

**The Accessible *Henry VI*: A New Adaptation**

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## I. Introduction

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To say that Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays are among the least popular is no exaggeration. Indeed, they "have prompted much more scholarship than admiration," and were "esteemed so little that until fairly recent times" they were "virtually excluded from the canon."<sup>1</sup> Though the plays have enjoyed a small renaissance in recent years, to this day they remain "the plays least performed outside of England."<sup>2</sup> Many factors are to blame for the *Henry VI* trilogy's lackluster reputation: some are inclined to dismiss it as the unwieldy work of a young writer, while others find the lack of definitive authorship troubling, and others still find them overtly offensive in places (Shakespeare's less than flattering portrayal of Joan of Arc is one such instance of cultural and religious insensitivity). However, the almost universal reluctance to perform these plays also stems from the fact that unlike many of Shakespeare's other 'standalone' histories – *Henry V*, for instance – the *Henry VI* plays can be nearly impossible to follow when viewed individually (a problem which is exponentially magnified once one leaves the British Isles and must perform for an audience unacquainted with Medieval English history; this may account for the fact that they are the least performed plays specifically *outside* of England)<sup>3</sup>. Though all three parts of *Henry VI* follow an individual plot arc of some variety, they are essentially co-dependent works, relying on the viewer's basic understanding of the Wars of the Roses – an understanding which has not been commonplace even in England, let alone anywhere else, for hundreds of years – to make sense. All subplots and secondary narratives aside, the central conflict (the contest between the Houses of York and Lancaster for the throne of England), is unceremoniously divided into thirds.

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<sup>1</sup> Herschel Baker, "Henry VI, Parts 1, 2 and 3," in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 623.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hampton-Reeves and Carol Chillington Rutter, *The Henry VI plays* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

This may leave an audience feeling bewildered and unsatisfied. It stands to reason, then, that few theatre companies are willing to risk their patronage on plays with so uncertain a chance of success.

This is not to say that the unwieldy *Henry VI* trilogy is without merit. The trilogy has a number of notable strengths. Perhaps most importantly, it spans nearly thirty years of English history – and while Shakespeare was less than meticulous in his attention to historical accuracy, the *Henry VI* plays still present in a remarkably coherent and engaging manner the convoluted Wars of the Roses, an epic conflict usually beyond the layperson's ken. The dramatic events of the *Henry VI* trilogy are no less riveting than those of the *Henry IV-Henry V* cycle (though they are, admittedly, rather less efficiently presented). Despite much scholastic criticism and widespread doubts as to the true authorship of the plays – Part 1 in particular – there is, as in every other piece of work attributed to Shakespeare, an abundance of eloquent and poignant language which demands performance. Additional, more specific reasons abound: *2 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI* provide us with an intriguing origin story for one of the Bard's greatest villains, *Richard III*, and the trilogy as a whole features some of Shakespeare's strongest, most striking female characters (namely, Joan, Eleanor, Elizabeth Woodville, and of course Queen Margaret). The plays' harshest critics argue that their virtues are not nearly enough to outweigh their flaws. Fortunately, however, some scholars are more forgiving, and in recent years these peculiar plays have not been ignored as thoroughly as in the past.

In recent decades (i. e., in the last fifty years or so), a considerable number of enterprising theatres have risen to the challenge presented by the problematic *Henry VI* plays. In order to

avoid fragmenting the plot, a number of companies have chosen to mount all three plays at once. Parts 1, 2, and 3 have been presented in rotating repertory, have been condensed into two plays, and have undergone a number of creative cuts in order to be marketable to a theatre-going audience. However, these mammoth productions, most often mounted by theatrical giants such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, are both expensive to produce and taxing for an audience to watch, generally being (in total) much longer than “the norm of two or three hours” which “has been one of the most durable conventions of the Western theater”<sup>4</sup> since the days of Shakespeare himself. These “theatrical marathons”<sup>5</sup> provide a unique experience, but their demands are daunting, and it is only an exceptionally well-staffed and well-funded theatre that may even consider producing one in the first place.

Unfortunately, these requirements – demanding of audience and company alike – leave a wide gap in the viewership of the *Henry VI* trilogy. There are two principal groups which, because of the limitations of the plays in their current, various forms, are denied access to them: companies with a fraction of the RSC’s budget and resources, and viewers unwilling or unable to sit through six to nine hours of theatre. The *Henry VI* cycle will remain predominantly inaccessible until an adaptation of more reasonable length and production requirements is available. This is the ultimate goal of the ‘accessible’ *Henry VI*: to condense all three parts of William Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* trilogy into one play, which can be performed in the same amount of time, using the same amount of resources, as any of Shakespeare’s other individual works.

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Kalb, *Great Lengths: Seven Works of Marathon Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

There is, of course, an accompanying caveat: one must endeavor to make the *Henry VI* trilogy more widely performable and accessible *without compromising the integrity of the original works*. The *Henry VI* plays are certainly worth performing, and though it presents a considerable challenge, I believe it is possible to condense them in such a way that the merits of the works are preserved, while some of the more problematic elements are reduced or removed. This endeavor presents, in fact, a unique opportunity: to exhibit the most exemplary aspects of the *Henry VI* plays and create a more performable script which does not suffer from the same shortcomings responsible for the plays' original fall from popularity. It is a challenging project, to be sure, but when one considers the possibility of a free-standing, readily operative *Henry VI*, the risk of wasted time and effort seems small by comparison.

## II. History of the Text

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The textual history of the *Henry VI* trilogy is so disjointed and bewildering that it has given rise to a "staggering mass of inference, interpretation, and conjecture."<sup>6</sup> Theories abound to explain discrepancies between the Quarto, Octavo and Folio editions of the two latter texts, and to explain the many mysteries behind the text of Part 1, which appears only in the First Folio (and of course the subsequent Folios). The plays are in a way scattered and disorganized, each one covering enormous amounts of time and drawing historical information from varied and often conflicting sources. What, then, can be learned from a cursory exploration of the texts? While deeper research may be ambiguous in its results, the pursuit is not a pointless one. A thorough knowledge of the text is necessary if one is to attempt something as radical as the

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<sup>6</sup> Baker, "Henry VI," 624.

abridgement and combination of all three plays. If the use of a whimsical metaphor is permitted, one must find a recipe and the recommended ingredients before one begins to bake a cake.

### ***1 Henry VI***

All three parts of *Henry VI* were printed in the 1623 Folio – and the Folio is what is most commonly consulted by scholars and thespians, even though Parts 2 and 3 were printed in earlier Quartos and Octavos, each under a different name.<sup>7</sup> For *1 Henry VI*, “generally the least admired,”<sup>8</sup> the Folio text is all that we have to examine, besides a few oblique references to early performances of the piece. Though there it is impossible to be entirely certain, the ‘publication’ and first performance of Part 1 probably occurred in 1592, this Part “generally assumed to be the ‘harey the vi’ performed at the Rose Theatre” in March of that year, “marked as ‘ne’ – new? – by proprietor Philip Henslowe.”<sup>9</sup> However, while this and other references support the notion that the play was performed in 1592 and therefore must have been written shortly before, the Folio text tells us little else (at least, little else that is definite or even probable). Inconsistent spellings and other disparities suggest collaboration or co-authorship, and many have been suspicious enough to suggest that *1 Henry VI* is partly plagiarism of Robert Greene or George Peele or Christopher Marlowe, or not Shakespeare’s work at all. However, his touch and style are detectable in a number of key scenes, including “the rose-plucking scene in the second act and the moving dialogue of Talbot and his son in the fourth-act battle” – scenes identified as the work of Shakespeare’s pen not only by Shakespearean scholars, but also by computerized tests in

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Bate, “Introduction,” in *The RSC Shakespeare, Henry VI: Parts I, II and III* (New York: Modern Library, 2012), xix.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Bate, ed., and Eric Rasmussen, ed., *The RSC Shakespeare, Henry VI: Parts I, II and III* (New York: Modern Library, 2012), 3.

more recent years.<sup>10</sup> Easier to identify than the likely multiple authors of Part 1 are the sources. The truly ‘historical’ elements of *1 Henry VI* were apparently gathered from a wide variety of sources, including but not limited to the 1587 edition of Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, Richard Fabyan’s 1559 *Chronicle*, and Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*.<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare, it would seem, consulted so many different works so as to be able to take what he liked or needed from one account or another and weave together a new patchwork history. However, in some instances, he chose to simply invent his own history, as in the legendary but alas, entirely fictional Temple Garden scene (Act II, Scene 4). This variegated and imaginative history makes it difficult to identify precisely the historical span of the play, but it is safe enough to estimate that Part 1 corresponds roughly to the years between the death of Henry V in August 1422 through the confirmation of Henry VI’s impending marriage to Margaret of Anjou, sometime late in 1443 or early in 1444.<sup>12</sup> *1 Henry VI*, then, covers at least the first twenty years of the titular monarch’s life. It is perhaps not surprising that this particular play is long and rather clumsily assembled. The Wars of the Roses did not truly begin until at least ten years later, with the First Battle of St. Albans. Part 1, it would seem, is the least relevant of the three to the telling of that particular story. That being said, if one is to avoid alienating a modern audience which is less historically astute than Shakespeare’s own audience might have been, it cannot be entirely dismissed. The origins of the conflict to be so grandly played out in Parts 2 and 3 reside in the Part 1 – where France is lost, York’s ambition blossoms, and perhaps most fatally, Margaret of Anjou is chosen by the impulsive Earl of Suffolk as Henry’s future Queen.

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<sup>10</sup> Bate, “Introduction,” x.

<sup>11</sup> Baker, “Henry VI,” 624.

<sup>12</sup> Alison Weir, *The Wars of the Roses* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), 106.



## 2 *Henry VI* and 3 *Henry VI*

What we now know as Parts 2 and 3 of the *Henry VI* cycle were originally printed under different titles, “Part 2 as *The First Part of the Contention betwixt the two famous Houses of Yorke and Lancaster* (1594) and Part 3 as *The true Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke...* (1595).”<sup>13</sup> For this and other supporting reasons – the connecting story arc chief among them – the prevailing opinion among modern scholars is that Parts 2 and 3 were originally intended to compose one Wars of the Roses tragedy and were lumped together with what we now know as Part 1 with the publication of the 1623 Folio.<sup>14</sup>

Part 2 was likely first performed in 1591. A short version was published in a 1594 Quarto, apparently a reconstruction of a playing version rather than an authorial version.<sup>15</sup> There is also a persistent question as to whether the version found in the later Folio was copied from an earlier version of the play, as it bears some of the same signs of collaboration as Part 1. The Folio version of Part 2 remains the version most commonly used, thanks in part to the familiar touch of Hemings and Condell, but the Quarto edition is occasionally consulted, especially in matters of staging.<sup>16</sup> The sources of Part 2 seem to be less widely varied than those of Part 1, relying heavily on Grafton and John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* as well as both Hall and Holinshed, though the latter had less influence here than in any of Shakespeare’s other plays.<sup>17</sup> Though it is, as always, difficult to pinpoint the exact dates, 2 *Henry VI* covers the historical events from King Henry VI’s marriage to Margaret of Anjou in 1445 to the First Battle of St. Albans, on 22 May 1455.<sup>18</sup> This First Battle of St. Albans is commonly regarded as the start of

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<sup>13</sup> Baker, “Henry VI,” 623.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Bate, *The RSC Shakespeare*, 110

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Bate, *The RSC Shakespeare*, 109.

<sup>18</sup> Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, 198-203.

the actual warring of the Wars of the Roses, which supports the theory that *2 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI* were originally intended to tell two halves of that same story.

Part 3's origin story is no less obscure than that of its supposed predecessors (though it is worth pointing out that Part 1 was almost certainly written after Parts 2 and 3, not unlike the lackluster *Star Wars* prequels). Like *2 Henry VI*, *3 Henry VI* was probably written in 1591 – or a little earlier – as York's accusation that Margaret is a “tiger's heart wrapt in a woman's hide”<sup>19</sup> was parodied in a pamphlet entered for publication in September of 1592.<sup>20</sup> Part 3 draws from many of the same historical sources as Parts 1 and 2, though it is more consistently faithful to Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and York* and the second edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles*. Like *2 Henry VI*, a reconstruction of a playing version of Part 3 was published – first in a 1595 Octavo, and then again in a Quarto of 1600 – before being printed together with the rest of the trilogy in the 1619 Folio.<sup>21</sup> Even with three different texts to examine, it is difficult to determine whether linguistic differences are signs of collaboration/co-authorship or simply the result of multiple revisions and the fact that there was no standardized spelling in Shakespeare's day. Part 3 presents the least difficulty in terms of establishing a timeline, though; after the First Battle of St. Albans that ended Part 2, the military events of the Wars of the Roses were better documented and offer modern scholars an opportunity to better determine the span of Part 3. *3 Henry VI* picks up almost exactly where *2 Henry VI* left off, in the late spring of 1455, and according to the (sometimes fancifully reimagined) events of the play, ends just after Richard III's alleged murder of Henry VI, on or around 22 May 1471.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Part 3 dramatizes the last sixteen years of Henry VI's life. This is less time than the rambling

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<sup>19</sup> Act I, Scene 4, line 577.

<sup>20</sup> Bate, *The RSC Shakespeare*, 231.

<sup>21</sup> Baker, “Henry VI,” 624.

<sup>22</sup> Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, 414.

coverage of Part 1, but about 50% more than the range of Part 2. This probably accounts in part for the predominant critical opinion that *2 Henry VI*, of all three Parts, is the ‘best.’ It is certainly the most concise; but as to ‘best’ – such a distinction cannot be mathematically measured, and therefore we must treat all three parts as equally important, and endeavor to preserve the best and most vital pieces from each. If we are both discerning and selective in the process, we may hope for a combined *Henry VI* that is at once shorter and more historically comprehensive (paradoxical though such a phrase may seem) than any of the three parts presented individually.

### III. History of the Plays in Performance

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The *Henry VI* plays, unaltered, are justifiably unpopular. Even today they are rarely performed, and when they are it is usually as “high profile and audacious experiments, spreading several hours of history over a number of settings.”<sup>23</sup> While this may sound appealing to a very particular kind of theatregoer and to a production company with the means to mount something so ambitious, it hardly makes for universally accessible theatre. Indeed, as I have already briefly mentioned, these plays are still among the least performed in Shakespeare’s canon outside of England. This is possibly because the plays are so thoroughly *English* – so English, in fact, that Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter go so far as to argue that “the plays’ main character is England itself,”<sup>24</sup> – and so English that they don’t hold much appeal for an international audience. Aside from a few festival performances in the US and Canada, they are almost criminally neglected.<sup>25</sup> This, however, does not mean that there is a dearth of performances to

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<sup>23</sup> Karen Brown and Peter Kirwan, “In Performance: The RSC and Beyond,” in *The RSC Shakespeare, Henry VI: Parts I, II and III* (New York: Modern Library, 2012), 351.

<sup>24</sup> Stuart Hampton-Reeves and Carol Chillington Rutter, *The Henry VI plays* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, “In Performance,” 355.

study for the sake of research. The bulk of significant productions in recent years have been mounted by such theatrical behemoths as the Royal Shakespeare Company, but it is in our best interest to examine a wider range of data and so we will be as comprehensive as possible, despite how little we know of early performances of the *Henry VI* trilogy.

### Individual Performance

An ongoing dilemma regarding the *Henry VI* plays is “whether they are best approached as a trilogy or as three single plays.”<sup>26</sup> Though hardly the most innovative idea, producing the plays as individual works has not been the prevailing tactic since the sixteenth century. Part 1 is possibly synonymous with the ‘harey the vj’ referenced by Philip Henslowe in 1592, while the Elizabethan equivalent of Part III, *The True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York* was performed by the Earl of Pembroke’s Men around or before the same time, according to the 1595 Octavo.<sup>27</sup> As we have already discussed, it is commonly agreed that Part 2 and Part 3 were staged first, with Part 1 appearing later as a kind of prequel. Regardless of what happened immediately following the plays’ publication, the first performances of which there is a definite record (rather than oblique references culled from various pamphlets and reviews) didn’t occur until 1680 at the Lincoln’s Inn Theatre.<sup>28</sup> The plays then went on to appear again individually at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1889 to general success, though Oswald Tearle’s production of *I Henry VI* took great liberties with the text, making massive cuts and notably overhauling Shakespeare’s scathing portrayal of Joan of Arc.<sup>29</sup> Ten years later F. R. Benson mounted Part 2 by itself, and shortly thereafter this became the most frequently performed individual piece of the trilogy – possibly

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<sup>26</sup> Hampton-Reeves, *The Henry VI plays*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, “In Performance,” 351.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 353-4

because it is the most traditional in its structure.<sup>30</sup> In 1906 Benson went on to be the first to stage all three parts of the trilogy separately, with some questionable cuts reminiscent of Tearle's 1889 production of Part 1, but after that the plays didn't appear again at Stratford until the founding of the modern RSC.<sup>31</sup> Not until the 1970s did truly significant independent productions surface again, this time at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, when all three parts were staged in succession, "as individual plays without cross-casting."<sup>32</sup> Some liberties were taken, though, even with these productions: the beginning of Part 3 was borrowed as the ending of Part 2, which, according to Alan C. Dessen, destroyed Part 2's horrific cliff-hanger effect.<sup>33</sup> In 1983, Jane Howell directed the trilogy and *Richard III* for the BBC/Time Life television series, where they were enormously well-received and surprisingly lauded as the best of the series (as well as the least traditional).<sup>34</sup> Eleven years later Katie Mitchell notably staged Part 3 by itself, as an artistic expression of "her experience visiting the war-torn country of the former Yugoslavia,"<sup>35</sup> after which performance the plays gained some popularity as theatrical metaphors for modern civil war. This increasing political relevance and the success of the RSC's 2006-08 Histories Cycle inspired a revival of sorts for the *Henry VI* plays as individual works, and though the productions were still largely confined to festivals, some smaller companies also began to try their luck with Shakespeare's most difficult histories.<sup>36</sup> However, the production of single plays from the *Henry VI* collection is still rare. Perhaps inspired by the epic sagas of the RSC of the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 356

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Hampton-Reeves, *The Henry VI plays*, 8-11.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, "In Performance," 361.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 358

1960s and '80s,<sup>37</sup> companies across the English-speaking world have begun to explore the *Henry VI* cycle in a less piecemeal manner.

### The Two-Part Adaptation

Ignoring for a moment the playwright's (or possibly *playwrights* ') original intentions regarding the last two thirds of the *Henry VI* cycle, we can give credit for the first two-part adaption to Thomas Crowne, who mounted the Lincoln Inn Theatre production of 1680. This two-part format – and there are many incarnations of it – remains the most popular, even today.<sup>38</sup> Crowne's early production enjoyed considerable success, but it was ultimately doomed by its mastermind's ideological contention with the Roman Catholic Church, which at the time was in the process of being partially reconciled with the English monarchy.<sup>39</sup> Unsurprisingly, it didn't take long for the two-part format to resurface, and in the eighteenth century Theophilus Cibber attempted to combine parts of the *Henry VI* trilogy with *Richard III*. The end result was awkward and disjointed, and "his text is unlikely to have been performed more than once."<sup>40</sup> However, the idea of marrying *Henry VI* to *Richard III* wasn't dead, and in 1923 Robert Atkins' production at the Old Vic presented a two-part adaptation of *Henry VI* in conjunction with *Richard III*.<sup>41</sup> This was an improvement on the Cibber model but only a minor one – the end result was still unwieldy and overwhelming. This didn't, of course, stop Stuart Vaughn from trying the same thing for the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1970, where, as per usual, the Duke of York "provided the strongest through-line for the play."<sup>42</sup> In 1963 the trilogy was re-edited and re-

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<sup>37</sup> Hampton-Reeves, *The Henry VI plays*, 54.

<sup>38</sup> Brown, "In Performance," 352

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>40</sup> Hampton-Reeves, *The Henry VI plays*, 24.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, "In Performance," 355.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 356

written by Peter Hall, to be performed as two plays, titled *Henry VI* and *Edward IV*, respectively, and performed alongside *Richard III* once again. Adrian Noble would repeat almost exactly the same steps in 1988. Both Hall's and Noble's adaptations were day-long, marathon events "in which the actors' commitment [was] matched by that of the audience."<sup>43</sup> The same setup appeared again when the English Shakespeare Company toured *The Wars of the Roses* under Michael Bogdanov's direction – the *Henry VI* trilogy was once again split into two parts, this time called *House of Lancaster* and *House of York*.<sup>44</sup> In 2001 another Hall – Edward Hall – introduced a radical new two-part adaptation called *Rose Rage* for the Propellor, which reduced the trilogy to a kind of slasher black comedy that "pointed to the futility and cruelty of the almost casual violence."<sup>45</sup> This wide array of adaptations suggests that not only is the two-part play idea the most popular, but that it also might be the most versatile. Indeed, it seems a compromise between the equally daunting logistical nightmares of trying to present all three plays together or each of the three plays individually. While some two-part adaptations have had resounding success, others have not been so lucky,<sup>46</sup> and it seems that no one has yet perfected the formula. It is possible – probable, in fact – that no perfect formula exists. Just as every production of *King Lear* or *Macbeth* will differ from every other production of the same plays, every adaption of *Henry VI* will be unique, depending on the intentions and skill of the adapter. A two-part production allows for mobility and brevity at once. However, I assert that to serve a specific purpose – namely, to make the *Henry VI* trilogy as widely accessible as possible – a one-play adaption might be even more effective.

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Billington, quoted in Brown, "In Performance," 360.

<sup>44</sup> Hampton-Reeves, *The Henry VI plays*, 134.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, "In Performance," 358.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

## The One Play Idea

Though certainly the most unpopular option for the *Henry VI* trilogy in production, the idea of condensing all three parts into one play is not exactly new. John Merivale was the first to attempt it, in 1817, as a vehicle for actor Edmund Kean, who played the titular *Richard, Duke of York*. However, Merivale's endeavor was ill-fated. The play ended with Richard's death and eliminated so many key characters and events that audiences were largely unsatisfied.<sup>47</sup> Similar problems have plagued other attempts at significantly reducing the script, and it must be now acknowledged that it is impossible to extract one play from three without leaving a great wealth of material abandoned. How then, does an adapter choose what is kept and what is cut? This, of course, depends upon the end-goal: if one intends, as Merivale did, to tell only the story of the Duke of York, then closing with York's death in the first act of Part 3 is perfectly sensible. But this leaves the Wars of the Roses unconcluded. Richard Plantagenet is dead, yes, but his campaign to seize the throne for the House of York is far from over. It is perhaps more effective to approach the one play idea with the intention of telling as much of the story as possible, as succinctly as possible. Sacrifices, of course, will have to be made – but this is acceptable, so long as the strength of the story remains.

Why is an adaptation of this kind necessary? In the *Introduction* I have already presented my basic argument, but it begs embellishment. Simply put, the *Henry VI* trilogy tells a tremendous story, but it is, in its unaltered state, almost impossible to produce, except under remarkable circumstances. A one-play Wars of the Roses – no longer or more difficult to produce than any of Shakespeare's other, free-standing histories – would make *Henry VI*

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



available to every theatrical echelon, and therefore to every size and type of audience. To achieve this end, a new adaptation is necessary.

#### **IV. The Adaptation Process**

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In attempting to condense the *Henry VI* trilogy into one comprehensible, performable, producible play, myriad factors must be taken into consideration. It is hardly so simple as keeping the good and cutting the bad, or leafing through the scripts and eliminating line by line what isn't absolutely essential to the audience's (and, just as importantly, the *actors'*) understanding of the story and the history behind it. Though a comprehensive list of 'items considered' in the adaptation process would likely exceed the length of this paper, there are several 'deciding factors,' for lack of a more appropriate term, should be discussed. Among them are the major themes of the trilogy, the structure, and the central conflict.

##### **i. Major Themes**

It would be foolhardy to attempt any new adaptation of the *Henry VI* trilogy without first exploring the major themes of the plays – individually and as three parts of a whole. Perhaps the most effective method is to identify the themes presented in each part and then isolate those which appear repeatedly – it seems an overly simple method at first glance, but when one is undertaking to condense three plays into one, efficiency is often as important as thoroughness. It is the goal, then, to present themes common to all three *Henry VI* plays as effectively and succinctly as possible.

## Noble Discord

The most obvious theme of the *Henry VI* trilogy is the idea of civil discord; without the constant infighting amongst the English peers, many of the tragedies of the Wars of the Roses could have been avoided or reduced. Arguably, Shakespeare's *Henry VI* is a didactic piece of theatre, warning against the dangers of domestic disagreement. The Wars of the Roses were, ultimately, *civil* wars – or rather, a “series of dynastic civil wars whose violence and civil strife”<sup>48</sup> led to an untimely loss of empire. The sources of the conflict are comparatively small (jealousy, money, political power), while the losses are great (life, land, sovereignty). This particular ‘theme’ of squabbling nobility requires very little external interpretation, as it is so often discussed by the characters themselves – who, despite their ability to identify the problem, seem oddly powerless to fix it. The most outspoken denunciation of the nobles’ bickering comes in *1 Henry VI*, Act IV, Scene 4, from Sir William Lucy, sent as an emissary between the two most prominent figures in the never-ending courtly contention: York and Somerset. Lucy’s accusations are bold, but not unfounded, when he declares that “The fraud of England, not the force of France,”<sup>49</sup> is responsible for Talbot’s death and the inevitable loss of England’s French territories. The quarrel between York and Somerset looks trivial, but it quickly snowballs out of control. The origins (not historically, but in Shakespeare’s plays) can be found in the iconic Temple-Garden scene, when York and Somerset have their first real dispute, over a “certain question in the law”<sup>50</sup> which is never really specified. The fight continues through the wars in France, where because of York and Somerset’s inability to cooperate, Talbot and his son are slain. A hasty peace is concluded as the result of so many Christian deaths, and many of

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<sup>48</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s. v. “The Wars of the Roses,” accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/509963/Wars-of-the-Roses>

<sup>49</sup> *1 Henry VI*, Act IV, Scene 4, lines 2122-23

<sup>50</sup> *1 Henry VI*, Act IV, Scene 1, line 1860

England's French territories are lost. This loss, an indirect consequence of York and Somerset's discord, is the breaking point for the tenuous peace between the peers.

Gloucester is the next to suffer from the English courtiers' inability to cooperate, and his murder in *2 Henry VI* is not entirely unlike Talbot's untimely death in Part 1. Here is another theme to go hand-in-hand with the peers' disharmony: the deaths of innocents. Talbot is a noble soldier, the Duke of Gloucester as innocent "as is the sucking lamb or harmless dove"<sup>51</sup> (at least, according to King Henry). Neither of them are condemned to die for their faults, or even suffer for their own mistakes, but are more like collateral damage – they die as a result of the other peers' ambition, disagreements and misdeeds. These are not isolated incidents: the deaths of innocents are dramatized in *3 Henry VI* as well as the first two parts, with the death of York's young son Rutland in Act I, Scene 3 and again with the parallel death of Prince Edward in Act V, Scene 5. (Indeed, the scenarios are so eerily similar that the dead boys are described in virtually identical terms: a messenger laments the demise of "sweet young Rutland,"<sup>52</sup> while Margaret curses Edward IV and his brothers from bringing about the death of her "sweet young prince."<sup>53</sup>) These similarities are not coincidental – it is therefore advisable that in any adaptation they be preserved as much as possible. We must assume, in making cuts to Shakespeare's text, that anything he took the time to write more than once is important.

Returning for a moment to the idea of noble discord before we move on to the pervasive theme of violence (touched upon in the previous paragraph), it is necessary to discuss the lack of

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<sup>51</sup> *2 Henry VI*, Act III, Scene 1, line 1349

<sup>52</sup> *3 Henry VI*, Act II, Scene 1, line 690

<sup>53</sup> *3 Henry VI*, Act V, Scene 5, line 2967

loyalty amongst the warring factions of the *Henry VI* cycle. Historically nearly everyone of significance quickly took sides in the York-Lancaster conflict. However, the lack of true loyalty is astonishing. The near-constant switching of alliances doesn't begin in earnest until *2Henry VI*, but it is presaged in Part 1 with the Duke of Burgundy's fatal shift in allegiance from Henry VI to the French Dauphin Charles in Act III, Scene 3. He is persuaded by Joan la Pucelle in a little less than forty lines to defect back to France, leaving her to utter the almost comical aside, "Done like a Frenchman: turn, and turn again!"<sup>54</sup> But this act of abandoning alliances is hardly reserved for the (in Shakespeare's depiction) fickle French. To some degree in Part 2 but almost constantly throughout Part 3, major players in the royal conflict change sides: the Duke of Clarence and the Earl of Warwick are the most repetitive and significant offenders, respectively. Clarence turns on his elder brother only to turn back again, and Warwick, embarrassed by Edward IV's decision to marry Lady Grey despite previous overtures to Lewis XI's sister Bona, joins with his arch-enemy Queen Margaret in less time than it took the Duke of Burgundy to be swayed away from Henry by Joan la Pucelle two plays previously. Of course, all of these wavering loyalties are difficult to keep track of with the text of all three plays available – it would be lunacy to attempt to preserve them in their entirety in a shorter adaptation. However, the changeability of the English peers is important, and must be retained somewhere. The ideal scene to convey the capricious politics of the time seems to be Act III, Scene 3 of *3 Henry VI*, when Warwick's staunch support of the Yorkist cause is changed in an instant by the arrival of a nuptial announcement from Edward IV. So long as this scene is kept essentially intact, some of the other, less significant transgressions can afford to be cut. The idea that loyalties may change at the drop of a hat remains. However, one cannot draw attention to the dearth of loyalty without

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<sup>54</sup> *1 Henry VI*, Act III, Scene 3, line 1695.

also addressing the reason for such flighty alliances. And here emerges another theme: that of personal gain over national welfare. With the possible exception of the Duke of Gloucester – depending on the cynicism of the audience and how sympathetic the actor’s portrayal – not a single significant character in the *Henry VI* trilogy consistently acts with the welfare of the nation at heart. Personal desires and vendettas almost always interfere. Suffolk’s feelings for Margaret persuade him to make her England’s queen, despite her “little worth.”<sup>55</sup> In a similar moment of lecherous weakness, Edward IV marries Lady Grey despite Warwick’s planned overtures to Lady Bona.<sup>56</sup> But these characters are prone to such selfish errors. What is more surprising than this is the innocent King Henry’s own inability to make decisions with the good of his nation in mind. A usually sympathetic (though impotent) character, Henry’s apparent lack of inclination to do what’s best for England is alarming, when he declares that he would rather plunge his people into civil war than yield his crown to York:

**Henry VI:**

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;  
Ay, and their colours, often borne in France,  
And now in England to our heart’s great sorrow,  
Shall be my winding-sheet...

--3 *Henry VI*, Act I, Scene 1, lines 131-136

This sort of selfish action is common in the *Henry VI* trilogy, and contributes greatly to the political discord of the English court. Exeter’s remarks at the end of *1 Henry VI*’s Act IV, Scene 1 serve best to summarize the condition of the factious ruling body:

**Duke of Exeter:**

But howsoe’er, no simple man that sees  
This jarring discord of nobility,

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<sup>55</sup> *1 Henry VI*, Act V, Scene 3, line 2619.

<sup>56</sup> *3 Henry VI*, Act III, Scene 2.

This shouldering of each other in the court,  
 This factious bandying of their favourites,  
 But that it doth presage some ill event.  
 'Tis much when sceptres are in children's hands;  
 But more when envy breeds unkind division;  
 There comes the rain, there begins confusion.  
 --lines 1956-1963

This petty quarrelling and self-promotion cannot be lost in the process of condensing the three plays into one. There are a thousand possible combinations of scenes and lines to keep and to discard, so long as the theme remains intact. It is my opinion that the most crucial scenes to preserve are the previously mentioned scene between Warwick, Lewis XI and Lady Bona, the Temple-Garden scene and the following quarrel between Vernon and Basset,<sup>57</sup> as well as the series of scenes from Part 2 which sets up the mutiny against the Duke of Gloucester. Though it is regrettable that every inconstancy cannot be included, these few scenes present the most succinct and irrefutable evidence of the Lancastrian court's corruption.

### **Loss of Empire**

Henry VI's loss of his father's French territories is a point often harped upon by the other characters and courtiers. Beginning in *1 Henry VI* and continuing through Parts 2 and 3, English holdings in France are slowly forfeited and given up until there is very little left – indeed, by the time the Wars of the Roses were over, the only land that England still controlled in France immediately surrounded the port city of Calais.<sup>58</sup> Henry V, “too famous to live long,”<sup>59</sup> had earned the respect (and in many cases the fear) of both English and French subjects as a tyrant and a conqueror. Unfortunately, his son inherited none of his ferocious qualities, and was

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<sup>57</sup> *1 Henry VI*, Act 4, Scene 1.

<sup>58</sup> Weir, *Wars of the Roses*, 66.

<sup>59</sup> *1 Henry VI*, Act I, Scene 1, line 10.

regularly criticized – odd though it may seem – for his devotion to the Catholic Church (the authoritative theological body in England at the time, some hundred years prior to Henry VIII’s break with Rome).<sup>60</sup> His piety, though often praised by the people, is more often lamented by those who surround him, including – most vociferously – York and Margaret. The latter laments that he would have made a better churchman than a priest, that “all his mind is bent to holiness,”<sup>61</sup> and “his weapons holy saws of sacred writ.”<sup>62</sup> Beyond frustrating Margaret and long delaying the arrival of an heir (even after his marriage, Henry VI prized his chastity highly),<sup>63</sup> Henry’s holiness greatly handicapped him as a military leader, and doomed his attempts to carry on his father’s campaigns in France. According to Peter Saccio, “Henry V, strong-willed, immensely experienced, firmly governing a united country...had undertaken a task that, if possible at all, only he or someone like him could carry out.”<sup>64</sup> Whether Henry VI’s task was truly impossible or just difficult, the peers and queen are merciless in their criticism of him. However, their rancor is not entirely unreasonable. As the Duke of Gloucester – perhaps the mildest of those powerful people surrounding the king – reminds his comrades, many of them “received deep scars in France and Normandy,”<sup>65</sup> and the loss of that dearly-bought territory is not something they should quietly endure. York has perhaps the strongest reason to be upset by Henry’s loss of France and cavalier forfeiture of the territories belonging to Margaret’s father; by right of his birth, the kingdom is his. Even more afflictive than that is the fact that York, before England’s truce with Charles (enacted in *1 Henry VI*, Act V, Scene 4), had spent years and great

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<sup>60</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s. v. “Henry VIII,” accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/261947/Henry-VIII>.

<sup>61</sup> *2 Henry VI*, Act I, Scene 3, line 446.

<sup>62</sup> *2 Henry VI*, Act I, Scene 3, line 449.

<sup>63</sup> Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, 116.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Saccio, *Shakespeare’s English Kings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 113.

<sup>65</sup> *2 Henry VI*, Act I, Scene 1, line 94.

sums of his own money to keep the conquered parts of France under England's control.<sup>66</sup> It is no surprise, then, that York considers Henry's sacrifice of his lands in France an act of piracy:

**Richard Plantagenet:**

Anjou and Maine are given to the French;  
 Paris is lost; the state of Normandy  
 Stands on a tickle point, now they are gone:  
 Suffolk concluded on the articles,  
 The peers agreed, and Henry was well pleased  
 To change two dukedoms for a duke's fair daughter.  
 I cannot blame them all: what is't to them?  
 'Tis thine they give away, and not their own.  
 Pirates may make cheap pennyworths of their pillage  
 And purchase friends and give to courtezans,  
 Still revelling like lords till all be gone;  
 While as the owner of the goods  
 Weeps over them and wrings his hapless hands  
 And shakes his head and trembling stands aloof,  
 While all is shared and all is borne away,  
 Ready to starve and dare not touch his own:  
 So York must sit and fret and bite his tongue,  
 While his own lands are bargain'd for and sold.

--2 *Henry VI*, Act I, Scene 1, lines 226-243

Such animosity leads naturally to contention, and eventually violence. Henry VI's inability to hold onto the lands his father won is more than shameful – it is dangerous. The Yorkist peers take advantage of his weakness, while his own Lancastrian supporters are disgusted by it. This disgust extends even beyond Henry's shortcomings as a military tactician, for he exhibits the same passivity and cowardice when his claim to the throne is challenged. He is such a “faint-hearted and degenerate king”<sup>67</sup> that he is content to disinherit his son and transfer the crown to York if he will be permitted to enjoy his royal privilege for his own lifetime. So the idea of the loss of empire is twofold – as England loses its grip on France, the House of

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<sup>66</sup> Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, 105.

<sup>67</sup> 3 *Henry VI*, Act I, Scene I, line 92.



Lancaster loses its claim to the throne. Henry, “the only king of England to have been twice crowned, twice deposed, and twice buried,”<sup>68</sup> is a repeat offender. His constant failures, as a father, husband, friend and monarch, make enemies for him on every side, and it is not long before their bitterness turns to rage – and murder. All of these points must be touched upon to tell the story in its entirety.

### **Violence**

The *Henry VI* cycle is every bit as violent as Shakespeare’s bloodier tragedies (*Macbeth*, *Titus Andronicus*, etc.), if not even more so. However, what is even more alarming than the sheer scope of the violence (‘excursions’ of some sort or another precede almost half of the scenes) is the casual manner in which it is executed.<sup>69</sup> This cavalier bloodletting inspired Edward Hall’s aptly named adaptation, *Rose Rage*, which toured the UK in 2001 and focused on “the visual fascination with violence, drawing on schlock horror to offer a grimly humorous version of the play,” which included writhing bodies on butchers’ hooks and the use of uncomfortably, pungently real animal entrails in most of the murder scenes.<sup>70</sup> Mercifully, not every director is bold enough to emulate Tarantino when producing Shakespeare, and other approaches to the savagery of the *Henry VI* trilogy must be considered. Condensing the play provides an unprecedented opportunity to balance the amount of violence required to make a point with the amount of violence an average audience is willing to endure. Often, as Alan C. Dessen suggests, “Controlled use of onstage violence in the original scripts has... yielded to theatrical overkill.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Saccio, *Shakespeare’s English Kings*, 91.

<sup>69</sup> No pun intended.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, “In Performance,” 358.

<sup>71</sup> Alan C. Dessen, “Compressing *Henry VI*,” in *Rescripting Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 276.

In the world of Shakespeare's Wars of the Roses (and indeed, in the actual historical events) violence seems to be the answer to everything, and 'An eye for an eye' is nearly everyone's motto (the playwright himself included: consider the mirrored deaths of Rutland and Prince Edward, in *3 Henry VI*, Act I, Scene 3, and *3 Henry VI*, Act V, Scene 5, respectively). Murder is casual and excused by war, and at the end of Part 3, Edward IV's litany of defeated foes gives the viewer only the barest idea of the sheer number of casualties – noble and otherwise:

**Edward IV:**

Once more we sit in England's royal throne,  
 Re-purchased with the blood of enemies.  
 What valiant foeman, like to autumn's corn,  
 Have we mow'd down, in tops of all our pride!  
 Three Dukes of Somerset, threefold renown'd  
 For hardy and undoubted champion;  
 Two Cliffords, as the father and the son,  
 And two Northumberland; two braver men  
 Ne'er spurr'd their coursers at the trumpet's sound;  
 With them, the two brave bears, Warwick and Montague,  
 That in their chains fetter'd the kingly lion  
 And made the forest tremble when they roar'd.  
 Thus have we swept suspicion from our seat  
 And made our footstool of security.

--Act V, Scene 7, lines 3097-3109

It cannot be made plainer that the rewards of war and murder are tremendous. It is not so difficult, then, to see why the *Henry VI* plays feature as many battles and beheadings as they do. However, to today's audience, for whom casual decapitation is not commonplace, there is a limit to how much butchery is effective, and how much is excessive. How does one decide what to keep and what to cut? I think again that repetitive language and structure provide the best clues. What's most striking (or most disturbing) about the violence of the war-torn *Henry VI* plays is the high incidence of violence towards children. The first 'young' death we see is that of John

Talbot, son to the famous warrior of the same surname;<sup>72</sup> this is followed almost immediately by York's promise to kill Joan's unborn baby (whether the baby is real or a device used by Joan to avoid being burned at the stake is immaterial to the parallel).<sup>73</sup> This is an interesting parallel, but not even the most obvious one, for in Part 3, "the Lancastrians led by Clifford kill a Yorkist child (Rutland)" and "in Act V, the [Yorkists] do the same: the three brothers kill Prince Edward."<sup>74</sup> Empire is not the only thing lost in the Wars of the Roses; innocence is lost as well, either by committing violence or being victim to it (or in Prince Edward's case, both), the result of living in a state of near-constant war. This pattern of sacrificing the young seems also to suggest that the children of England are suffering for the transgressions of their progenitors, as well as reaping the rewards for their successes. Though Edward IV will take the throne on his father's behalf, Rutland will pay for his father's ambition with his life.

Another element of violence necessary to consider is the peculiar fluidity of aggression between the nobility and the commons. Though the core of the story has very little to do with the commons (as most political events did in the fifteenth century), the stark difference between the upper and working classes is impossible to ignore – especially when violence erupts between them. In the course of the *Henry VI* trilogy, it is easy to forget that the common people did have some influence, and that without their support a coup of any kind would have been impossible. Armies at the time were largely underpaid, if they were paid at all, and therefore the support of the common people was indispensable (especially in the later stages of the conflict, when Edward IV and Queen Margaret were vying for popular support of their respective rights to the

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<sup>72</sup> *1 Henry VI*, Act IV, Scene 7.

<sup>73</sup> *1 Henry VI*, Act V, Scene 4.

<sup>74</sup> Dessen, "Compressing *Henry VI*," 280-81.

throne).<sup>75</sup> This need for the support of the commons is perhaps best illustrated by the scene following Gloucester's murder in *2 Henry VI*, when the commons demand the immediate removal or death of the traitorous Duke of Suffolk, a message relayed to the king by the Earl of Salisbury:

**Earl of Salisbury:**

Dread lord, the commons send you word by me,  
 Unless Lord Suffolk straight be done to death,  
 Or banished fair England's territories,  
 Thy will by violence tear him from your palace  
 And torture him with grievous lingering death.  
 They say, by him the good Duke Humphrey died;  
 They say, in him they fear your highness' death.

--Act III, Scene 2, lines 1934-1940

The commons' influence is often overlooked, but it is imperative that it not be entirely ignored. This scene is, therefore, crucial. One might argue that the Cade rebellion is equally significant. However, the Cade rebellion (at least, Shakespeare's version of it) is a mercenary endeavor, rather than being born of public indignation. Cade is hired by York to start a common rebellion, and the rebellion is fueled by his ego and his followers' enthusiasm for opportunistic looting. (In fact, sacrilege though it may seem, in so short an adaptation as I have proposed, the Cade rebellion can be completely eliminated. This is equivalent to the surgical removal of a non-vital organ. Cade is interesting, yes, but not imperative to the progress of the overarching plot – but this will be further discussed in the following section on *The Central Conflict*.) It is evident in Suffolk's banishment and subsequent beheading by pirates<sup>76</sup> that the commons hold some sway over the much more powerful courtiers, and that violence between social classes is not out of the question. But this is not all that the aggressive action of the commons calls to mind. With

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<sup>75</sup> Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, 373-86.

<sup>76</sup> *2 Henry VI*, Act IV, Scene 1.

Suffolk's demise we glimpse the first truly dishonorable fall from grace to be suffered by a member of the gentry – and many more will follow. The action of the commons against the Duke of Suffolk shatters the illusion that privilege and safety go hand in hand. Henry VI himself further descants on this subject in his famous 'molehill' soliloquy of *3 Henry VI*, Act II, Scene 5:

**Henry VI:**

Gives not the hawthorn-bush a sweeter shade  
To shepherds looking on their silly sheep,  
Than doth a rich embroider'd canopy  
To kings that fear their subjects' treachery?  
--lines 1144-1147

Henry's conclusion is clear: in the "dangerous days" that Gloucester warned him of,<sup>77</sup> a powerful position is also a perilous one. It is a case of 'the bigger they are, the harder they fall,' and the willingness of the common people to lay violent hands on their social and political superiors only serves to emphasize this fact. Therefore, in the process of condensing the *Henry VI* trilogy, the mob mentality of the common people should be acknowledged.

**The Fatal Power of Women**

One of the many reasons it is such a deep loss that the *Henry VI* plays are not more often performed is that they feature some of Shakespeare's most formidable females: namely, Joan, Eleanor, the future Queen Elizabeth and Queen Margaret. Each of these exceptional women defies the expectations of their time by invading the predominantly masculine spheres of war and politics. However, Shakespeare was no feminist – at least not by today's definition – and when women have power in the *Henry VI* trilogy, it always comes with a price. In some cases it is not even conceivable for women to have power without occult assistance: in *1 Henry VI* Joan's

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<sup>77</sup> *2 Henry VI*, Act II, Scene II, line 1025.

seemingly divine power is in fact a result of consorting with the devil,<sup>78</sup> and in 2 *Henry VI* the situation is much the same – Duchess Eleanor’s ambition gets the better of her and she dabbles in black magic,<sup>79</sup> with devastating consequences. Joan’s ‘fiends,’ in the end, abandon her, despite her promises to pay them with her blood and body, and she and (possibly) her unborn baby are burned at the stake on York’s orders. Eleanor is framed by the Duke of Suffolk and subjected to public humiliation and exile. However, her ominous predictions all turn out to be accurate. She warns her husband of his impending downfall, and though her promise that the courtiers “have all lim’d bushes to betray [his] wings”<sup>80</sup> falls on deaf ears, it is not long before the Duke of Gloucester is murdered. Joan and Margaret are similarly prophetic, predicting, respectively, France’s battlefield triumphs and the eventual slaughter of Edward IV’s children (which does not actually happen until *Richard III*). The women’s wisdom is often ignored by the men, with fatal consequences. It seems almost that Shakespeare is making some sort of comment on the inferior position of women at the time; what’s less clear is what that comment is. These three women are powerful, yes, but still they are destined to be ignored or worse, their power will bring about their downfalls. Margaret offers the best opportunity for examination of this dichotomy. Of the *Henry VI* cycle’s three leading ladies, she is the most prominent and the most powerful. She is the de facto monarch of England – due to her husband’s weakness – a dynamic pointed out in scathing terms by Edward IV in Part 3 when he addresses her by saying, “You, that are king, though he do wear the crown.”<sup>81</sup> Her influence in the plays is as enormous as it was historically. Though she first set foot on English soil at the young age of fifteen, she quickly assumed

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<sup>78</sup> Act V, Scene 3.

<sup>79</sup> Act I, Scene 4.

<sup>80</sup> 2 *Henry VI*, Act II, Scene 4, line 1214.

<sup>81</sup> Act II, Scene 2, line 935.

leadership of the disjointed English government. Of Margaret's relationship with Henry, Alison Weir says she

"...quickly became the dominant partner in the marriage. She had energy and drive enough for two, and Henry accepted her tutelage without protest; he had, after all, been dominated since infancy by a succession of strong characters, and Margaret was another such...Margaret was in most respects the complete antithesis of Henry, and probably viewed his willingness to forgive his opponents as weakness. Instinctively, she began to shoulder his burdens and responsibilities, and he let her, being content to allow someone else to take the initiative."

--Alison Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, p. 118

Over the years she proved to be a strong-willed if impetuous leader, and a surprisingly capable military commander and strategist, all to the further emasculation of her husband. Nevertheless, she, like the rest, is doomed to a terrible fate. At the end of Part 3 she is forced to watch while her son is murdered, and then is, like Eleanor, exiled (though she does make an inexplicable and historically impossible reappearance on English soil in *Richard III*, when she levies another litany of prophetic curses on everyone in the vicinity).<sup>82</sup> The women of *Henry VI* are apparently being punished for their brief tastes of power, and Margaret is no exception. Shakespeare was evidently as afraid of a female agency as the other men of his time. It is a situation reminiscent of the previously mentioned perils of political power: the women are like the other courtiers. The greater their strength, the more terrible their destruction.

This is not the only power dynamic at play where the *Henry VI* women are concerned, and it would be remiss not to discuss the other kind of female power present in these plays: not political, but sexual. While certainly not among Shakespeare's sexiest plays (consider for comparison *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or even *Hamlet*), the *Henry VI* cycle is not without its lascivious moments. Joan is the first female to make a significant

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<sup>82</sup> *Richard III*, Act I, Scene 3 and Act IV, Scene 4.

appearance, and she is a virtual personification of the virgin/whore dichotomy, as evident in her final scene with York. Though she is lauded as a maid and virgin by her French compatriots (and was certainly celebrated as such by the people of France), in her final scene onstage her unspecified liaisons with the devil are revealed, and when York and Warrick threaten to burn her at the stake, she confesses to being pregnant (despite having claimed purity and virginity only a few lines before) and accuses three different men of fatherhood. York seems to be speaking for the playwright and possibly the common population of England when he condemns her for her indiscretion:

**Richard Plantagenet:**

Why, here's a girl! I think she knows not well,  
There were so many whom she may accuse.

...

And yet, forsooth, she is a virgin pure.  
Strumpet, thy words condemn thy brat and thee:  
Use no entreaty, for it is in vain.

--*I Henry VI*, Act V, Scene 4, lines 2751-52 and 2753-56

Joan's sexual freedom is, undoubtedly, partly what condemns her to death (though, of course, this depends entirely on whether her pregnancy is taken as truth rather than a desperate attempt to save herself from a particularly horrible execution). Women with power, it would seem, are unforgivable, and the nature of that power does not matter much. This is not an isolated incident. Margaret, too, is a sexual deviant by the religious standards of the time, and appears almost immediately "after Joan's death as if her spirit has been resurrected to plague the English throne."<sup>83</sup> Though not probably historically accurate, Shakespeare's Margaret is quite clearly having an affair with the Duke of Suffolk, in much the same way that Joan appears to be having an affair with Charles. In reality, "when Suffolk met Margaret he was forty-eight and she

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<sup>83</sup> Brown, "In Performance," 376.



fifteen,” and though “he was kindly and avuncular, and made no secret of his admiration,” it is extremely unlikely that there was actually any intimate relationship between them.<sup>84</sup> This, of course, did not stop Margaret’s many detractors (apparently including Shakespeare) from accusing her of having extramarital affairs with Suffolk, Somerset, and an imaginative array of other people. In fact, after making a public bid for the crown, York and Warwick launched several nation-wide smear campaigns which questioned Prince Edward’s paternity.<sup>85</sup> This allegation, though almost certainly false, seems more plausible in the world of Shakespeare’s play. The Duke of Suffolk and Margaret are obviously on intimate terms, and even after his death Margaret is prone to referring to Prince Edward as “my son” rather than ‘our son’ in King Henry’s presence.<sup>86</sup> Prince Edward as the child of Suffolk and Margaret rather than Margaret and Henry is plausible interpretation, and one that makes the murder of the young prince slightly reminiscent of the execution of the pregnant Joan. In Shakespeare’s Lancastrian England, the children of women whose sexuality is largely undisciplined meet the same terrible fates as their mothers. But Margaret’s infidelity is hardly the extent of her sexual deviance. In a number of productions, notably Terry Hands’ 1977 production featuring a young Helen Mirren, “Margaret is less harridan than deviant sexpot, never more intimate and loving than when a murder is rising to its climax.”<sup>87</sup> After Suffolk’s death, Margaret spends several scenes carrying his severed head around in the basket (Another consequence of their lecherous liaison, perhaps?) and from that point forward her sexuality takes on a much bloodier quality, exhibiting itself in her sadistic triumph over the Duke of York. It is not entirely surprising that Shakespeare’s Margaret finds something arousing in acts of violence, nor that she is in some grotesque way attracted to her

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<sup>84</sup> Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, 123.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 237

<sup>86</sup> *3 Henry VI*, Act I, Scene 1, line 267.

<sup>87</sup> Carol A. Chillington, quoted in Brown, “In Performance,” 379.

arch-enemy, Richard Plantagenet. He is, after all, everything that the unsatisfying, childish Henry is not: “wealthy, respected, experienced in warfare and government, and already the father of a growing family with healthy sons.”<sup>88</sup> Margaret is, if nothing else, attracted to power – which, throughout the course of these three plays, both murder and the Duke of York provide – and the attraction is likely in some way sexual. It is at once baffling and entirely logical, and perhaps best explained by Oscar Wilde’s tongue-in-cheek but nevertheless accurate assertion that “Everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power.”

Joan and Margaret’s sexual indulgence undoubtedly plays a role in their respective downfalls. However, it is interesting to note that this problem is not entirely limited to the women. Edward IV, both historically and in Shakespeare’s plays, has even more sexual deviance to answer for than either Joan or Margaret. By the time he was in his mid-twenties he had achieved a reputation for seducing the wives, daughters and sisters of all his courtiers, and this seems to have been more than a myth, as venereal disease had “permanently undermined his health and constitution” by the time he was thirty.<sup>89</sup> Even more damaging than this, however, was his rash decision to break an arranged marriage between himself and Lewis XI’s sister-in-law, Bona of Savoy, by marrying in secret the widow Elizabeth Woodville, a commoner, and “only because she stoutly refused to become his concubine.”<sup>90</sup> This transgression results in both Lewis XI and Warwick defecting back to the Lancastrians, and further supports the notion that powerful women are also dangerous ones. Elizabeth Woodville, beautiful but also “calculating, ambitious, devious, greedy, ruthless and arrogant,”<sup>91</sup> was both. Though her and her royal

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<sup>88</sup> Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, 130.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>90</sup> Saccio, *Shakespeare’s English Kings*, 143.

<sup>91</sup> Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, 323.

husband's joint demise (and that of their children) isn't chronicled by Shakespeare until *Richard III*, it is promised by the defeated Queen Margaret at the end of Part 3, just after her own son is killed:

**Queen Margaret:**

You have no children, butchers! if you had,  
 The thought of them would have stirr'd up remorse:  
 But if you ever chance to have a child,  
 Look in his youth to have him so cut off  
 As, deathmen, you have rid this sweet young prince!  
 --Act V, Scene 5, lines 2961-2967

Here again, sex and female empowerment lead to disaster. Thus is the pattern of the *Henry VI* plays. It is unpalatable, perhaps, to a modern audience, but it must be acknowledged.

These themes – noble discord, loss of empire, violence, and the dangerous power of women – run throughout the *Henry VI* trilogy. Of course, it is impossible to keep every pertinent scene and line, but it would be fatal to any new adaptation to ignore them entirely. The squabbling of the courtiers, the loss of English territory in France, the unmitigated bloodshed of the wars and the prophetic, fatal power of the plays' women are all woven into the *Henry VI* tapestry. They ought to be preserved in whatever way contributes best to the telling of the story – and to determine what that best telling is, we must first isolate the *Central Conflict*, and then, finally, turn to *Structure*.

## **ii. Central Conflict**

Isolating the central conflict of the *Henry VI* trilogy proves to be simple. One might even argue that it would take more time to explain the essential plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, one of Shakespeare's shortest plays, than to explain the essential plot of the *Henry VI* cycle.

While a logline for *Midsummer* might read along the lines of, ‘When Hermia’s father forbids her to marry her lover Lysander, they flee from Athens, followed by Demetrius, Hermia’s would-be fiancé, and Helena, Hermia’s friend and Demetrius’ unrequited lover. Meanwhile, the king and queen of the fairies are at odds...’ and so on. *Henry VI*, on the other hand, can be more simply put: ‘The House of York and the House of Lancaster vie for the right to sit on England’s throne.’ Taking everything we have already discussed into account, this may seem overly simplistic. The Wars of the Roses – the events of which are almost perfectly contained within the *Henry VI* plays – were named for the drawn-out dispute between the Houses of York and Lancaster over who was the rightful king of England – Richard or Henry. It would logically follow, then, that the plays should focus on the same conflict. However, this particular conflict spanned almost thirty years of English history, and to make sense of it in three hours or less is no small challenge. Therefore, we must cut anything and everything that can possibly be cut. This is, in a way, tragic – but, as we are reminded by Dessen, “any compression of three event-filled plays...is going to necessitate major omissions and adjustments.”<sup>92</sup>

To approach the adaptation process from a position of ‘omission,’ however, is perhaps a poor way to do it. Instead, I propose a process of ‘addition,’ wherein one begins with a blank slate and adds the most important, most striking pieces from each play until some coherent story emerges. For this method to work, a linear approach is best. *I Henry VI*, as many scholars have been eager to point out, does not fit particularly well with Parts 2 and 3. The Wars of the Roses themselves do not begin until the Battle of St. Albans at the *end* of Part 2 – but the idea that Part 1 is completely useless is shortsighted and unfair: it is as vestigial to say that Part 1 is irrelevant

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<sup>92</sup> Dessen, “Compressing *Henry VI*,” 275.

as to say that the Civil War was about slavery. Slavery was one element of a much larger economic problem. Part 1 may be viewed in the same way – as one part of a larger whole – and from this perspective it assumes almost a cause/effect relationship with the other two parts. The Wars of the Roses are caused, in a large part, by the loss of English territories in France – and this loss occurs almost entirely in Part 1. Part 1 is also where the seeds of division are sown, in the Temple-Garden quarrel. So these are the two (major) elements which must be lifted from Part 1: the outcome of the wars with France, and the first moment of dissension in the Temple-Garden. Also vital is the introduction of Queen Margaret. The rest is – though not without value, especially to director and actors – expendable (which we will here take to mean *unnecessary for the audience's understanding of the basic plot*).

Choosing what to extract from Part 2 is more difficult. Part 2 sees very little military action when compared with Parts 1 and 3, and reads almost like a political thriller. Very little here is truly expendable, if we are to use the previously supplied definition of the word. Here we have Suffolk's rise to power and subsequent fall from it, Margaret's assumption of her role as de facto ruler of England, the murder of Gloucester, and Richard's fatal declaration of his right to the crown. All of these events must be kept – truncated and simplified, perhaps, but kept. One might argue that it is also necessary to preserve the Cade rebellion, but I disagree. In a longer, two- or three-part adaptation, Jack Cade's rebellion provides an interesting cultural perspective for an audience which is (we may assume) ignorant of the political climate of England in the fifteenth century. However, if we must keep within the constraints of a one-play adaptation, there simply is not time for it. York needs an army to aid in his attack on London – in the unabridged

version of the story, Cade supplies this army. In our much-reduced version, the “host of men”<sup>93</sup> given to York to quash the Irish rebellion will do just as well. If we can concede that Cade must be omitted, we are then free to elide 2 *Henry VI*, Act V, Scene 1, with 3 *Henry VI*, Act I, Scene 1. A few battle scenes are lost, but the sense of the conflict remains – and an average audience, devoid of medieval historians, will be none the wiser. Thus we may progress to Part 3.

Part 3, as discussed with the *History of the Text*, covers virtually all of the actual military conflict of the Wars of the Roses. Here also fall many of the decisive events of the trilogy – the murder of Rutland, the death of the Duke of York, the defeat of the Queen’s army and the murder of Prince Edward, the rise of Edward IV and ultimately the murder of King Henry in the Tower. Many of the minor skirmishes and such trifles as Clarence’s constant changing of sides can afford to be eliminated. A stronger, more streamlined story remains, and the audience no longer suffers from the *Game of Thrones* dilemma, wherein there are too many characters to ever keep track of properly. The simplest version of the story is the one we need for this kind of adaptation, and so it goes: due to the loss of France and disagreement between the peers, the Duke of York is provoked into challenging Henry VI for the crown. After a bloody struggle, the House of York emerges victorious, and Edward IV, destined to be a more successful king, assumes the throne. This, one might argue, is overly simple, but for an adaptation of this length to exist, one must simplify mercilessly. It is now appropriate to quote Alan C. Dessen again: “The many cuts and transpositions (along with the telescoping of disparate figures into one to economize on personnel) could be seen as the price-tag for mounting *Henry VI* at all.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> 2 *Henry VI*, Act III, Scene 1, line 1629.

<sup>94</sup> Dessen, “Compressing *Henry VI*,” 285.

Of course, one does not simply throw all of these ‘necessary elements’ together in a lump. If we are to reduce the *Henry VI* trilogy into one play, we must pay very close attention to *Structure*.

### iii. Structure

For myriad reasons, the *Henry VI* trilogy is difficult to categorize. Firstly, the plays must be considered individually, a difficulty in itself since the mysteries of their origin and scholarship are so unsolvable. However, several centuries after their appearance on the Elizabethan stage, scholars and academics responsible for their categorization have come to agree that they fit best under the umbrella of ‘history’ plays. This epithet is generous in a way – Shakespeare’s interpretation of the true events of the Wars of the Roses is *creative* at best, flagrantly erroneous at worst. In the process of adaptation, this reality should be taken into account. The *Henry VI* trilogy is nominally a series of history plays; however, ‘history’ cannot be lauded as the most important aspect of performance, as Shakespeare’s version of events is so frequently inaccurate. This leaves the adapter with a new conundrum: What, if not historical accuracy, ought to be the central structural strut of these plays in performance? I am not now discussing theme but rather *framework*. If we are to condense all three parts of *Henry VI* into one play, we must as much as possible preserve some Shakespearean structure in the interest of maintaining the integrity of the work. Since, as we have already discussed, the *Henry VI* trilogy can only be considered a true ‘history’ under the most lenient and generous guidelines, I propose that we instead treat our consolidated work as a tragedy. Indeed, if we are to define Richard, Duke of York and Margaret of Anjou as the two ‘protagonists’ of the story, we must consider it a twofold tragedy – where York plays the tragic hero, and Margaret the tragic villain.

First let us address our treatment of York as tragic hero. This is not, of course, a new idea. In fact, in the earliest records of performance, *3 Henry VI* is referred to as *The true Tragedie of Richard Duke of York*.<sup>95</sup> The Duke of York makes a convincing tragic hero – both Shakespeare’s incarnation of him and the historical man himself. According to Alison Weir, “In every respect York was “the perfect heir presumptive.”<sup>96</sup> The qualities which recommended him as a potential ruler of the British Isles also recommend him to assume the role of hero. In this case, of course, York is a tragic hero, by right of his untimely and gruesome death at Margaret’s hands in *3 Henry VI*. Shakespeare’s tragedies, according to Fredson Bowers of the *South Atlantic Review*, “are pyramidal in structure... That is, the play begins at some comparative point of rest either before or immediately after the start of the series of complications that is to comprise the main action.”<sup>97</sup> Bowers provides the example of *Romeo and Juliet*, where the ‘series of complications’ in question is the existing family feud between the Montagues and Capulets. In the *Henry VI* trilogy, the catalyzing event is remarkably similar: the ongoing power struggle between York and the Duke of Somerset depicted in the famous rose-plucking scene in the Temple-Garden.<sup>98</sup> This seems as good a place as any to begin – to introduce both the tragic hero of the *Henry VI* story and the central conflict (namely, the vindication and restoration of the House of York). York has all the qualities required for a tragic hero – he is noble, brave, martial, and at the outset of the story has no real goal except to restore his family’s name to its former glory. However, York is tragically flawed, as every tragic hero must be. In York’s case the flaw

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<sup>95</sup> Baker, “Henry VI,” 623.

<sup>96</sup> Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, 130.

<sup>97</sup> Fredson Bowers, “Climax and Protagonist in Shakespeare’s Dramatic Structure,” *South Atlantic Review* 47 (1982): 24.

<sup>98</sup> *I Henry VI*, Act II, Scene IV.



is ambition, exacerbated by poor treatment by the Lancastrian government who, despite his years of admirable service both in France and Ireland, “treated him as an enemy; and by their wholly unjustifiable slights against one who was a prince of the blood and premier magnate of the realm, they made him an enemy.”<sup>99</sup> York’s ‘personal’ plot arc follows what Bowers defines as heroic tragedy – the initial conflict is followed by a “turning point that will inevitably lead to the retribution in the catastrophe, or finale,” which is “the protagonist’s decision followed by the action that clinches this decision and thereupon makes the tragic ending not only inevitable but also acceptable to the audience as an act of justice.”<sup>100</sup> York’s point of no return, when the trilogy is viewed as a whole, falls in *2 Henry VI*, Act V, Scene 1, when York makes public his bid for the crown:

**Richard Plantagenet:**

How now! Is Somerset at liberty?  
 Then, York, unloose thy long-imprison’d thoughts,  
 And let thy tongue be equal with thy heart.  
 Shall I endure the sight of Somerset?  
 False king! Why hast thou broken faith with me,  
 Knowing how hardly I can brook abuse?  
 King did I call thee? no, thou art not king,  
 Not fit to govern and rule multitude,  
 Which darest not, no, nor canst not rule a traitor.  
 That head of thine doth not become a crown;  
 Thy hand is made to grasp a palmer’s staff,  
 And not to grace an awful princely sceptre.  
 That gold must round engirt these brows of mind,  
 Whose smile and frown, like to Achilles’ speak,  
 Is able with the change to kill and cure.  
 Here is a hand to hold a sceptre up  
 And with the same to act controlling law.  
 Give place: by heaven, thou shalt rule no more  
 O’er him whom heaven created for thy ruler.

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<sup>99</sup> Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, 136.

<sup>100</sup> Bowers, “Climax and Protagonist,” 25.

--lines 3070-3088

This outburst follows Bowers' assertion that the tragic 'turning-point' teeters on the fulcrum of "passion versus reason."<sup>101</sup> This decision, however emotional, is a necessarily *ethical* one; not enforced by any external circumstance, but made freely by the tragic hero. What follows is the unavoidable tragic demise – in York's case, death at the hands of the trilogy's tragic villain, Margaret, in *3 Henry VI*, Act I, Scene 4. This downfall is a direct result of York's rash decision on the field between Dartford and Blackheath, where he is indisputably "aware himself of the enormity of the act he is about to commit. It could lead to his death. It does."<sup>102</sup>

Margaret and York share a great number of qualities; the principal difference between them – at least, from a structural perspective – is Margaret's lack of moral scruples. While York's ambition is, in a way, noble, Margaret's is greedy and selfish (at least, in Shakespeare's version of the story). This marks her as a tragic villain rather than a tragic hero. According to Bowers:

In the usual villain-play after his initial crime, early-presented, the protagonist continues on his murderous course until he is tripped up and retribution follows in the catastrophe. Thus there is no ethical climactic moment of decision such as we find in regular Shakespearean tragedy.

--"Climax and Protagonist," p. 31

For our consideration Bowers suggests *Macbeth* – the murder of Duncan is not a climactic event, but only an early crime that will pave the way for further transgressions. So is the case with Queen Margaret; her wanton cruelty is seen first in *2 Henry VI*, Act III, Scene 1, when she urges the peers to lay violent hands on the innocent (though enviably powerful) Duke

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Hampton-Reeves, *The Henry VI plays*, 22.

of Gloucester. This crime is mimicked and embellished upon with the murders of Rutland and York in *3 Henry VI* (Act I, Scene 3 and Act I, Scene 4, respectively). The ‘retribution’ Bowers refers to arrives in *3 Henry VI*, Act V, Scene 5, with the powerfully familiar execution of Margaret’s own son, Prince Edward, at the hands of York’s vengeful offspring, an event she rather hypocritically declaims as the act of “Butchers and villains! bloody cannibals!”<sup>103</sup>

The dual tragedies of York and Margaret must of course, overlap. York’s ends with his death, Margaret’s with her exile and the death of her only son. However, the story is hardly over, even then, and two more important players must be recognized. The first of these is, of course, Henry VI himself. Henry VI, as we have discussed already, is poor material for a king and a protagonist and may – if we are to treat Margaret and York as our principal players – be regarded as collateral damage more than anything else. With York, Margaret and Prince Edward all gone, Henry VI is simply in the way. His murder in the Tower serves only to remove the final stumbling block before the House of York. Less passive and of greater structural importance (it is ironic but not incorrect to say that Henry VI has little to no effect on the outcome of any of the three plays named after him) is York’s eldest son, who upon his father’s death ascends the throne as Edward IV. In many respects, Edward IV can be equated with Edgar of *King Lear* – his is a subplot which eventually “forsakes a supportive role and becomes a crucial part of the main plot.”<sup>104</sup> Edward IV, “pragmatic, generous, witty and ruthless when the occasion demanded it,”<sup>105</sup> ruled England successfully and (mostly) with popular support for over twenty years. Though his reign would end in disaster – namely, the ascension of his murderous younger

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<sup>103</sup> *3 Henry VI*, Act V, Scene 5, line 2961.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>105</sup> Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, 293.

brother – his coronation prevents the trilogy from being entirely tragic. It is still, in essence, a tragedy, but like Edgar, or Richmond of *Richard III* or even *Hamlet*'s Fortinbras, Edward IV emerges at the end of the *Henry VI* trilogy as a hopeful figure. Whether or not Richard III, lurking in the background, is permitted to borrow an epilogue from the subsequent play depends, perhaps, on the optimism of the director – or the lack thereof.

Ultimately, the *Henry VI* cycle is best presented – if it is to be presented as a single, five-act play – as a tragedy. To accommodate this peculiar and particular project, one must consider two varieties of Shakespearean tragedy: that of the tragic hero, and that of the tragic villain. In the *Henry VI* canon we have both. In fact, one might go so far as to suggest that we are provided with two tragic heroes – York and Edward IV – and two equally formidable tragic villains – Queen Margaret and Richard III. This way, the Wars of the Roses are presented not only as history, but as didactic tale, a tragic lesson on the dangers that come hand in hand with power and ambition – a lesson which, in the modern political arena, we would do well to remember.

## V. Conclusion

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“*Henry VI* breaks all the rules.”<sup>106</sup> Hardly any of the long-standing conventions of dramatic criticism can be applied to the *Henry VI* cycle,<sup>107</sup> and this is perhaps the reason that it is so rarely approached, and even then, approached with trepidation. Still, despite the prevailing

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<sup>106</sup> Hampton-Reeves, *The Henry VI plays*, 18.

<sup>107</sup> Dessen, “Compressing *Henry VI*,” 166.

reservations of the literary and theatrical communities, the *Henry VI* plays are not without merit. Over the years, many theatre professionals have re-imagined and adapted and altered them, with a variety of end-goals in mind: social commentary, satire, or a six-hour history lesson. What hasn't been done yet – or at least, not effectively or with any popular success – is condensing the trilogy in such a way that it becomes practically available to every echelon of the theatre community. In recent years, comprehensive productions of *Henry VI* have been predominantly limited to companies on par with the RSC, monetarily and by reputation. However, there is no reason that some version of *Henry VI* should not be available to smaller, humbler theatres. To that end, it was my goal in adapting the *Henry VI* cycle yet again to condense all three parts into one play which can be performed in the same amount of time, with the same amount of resources, as any other individual work by Shakespeare. The process was complex, and has been only superficially outlined in the preceding pages.

When condensing or adapting any work of a similar length and cultural weight, there are myriad factors to consider. Plays which were written and first performed four hundred years ago provide a creative adapter with not only the text itself, but with centuries of previous alteration and interpretation to study. In this case it is especially difficult because nothing at all is certain – when the plays were written, in what order, and even by whom. We are left, then, with the text itself and the endeavors of previous directors, actors and adapters. For years thespians have been experimenting with the *Henry VI* cycle, and though it appears most popularly as a two-part event, it is not impossible to shorten it further and make it only one. But this must be done with careful attention to theme, plot and structure. The essential and the expendable must be separated, and textual sacrifices must be made in the interest of making a thirty-year conflict

comprehensible and *interesting* in three hours' run time or less. This is not a small task, but it is worth undertaking.

The *Henry VI* plays are among the most underappreciated, the most often overlooked. Their many shortcomings undoubtedly account for this: they are long, unwieldy, disjointed, and because of their (probable) multiple authorship, can have an almost patchwork appearance when presented together: a Shakespearean Frankenstein's monster. However, in spite of all this, *Henry VI* is worth performing. The *Henry VI* trilogy, apart from providing a truly uncommon overview of momentous events in European history, is a profound collection of theories and lessons on war, politics, family, feminism and power dynamics. With careful research and exploration of the text, I feel it is both possible and worthwhile to find a short form of this story which is comprehensible, enjoyable, and accessible – and preserves the integrity of the original trilogy. Though it is far from perfect, the first script of this variety was produced by UNC's LAB! Theatre in March of 2014, with ten actors, two directors, two chairs for a set and a budget of less than five hundred dollars. 'The Accessible *Henry VI*' is more than a pipe dream: it is a tangible, embryonic possibility.

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