in the margins.