Shakespeare as a Portable Guide to the Human Condition
Shakespeare as a Portable Guide to the Human Condition

By
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INTRODUCTION

The importance of William Shakespeare. William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is one of the most powerful and interesting English playwrights and poets. His work has been translated widely and continues to exercise a huge influence on writing throughout the world, as well as on educated opinion about the nature and importance of literature. He was the author of thirty-eight plays, 154 sonnets, and two long narrative pieces, as well as the fascinating short poem ‘The Phoenix and the Turtle.’ Anything you can do to put him in your pocket and live with him will base and center you, and make you feel briefly atop the world. Reading his work is as good as praying.

The life of William Shakespeare. William Shakespeare was born in the market town of Stratford-upon-Avon in April 1564. He was a real human being, conceived then laid out to dry. He was the son of John Shakespeare, an alderman and periodically successful glover who later in his career suffered considerable financial losses, failed to repay his debts, and became essentially a pariah in his village, although not entirely destitute. We gather that William was educated at the local school, close to his family home. (Ben Jonson later referred to him having ‘small Latin and less Greek,’ but Shakespeare was able to make very effective use of Latin historical sources in his work and, as any classicist knows, to find the sinews inside his English, hidden in the meat of history.)

Marriage and move to London. At eighteen Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, a lady eight years older than he, with whom he had three children. Subsequently he went to London, where he began what was to be a very successful career as an actor (1585–92); in fact, he parlayed that career into a role as a leading member of a popular acting company, known at different times as The Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Lord Hunsdon’s Men, and The King’s Men. The group eventually built the Globe Theatre, which was for some time a central venue for playgoers in London. He began his career as a playwright at some point in the late 1580s or early 1590s, writing comedies and history plays. His brilliance was soon recognized, and from comedies, in his early stage, he went on to write both tragedies and tragi-comedies. His subsequent professional life in London was dominated by the
theater. In 1613 he returned to Stratford-upon-Avon, where he spent his last years.

**The Works of Shakespeare**

**The Sonnets.** Lest they get mentioned last, Shakespeare’s sonnets require initial attention. Many of these splendid poems, all of which follow the formal sonnet rules of the time, and are thus formalized, break out from within their formalities to a passion rarely equaled in literature. A young man—is he an idealized lover, a homosexual partner?—is the object of many of the sonnets, as is the general theme, which the erotic issue reinforces, of the passing of what is beautiful and transitory.

**Drama.** The richness of Shakespeare’s dramas defies all summary—although we intend to try a wrap-around of his whole achievement, which would not be his if it did not aspire to make us replace him. One need only think of his tragedies *Hamlet, King Lear, or Othello*, his comedies *All’s Well that Ends Well, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, or A Comedy of Errors*, or of his unclassifiable plays, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream or The Tempest*—fantasy-comedy—to encompass a creative spirit which seems, as the adage of the time confirms, to have surpassed all rivals. To think of Shakespeare as a guy who wrote texts for classrooms is pretty off-base. The Bard of Avon wrote in a cutthroat theater atmosphere, was long interested in simply proving himself among his competitors, reading in texts which had promise for new plot lines, acting—for indeed he spent as much time acting in as writing plays, and, you guessed it, *writing plays*. His private life was pretty private, his financial life pretty disciplined and accretive, and his drama writing fluently part of the many other activities he undertook. It seems characteristic that Shakespeare had little interest in written texts, including his own, except as parts either of actions—getting the next script ready for the next performance—or of celebrations—the consistently moving sonnets to lovers and to the treacherous human condition. Shakespeare was a transactional writer, as dramatists tend to be, and implicitly awaits your response.

**The work and the grading system.** This book is a guide to the human condition, and as such it should be graded, like any true guide, which, in the travel realm, for instance, will tell you which destinations are the most picturesque and comfortable, which are polluted and expensive, and which will send you to Santa Monica instead of Akron. I have appended a grade mark to each play or poem discussed in the following analyses, and by this conventional means I have built an implicit aesthetic into this guidebook.
On the whole I subscribe to the view that beauty and depth belong to each other, in drama, and that the discovery of one is the discovery of the other. For me these were guiding perspectives in determining my value system and cockily ascribing marks. At some level I was thinking, as I went ahead, about what I would recommend to my kids or my buddies if I was sending them off into the world to read the Bard.

The work and the odd business of writing (and even just thinking about) the plays. I read that Shakespeare took little interest in his plays as writings. He was very active as a writer, but it seems his writing was very much an upside of his doing his writing, acting strenuously—acting is demanding of one’s energy, memory, self-awareness, even humor—and putting it out there as impresario and businessman, reading like mad for the next plot, and consulting. That makes you think so much on what kind of mind Shakespeare must have had, all insight and action, and doing and imagining at the same time. I think of Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* as an example of this kind of manic factory of perceptions and digestions, a *ferox* that consumed itself in telling itself what it and its world were.

The whole work that is made by being a real, productive dramatist. It’s not like being a poet or a novelist or an artist, because what you’re generating from your imagination is a tangible neuron-driven inner picture of the world you are living and that is living you. You are an actor in that world, and a being of the script for that actor. (A poet is all about the language in which he is being a poet for you; a novelist is about the imaginable world he can track out for you, gifting you supremely with the interesting and the tense and sometimes the inspiring. Neither of these guys acts the world with his body’s nervous energy the way the playwright does.) There’s a lot more to say, too, about reading a great play. Think of the distinctive set of mandates with which you must comply in order to embody the play’s script; thinking into it all that is given by stage directions, whispers and gestures and actings-out between speeches, all carried through by your own body doing the play. From curtain-rise on, with its ‘new dawn’ potential, you yourself are the physical presence of the play. Volatile you, sure as hell, and no wonder they wouldn’t bury you in consecrated ground.

The little matter of the direction you are going. Shakespeare was a busy entrepreneur as well as a voracious reader, a full-time playwright, and an actor. Did he have or develop a game plan? Let me replace my obviously amateur status by using what I’m reading right now. It’s a book about how Shakespeare acquired the knowledge of how to acquire the skill of talking
from inside the character. The process of acquisition can be traced by listening to the internal conversations held by Richard III, Richard II, and Brutus (in Julius Caesar) over a period of some seven years. How did Shakespeare acquire this skill? By practice, by doing it, by finding out the ways in which plot is enhanced by getting on the inside of it, from where it self-generates. By discovering, in the interplay of plot with thought in Hamlet (1600–1), an adequacy of role speech to story, which was at the same time a technical discovery, a way of discovering new angles of word processing from the brain. Shakespeare was in that process, when in fact his popularity seemed at its apex, on the brink of finding himself into many outbranching freshesses of his verbal power. King Lear, Macbeth, and Antony and Cleopatra were all around the corner, taking introspection into new challenging crises for protagonists to mull over. The creative advancement, to judge from an instance, of the interior monologue like this, is a matter of solving one’s meeting one situation successfully, so that it is there, ready to promote the solution to the next inner-voice structural issue. Your direction has been both discovered and laid out by meeting one problem of technique after another.

The lessons Shakespeare gives us by moving into his future in the above way. Shakespeare shows us how deeply we can rely on our strong imaginations to carry us through to the far side of them. This may be one of the lessons that great art in language manages: It shows off the texture of expression and creates samples of desire to which we can recur in our own incrementally generative sequences of thought. The collateral thought gestures that Shakespeare is able to exercise in comedy and other kinds of plays (such as problem plays) round out a making mindset, in his work, for which incremental growth guaranteed an unsurpassed aptitude for change and discovery within oneself.

Whether Shakespeare creates models for living your life well, whether it is good for you to read Shakespeare, and see what he has to tell you. Quality of experience is important. We are told to be with people who make us feel good. Feeling good is fine, it teaches you what you can expect of yourself. Shakespeare can make you appreciate real humor, such as the speech country clunks make to each other in Twelfth Night or the mind-blowing wit of Beatrice and Benedick in Much Ado about Nothing. Shakespeare can wonder what he means by—and makes you want to know what he means by—plays such as All’s Well that Ends Well or Troilus and Cressida, where we thrive on the sense that we should fully comprehend half-resolved meanings. He can take us through a play like Hamlet, awed
by the power with which the character can make us care for his brilliant weakness. He can fuse us with the powerful other in *King Lear* or *Othello* or *Coriolanus*, all images of what imagination can do for our dignity and self-respect. His sonnets can help us give form to the dream of permanence in a life where beauty seems the best guarantor of endurance.
A NOTE ON BACKGROUND AND METHOD

The poems and plays visited here were organized chronologically, taking for a model the timeframe in Harold Bloom’s *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998). The setting for the following collection is pedagogical—it was prepared as part of the curriculum for an online university—and so follows a pattern in its discussion of each play, of a grid of concerns: story, themes, (main) character(s), illustrative moments, parallel situations in literature or the arts, and discussion questions. The overall intent is to create a handbook for reading Shakespeare, and the guiding motif for this Virgilian trip is transparent: The grading of each play, by its intrinsic worth today, is a nudge to the reader, a hint to where the gold is, and to places to treasure, or overfly, in the early twenty-first century.
1. *Henry VI, Part I* (1590–91)

**Grade:** C+. Shakespeare can portray a personality—in this case a weak and undeveloped man—set him in the midst of intrigue and international politics (as it looked to the English person of the day), and give us the sense of historical engagement. However, in this case the operation is not thought-provoking at its highest, and does not rise above itself.

**Characters**

- King Henry VI
- Duke of Gloucester, Lord Protector, uncle of King Henry VI
- Duke of Bedford, Regent of France, uncle of King Henry VI
- Thomas Beaufort, Duke of Exeter, great-uncle of King Henry VI
- Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester (later Cardinal)
- John Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, great-uncle of King Henry VI
- Richard Plantagenet, son of the late Earl of Cambridge (later Duke of York)
- Earl of Warwick
- Earl of Salisbury
- Earl of Suffolk
- Lord Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury
- John Talbot, son of the Earl of Shrewsbury
- Edmund Mortimer, Earl of March
- Sir John Falstaff
- Sir William Lucie
- Sir William Glansdale
- Sir Thomas Gargrave
- Mayor of London
- Woodville, Lieutenant of the Tower
- Vernon, of the White Rose (York) faction
- Basset, of the Red Rose (Lancaster) faction
- A lawyer
- Mortimer’s Keepers
- Charles, Dauphin (afterwards King) of France
- Reignier, Duke of Anjou and titular King of Naples
- Duke of Burgundy
Drama and Poetry Texts

Duke of Alençon
Bastard of Orléans
Governor of Paris
Master-Gunner of Orléans and his Son
General of the French forces in Bordeaux
A French sergeant
A porter
An old shepherd, father of Joan La Pucelle
Margaret, daughter of Reignier, afterwards married to King Henry VI
Countess of Auvergne
Joan la Pucelle, commonly called Joan of Arc
Lords, warders of the Tower, heralds, officers, soldiers, messengers, attendants, friends of La Pucelle

Overview. The loss and subsequent reoccupation of England’s territories in France led to the conflictual situation of the present play, which deals both with the efforts of England to retain its numerous French possessions, which the French are besieging, and at the same time with the intra-family struggles that comprised the so-called Wars of the Roses in England. Among the French armies appears Joan of Arc, who for a time sows terror among the English before losing her visionary power. The play is one of Shakespeare’s earliest and least acclaimed works, though its appearance, along with two or three other of his earliest works, was the foundation for his initial popularity, which was already at the time growing rapidly.

Story

Backdrop. The story involves the early kingship of Henry VI, who had been thrust onto the throne by the sudden and unexpected death of Henry V (1386–1422), the great victor over the French whose military achievements were all undone by his successors. That early kingship was fraught with threats—from France, but also from within, where powerful squabbling families—particularly the Lancastrians and the Beauforts (Dukes of Somerset), who play decisive roles in the present work—had begun jockeying for power the moment Henry V’s great-grandfather Edward III died.

Funeral. The present play opens with the funeral of Henry V, but is soon interrupted by a succession of messengers announcing serious losses among the English possessions in France. The mature Shakespeare’s adeptness at interspersing scenes from scattered points of creative interest—at court, on a field of battle, in the midst of an intimate conversation—is evident already
in these earliest plays. We soon realize that the English are in a growing state of panic. Shifting to the French field of battle, we become aware of a new factor, which has emboldened the French army and given them a temporary sense of invincibility—the arrival of Joan of Arc, ‘La Pucelle’.

**La Pucelle.** Shakespeare’s dramatic eye is quick to hone-in on the startling apparition of Joan, a visionary girl who is obsessed with the importance of driving the English from French territory. Haunted by her visionary encounters with the Virgin Mary, Joan rides for a while on her transcendent powers, which enable her to beat up on the commander of the French army, who quickly accepts her offer to take over his post. It is not until much later, when the tide has turned against her and fiends have dispelled her visions, that Joan, and the army with her, concede victory to the English. Prior to that loss, however, Joan reaches such heights of power that her inspiration is sufficient to retake the city of Orleans for the French, and the new Regent of France, Charles d’Orléans, offers to share his throne with her.

**The English culturescape.** While the battle rages in France, leading eventually to an English-managed peace in which the French Charles d’Orléans serves as vice-regent, the great families of England—the Beauforts, Plantagenets, Mortimers, Talbots, de la Poles—jockey for position under the management of the new King. Winchester and Gloucester quarrel bitterly in the Tower; the Countess of Auvergne tries to win Talbot over to the French side; Mortimer, long imprisoned in the Tower of London, recounts to Richard Plantagenet the noble lineage of his family; and the King himself prepares to travel to France to reinforce his nation’s battlefield victories. We might say that Shakespeare is building up for us the image of the complex England over which Henry VI presides.

The present play. Though in a way disjointed, stretching its emphasis over thinly scattered events in France and in England, and though the protagonist (if there is one) is a monarch who is new to the job and not yet of pronounced personality, the present play might be thought of as a building block, or a sketch on its author’s part of a stage of historical development and the setting in which it finds itself. It is of little surprise that the following play, Henry VI, Part 2, will show us Henry preoccupied with precisely the problem heralded in this first play: How to deal with the clamorous and conflicting nobles surrounding him. The final Henry VI play, carefully laid upon the first two, will take us through the bitter consequences of his unsuccessful effort to bring harmony to England.
Themes

**History.** Shakespeare’s history plays are all about power and the rulers who use or abuse it. Much of the present play is concerned with the bickering and squabbling among Englishmen from prominent families—Plantagenets, Beauforts, Mortimers—whose conflicts continued to shape political (and eventually religious) confrontations in England over the ensuing two centuries.

**The sacred and the demonic.** La Pucelle (Joan of Arc), of course, represents the visionary militant expression of one strand of early modern French culture, and her presence, both sacred and driven by demons which eventually destroy her, adds a dimension of the miraculous to this entire play. To the English she is a wild military woman, capable of inflicting great harm. She reinvents herself several times in a crafty but unsuccessful effort to save herself.

**Death of chivalry.** We are living, here, the end of the feudal dimensions of early English society, and at the same time—economics shaping culture—at the end of the period of chivalry, the last vestige of the mediaeval era. Talbot, a gentleman and a courtier, could be the poster child for this behavior and we see him, as in his invited visit to the Duchess of Auvergne, most in his chivalric role—and most in contrast with the dog-eat-dog aristocratic values of the ambitious English families surrounding Henry VI.

**Patriotism.** While the present play concludes with the failure of the English to recover their French possessions, it does present the new King of England sharing power with France as a significant symbol of coalescing English values, while England itself proudly takes center stage as the launching pad from which the military and political enterprises of the play unfold.

**Warfare.** The present play is crowded with fighting. There are few rich characters or situations that rise either to poetry or to reflection, but there is a succession of military encounters around which the narrative builds and the positions of the characters define themselves. The English—and this speaks too to the issue of patriotism—are on the whole objects of French respect, substantial, persistent, and durable opponents to the lighter Gallic team.

**Main Character: Henry VI**

**Character.** Henry VI is a young man when he enters the play, and Shakespeare shows us the behaviors of this youngster as he is forced into
the politics of international struggle—and, by play’s end, into marriage with a captured French princess. Except for a rather blushing admission of attraction to Margaret, his bride-to-be, Henry shows little distinctive personality. That, however, is all that is needed from him, for all we need to see is the structure of history unfolding before us.

Parallels. For a royal destined to serve his country, but hardly prepared for the bruising battles of politics, Shakespeare provides his own model, in the type of Hamlet, who is, as we meet him, just being drawn into the implications of a power play initiated by his lustful stepfather, Claudius. Greek antiquity naturally furnishes its stock of applicable parallels. One thinks of Orestes, a noble scion, thrust by destiny into the obligation of avenging his father’s death, an awesome burden incumbent on an untried youngster, or of Telemachus, tossed into the world to seek his seemingly lost father, Odysseus, and without guidelines until he falls under the guidance of Nestor.

Illustrative moments:

_Doubt_. Henry VI is thrust into big-time military politics and internal political struggles by Henry V’s unexpected death. When he comes of age, not one of the coterie of nobles who make up the English family-power phalanx feels confident that Henry will be up to the job.

_Readyiness_. An essential step in the preparation for Henry’s royal life is his coronation, which the Duke of Exeter is charged with arranging. With this event the ritual of historicizing Henry is underway.

_Reinstatement_. As Shakespeare presents it, one of the first actions of Henry’s kingship is to confer all the rights and privileges of the Plantagenet clan on Richard Plantagenet.

_Departure_. Not long after his coronation, Richard sets sail for France, with the English navy, to participate in the back-and-forth struggle for the occupation of the city of Rouen.

_Romance_. The Earl of Suffolk captures the young French princess, Margaret. Henry falls for her, and launches on preparations for the royal wedding.

Discussion Questions

*Henry VI, Part 1* has been criticized as one of Shakespeare’s weakest plays. Do you see weaknesses in this play? Do they lie in characterization, or in plotting—are you engaged by the story, or the inherent interest of the ‘material’ of the play?
Some critics, having been puzzled by the seemingly extravagant behaviors of Joan of Arc—from sublime and visionary to the down-to-earth and rough-tongued—have concluded that Joan is (more or less) a comic character. Do you see any case for that view? The same critics incline to think that the French as a whole, in this play, are presented as caricatures of themselves. How does this view sound to you?

Do you find any presence of the ‘common man’ in Shakespeare’s historical drama? You will recall that, in Richard II, Bolingbroke seems to have owed some of his popularity to being appealing to the little guy. Are there ‘little guys’ in the play before us? If so, are they part of military forces? Is there any grumbling, here, against people of wealth and privilege?

Henry VI, Part I, is viewed as an historical play. Does Shakespeare present his material, here, as though it had occurred long before the time of his telling? How do you know? How long, in fact, did the events you are reading here precede Shakespeare’s discussion of them?

2. Henry VI, Part 2 (1590–91)

Grade: B-. Shakespeare creates a king who is weak and entangled with a queen who has already sold herself to another before she marries him. We see intrigue as Shakespeare activates it from an historical palette over a century old by the time of his writing. Here’s what begins to awe us: This author can shift gears from high musical in Love’s Labor’s Lost to daggers-in-the-night societal struggle in Henry VI. His pen is a bucking bronco of flexibilities. Is, finally, history an adequate raw material for the imagination of the dramatist? Is it flexible enough, constricting as it is, with its simulation of wie es eigentlich war?

Characters
Henry VI, King of England
Margaret of Anjou, Queen to King Henry VI
Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, uncle of King Henry VI
Eleanor Cobham, Duchess of Gloucester, Humphrey’s wife
Cardinal Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester
William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, Queen Margaret’s lover
Duke of Buckingham
Duke of Somerset
Lord Clifford, military commander
Young Clifford, Lord Clifford’s son
Richard Plantagenet, third Duke of York
Edward, Earl of March, Richard Plantagenet’s son
Richard, Richard Plantagenet’s son
Earl of Salisbury
Earl of Warwick, Salisbury’s son
Thomas Horner, armorer
Peter Thump, his apprentice
John Hum, priest
John Southwell, priest
Marjery Jourdayne, witch
Roger Bolingbroke, a conjurer
Asmah, a spirit
Jack Cade, the rebel leader
Dick, a butcher
Smith, a weaver
George Bevis
John Holland
Emmanuel, Clerk of Chatham
Sir Humphrey Stafford, military commander
Sir John Stanley
Sheriff
Thomas Horner, the Duke of York’s armorer
Peter Thump, Horner’s apprentice
A man of Saint Albans
Sander Simpcox, supposed recipient of a miracle
Simpcox’s wife
Mayor of Saint Albans
A beadle of Saint Albans
Lieutenant, captain of a ship
Ship’s Master
Master’s Mate
Walter Whitmore, a ship’s officer
A Herald
Vaux
Clerk of Chartham
Alexander Iden, a gentleman of Kent
Matthew Goffe
Prentices, petitioners, neighbors, apprentices, citizens, messengers, prisoners, servants, guards, falconers, attendants, townsmen of Saint Albans, bearers, drummers, commoners, rebels, a sawyer, soldiers, officers, murderers, others
Overview. *Henry VI, Part 2* is the central play in the *Henry VI* trilogy, which opens with *Henry VI, Part 1* and closes with *Henry VI, Part 3*, in which the calamitous struggles of mid-fifteenth-century England come to a close. (Another classification adds *Richard III* to the sequence—something of a survey of the whole period from the death of Henry V to the rise to power of Henry VII—which makes the series a tetralogy.) It is noteworthy that Shakespeare first aroused dramatic acclaim with this sequence of plays, and with the line of Henrys to which he will revert twice more in the future (*Henry IV*, 1596–9, and *Henry VIII*, 1612–13).

Commencement. The present play tracks the tumultuous conflicts that take place in England following Henry VI’s return from France, still a recently crowned king and engaged in marriage negotiations. It is that marriage process that opens the present play and links it to its predecessor. One point, then, is crucial, as we launch into a plot survey: The marriage of King Henry to Margaret of Anjou has been arranged, as a convenience to the monarch, by the Earl of Suffolk, at the end of the first play of the trilogy. What this means is that Suffolk enters the play as Margaret’s lover, but then hands her over to Henry. From the outset Margaret and Suffolk plan to exercise their own will over the already weak monarch.

Plot

Marriage. The marriage of Henry and Margaret opens the play, and soon acquaints us with the cast of noble characters whose infighting will dominate the play, reminding us of the universal truths concerning power politics, whether high stakes or low: The drive for governance, power, and wealth easily turns friends into enemies, unleashes suppressed feral instincts, and subverts public policy for personal greed.

Gloucester. For Henry, who is a weak king from the start, the presence of a single ally, the Duke of Gloucester, is a precious advantage. The Duke is a popular figure, as Bolingbroke will be in *Richard II*, and has Henry’s complete confidence. It is, however, characteristic of the intricate power struggles depicted in Shakespeare’s history plays that even the security assured by Gloucester is counterbalanced by the ambition of Gloucester’s wife, who—with the aid of Suffolk’s agents—lets herself be lured into necromancy, by which she imagines herself able to depose the new king. Unfortunately for her, she is caught in the midst of her nefarious rituals, arrested, and banished, leaving behind Gloucester, whom we remember as the most reliable support of the king. Substantial complexities interrelate King Henry, Margaret, Suffolk, Gloucester, and Gloucester’s wife, and at
that we have barely immersed ourselves in the battle-to-the-death this play chronicles.

Suffolk. Suffolk, hating Gloucester, charges him with treason, has him imprisoned, then sends assassins to kill this one true ally of the king. For his efforts, Suffolk is then banished, and killed by pirates as he is leaving England. Margaret, Henry’s Queen but still Suffolk’s lover, is horrified by the way this scenario plays out: Suffolk’s head arriving on her doorstep.

York. Meanwhile—and these transitions interlace rapidly with each other in Shakespeare’s early plays—the Duke of York decides to press his case for the kingship, and, having been appointed a ‘four-star’ general, he decides to try a test run to evaluate his popularity. He arranges for a popular public figure, Jack Cade, to stage a popular rebellion in order to find out the sentiments of the man on the street. Cade’s move has its ups and downs—at one point he is elected Lord Mayor of London, but a few days later he is killed. York returns from Ireland, and after considerable maneuvering press his own case for seizing the throne.

Flight. A fierce battle at St. Albans results in a rout of King Henry’s forces, and Margaret urges him to flee. He does so, and the play concludes with the forces of York in hot pursuit of Henry’s army.

Themes
National history. Much scholarly debate swirls over the nature of Shakespeare’s achievement as an historian, but many are struck by the boldness with which he brings national history onto the stage. The British critic F. P. Wilson argued that no British playwright rivalled Shakespeare in his capacity to bring British history face-to-face with a British audience. It has subsequently been pointed out that, as a matter of fact, many other British playwrights had put pre-Armada British history on stage, but conceded that Shakespeare was the first to do so in a mature and plausible way. In the present play Shakespeare is reaching back into England’s national history from a period of monarchical struggle that preceded his own moment by at most a century and a half. He brings the tumultuous period leading up to the Wars of the Roses to boiling life.

Weakness. Henry VI is a mild and timid figure in a brawling time when high political stakes are up for grabs among the English nobility. The very manner of Henry’s marriage, proposed for him by one of his courtiers—who was himself the prospective bride’s lover—suggests the degree of
Henry’s fecklessness. Henry takes few apparent steps to protect either himself or his followers while he is under conspicuous threat from Suffolk and York. It is only Queen Margaret who prods Henry to flee, when the pressure from the House of Lancaster starts breathing down his neck.

**Discord.** The entire play deals with civil discord, from Henry’s marriage to his flight from York’s forces. The chief driver of discord is the power of the great aristocratic families—the Dukes of Lancaster, York, Somerset—who were leaders of political power blocs, eyeing the behavior of the common people and the newest personal threats at court. A religious man, short of ambition, Henry is a ready target for the swirling politics of this political environment.

**Populism.** A significant popular rebellion took place in 1450, centered around the figure of one Jack Cade. Cade was a man of the lower classes who was attuned to popular discontent, and led into London, as an armed populist movement, a group of laborers and workers who shared his opinion that Henry VI and his administration were too weak to govern and were mishandling public finances. This rejection of Henry is characteristic of a kind of populism we see often in Shakespeare’s *Henriad*, as well as in characters like Bolingbroke in *Richard II*.

**Main Character: Henry VI**

**Character.** Henry VI is the ‘main character’ of the present play in the sense that the balance of power remains with him—even in his indecisiveness, he is the referral point to which others’ dissatisfaction recurs. He is a gentle and trusting person, expecting the best of others, though regularly plotted against by them, and stunned when he is misused. He is a religious man who trusts in God to bring about the best outcomes but is unable to make those gestures of personal intervention—to support his trusted friend Gloucester, or to engage in the issues of the French succession—necessary to bring God’s justice to play in the real world.

**Parallels.** Royals are placed in a complex position; they must meet the protocols of their positions, and yet, to be successful as ‘symbols of the state,’ they must be able to take the requisite initiative at the right time. The ancient king Agamemnon, who directs the Greek forces at Troy in Homer’s *Iliad* and appears in various ancient plays, was not a natural executive, or even diplomatic leader, and, like Henry VI, he withdrew from active endeavors. Under pressure, as in the case where he must sacrifice his daughter to make the winds blow, he can act, but only under such duress is
he more than simply pious, polite, and responsible. Shakespeare’s King Lear, created fifteen years after his Henry VI, is of an ancient power that has faded from him with age and that has left him as vulnerable to opinion and casual hearsay as Henry, who is blown this way and that by people’s opinions. Lear’s inaccurate impression that his truth-telling daughter is not committed to him is the trigger of his madness and total loss of self-understanding.

Illustrative moments:

Welcome. Upon the initial arrival of Suffolk and Queen Margaret at court, Henry welcomes them cordially, innocent (or is he?) of the knowledge that his queen-to-be is already the lover of Suffolk, who is introducing her to him.

Trust. Having welcomed Margaret and expressed his emotional joy, Henry, with a bevy of top courtiers, received the news that England is not to recover all its French possessions immediately. Henry is instinctively trusting of the possession-contract established by the French.

Belief. For Henry it is an axiom that God rules all events, and nothing is left to fate or chance. When he is under pressure he deepens in himself, and looks for the will of God in his inner self.

Unsteadiness. Despite the fact that Gloucester is his most loyal friend at court, Henry is unable to stand by his ally when the man is arrested. Henry is too saddened to endure any talk of the matter, and leaves the court to retire with his own thoughts.

Flight. At the play’s end, terrified at the approach of Jack Cade and his rebellious troops, persuaded by the stronger figure of his wife, King Henry flees, and leaves his throne.

Discussion Questions

Shakespeare is a master of creating and dealing with male characters who are weak or flawed: one thinks of the great figures such as Hamlet and Macbeth, who are obvious instances, but also of such less developed characters as Henry in the present play. It is widely thought that Henry is a simplified version of the weak male character—cf. Hamlet, say—but if so, what striking advances did Shakespeare make between Henry VI, Part 2, and Hamlet in his creations of vulnerable male royalty?

Where does Shakespeare find the meaningful lines of development in the human historical record? Does he see history as being made by great individuals? That was the view of the nineteenth-century thinker Thomas Carlyle, who believed that individual leaders were the soul of historical development. Or is Shakespeare, as in the play before us, more interested in
the flaws, even tragic flaws, that leave their mark on history?


**Grade:** C. It’s hard to grade these early plays, particularly in this case. We will later see subtle kings, such as Henry IV, who in their fading reflect on the transitory and fascinating about the crown, or weak leaders such as Macbeth, who are shaped by their wives. Both Macbeth and Henry IV are carved fine, subtle, while Henry VI is almost cliché work—it is in the sociopolitical intrigue that the playwright’s genius makes us smile.

**Characters**

King Henry VI  
Queen Margaret  
Edward, Prince of Wales  
Lord Clifford, military commander  
Duke of Exeter  
Duke of Somerset  
Duke of Norfolk  
Earl of Warwick  
Earl of Northumberland  
Earl of Westmorland  
Earl of Oxford  
Henry, Earl of Richmond (later Henry VII; non-speaking role)  
Somerville  
Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, would be king  
Edward Plantagenet, York’s eldest son; Earl of March, and later King Edward IV  
George Plantagenet, York’s son, later Duke of Clarence  
Richard Plantagenet, York’s son, later Duke of Gloucester  
Edmund Plantagenet, York’s youngest son, Earl of Rutland  
Robert Aspell  
Montague  
Lord Hastings  
Sir William Stanley  
Sir John Mortimer, York’s uncle  
Sir John Montgomery  
Lady Grey, later Elizabeth, Queen to Edward IV  
Lord Rivers, brother of Lady Grey  
King Louis XI of France  
Lady Bona of Savoy, Louis’ sister-in-law
Thomas of Beverley
John Brett
Lieutenant of the Tower
Noblemen, aldermen, nurse, gamekeepers, watchmen, huntsman, soldiers, messengers, drummers, attendants

**Overview.** The third part of *Henry VI* concludes with the stabbing of Henry in the Tower of London—a bloody, violent, and socially divisive period in England’s history. As a young man about to be married, the Henry VI of *Part 1* hesitatingly struggles to behave like a king and to hold together the aggressive political factions which are only too ready to dethrone him and promote themselves. The second part of the trilogy concerns Henry’s largely unsuccessful efforts to negotiate among his rivals and to deal personally with the kingship role which refuses to grow congenial to him. By the last play in the trilogy he has frankly admitted to himself that he prefers the solitary life of meditation, and is uninterested in his aggressive and self-promoting Queen, Margaret. The trilogy as a whole can be compared to the *Henriad*, written from 1587 to 1589, six or more years after this sequence, devoted to the sequence of monarchs who immediately preceded Henry VI.

**Opinions.** It is a commonplace opinion, easily grasped, that Shakespeare was working as a novice in this earlier trilogy, which was created near the beginning of his career as a playwright, while in the later trilogy, equally wrapped up in the nature of monarchy and fate, Shakespeare had greatly developed his ability to characterize and had made startling advances in his understanding of the human situation—taking it on less as raw struggle, and more nearly as a subtle interplay of force, irony, humor, and bravura. It is a useful counter position, therefore, to notice the degree of insight in *Henry VI, Part 3* into both the feral and fragile texture of society—its readiness to rip and collapse—and the inherent dynamic of the machinery of society, which rejects stasis and ploughs ahead dangerously, without solutions to the problems it propounds.

**Story.** This third play about Henry VI opens where the second play of the trilogy concluded, with the flight of King Henry and Queen Margaret from the insurgent forces of the Duke of York. In London the opposing forces meet at the Chambers of the Houses of Parliament. There Henry and the Duke of York make a deal: Henry is to be allowed to remain king until his death, at which time the throne of England will pass to the House of York.
The deal. This deal, however, quickly runs aground on the furious objection of Queen Margaret, whose personality has unfolded since her marriage to Henry and the birth of their son, the Prince of Wales, on whom Margaret desperately counts as her family membership card into the line of succession to the English throne. It might be said that the whole brutal story of the present play, which ends with Henry’s death, turns on the extremely assertive and aggressive personality of Margaret and her struggles to replace her weak husband Henry, for whom her contempt grows ever stronger.

Violence. Violence of every sort follows on the royal deal, in which Lord Clifford, top military commander of the king’s party, sees to it that any gentleman’s agreement between Lancaster and York will be shattered. Clifford murders York’s twelve-year-old son, Edmund, then stabs York himself to death; at the Battle of St Albans Henry recovers his throne, reneging on the deal made earlier with York, who is dead. At the heavy prodding of his wife, he reassumes all the trappings of the kingship. Then in 1461 the regrouped armies of the House of York score a major victory against the king’s forces. Edward Plantagenet is proclaimed king, but his brother Richard is determined to dethrone him. By this point, so absolute has become the hostility between the rival claimants for the English throne that separate delegations have been sent to France, to pay court to the French king in order to win his allegiance and support back home in England. In fact, on Edward’s behalf Warwick is wooing Lady Bona, the sister of the French king, to establish a French-English kingdom, while Margaret is doing all she can to persuade King Louis XI of France to provide military support for King Henry.

Denouement. One looks for a catchword to describe the general breakdown that follows the double expeditions to France by Margaret and Warwick, the agents of Lancaster and York, respectively. *Denouement* or *untying* seems appropriate as our catchword, for what we see taking place, from the beginning of Act III on, is the coming apart of what had been.

Themes

Violence. In the Elizabethan theatrical tradition, as we find it in Nash, Marlowe, Kyd, or Shakespeare in various plays—*Titus Andronicus*, the *Henry VI* sequence—it is common to use violent action as a crowd-attracting element. (Shakespeare continued to employ such stagecraft far into his most mature period—cf. *Macbeth*, where the violence in question is that of reported rather than depicted action.) Certainly the play before us is rich in reported battlefield scenes—four on stage—and with any amount
of reported violence, faithlessness, the torture of York by Clifford, the stabbing of York’s son, and the outright murder of King Henry in the Tower.

**Narrativity.** It was long the contention of the French critics of Shakespearean drama that it is too rough and naturalistic. Not only did he ignore Aristotelian unities, but his plots were too ragged and natural. The play before us may be said to be rough as a theme: The action shifts at will from England to France and back, from one camp to another court within England, and then, as occurs when Henry is captured in a meadow by gamekeepers, we take dramatic action in our own hands and simply move ourselves to a spot which suits the mood of the principal character. The Shakespearean rebuttal is clear enough, that the action of a drama should follow the course of nature, and that is just what happens in *Henry VI*.

**Withdrawal.** Henry VI must seem a precursor to those hypersensitive Shakespearean heroes—Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear, Othello—who crash into the hard limits of human destiny and shatter there. Henry is not a rich monarchical figure, dealing with fate and its vanities, like King Henry IV; he is no friend of action or violence, being prone to withdrawal and meditation, and has no executive bone in his body. His hard-hitting wife, who has cuckolded him even before she marries him, gives him his marching orders at every turn.

**Historicism.** Shakespeare clearly takes it on himself, in the present trilogy, to think his national history right there on the stage before his audience, the English people. Perhaps this is what is ‘natural’ in his drama, that it unfolds out of itself; the conflicts of Margaret and Henry, that is, just develop out of their own premises, and one event leads outward into another. It is also to the point, here, that Shakespeare raises consciousness of his own epoch by drawing attention to another; he is a living historian, as, in his greatest tragedies, he will be a remorseless student of human weakness.

**Main Character: Henry VI**

**Character.** Throughout these three plays, we have willy-nilly been obligated to treat Henry VI as the main character. He is the titular character, his presence is required for all formal state events, and yet he is for the most part a figurehead—or, worse, a chicken. Margaret was brought to England to be Henry’s spouse, but from the outset she called most of the shots, including the rousing command to flee York’s forces at the end of the first play. It must be said, however, that in this third play Henry realizes his own nature, and, after once again reassuming the throne for the House of
Lancaster, he decides to appoint two of his top men as regents, making it clear that he would like to retire into nature and become a meditative. Fate, however, insisted on the last word—the murder of this weak man in the Tower of London.

Parallels. One thinks, as parallels, of the later creations of Shakespeare himself, especially of Macbeth and Hamlet, and has to wonder what differentiates those masterpieces of (partial) weakness from this depiction of Henry VI, to whom Shakespeare devoted three plays without mining very deeply into the ore of the man’s personality. The first answer seems to be this: that both Hamlet and Macbeth are painfully, even self-obstructively, aware of their own emotions and anxieties. As the plays enclosing those two characters develop, we are drawn deeply into the mindsets of the principal characters. With Henry VI we remain outside of his personality, and are only very rarely interested in it.

Illustrative moments:

Defiance. From the outset of the play, in rare bursts, Henry expresses defiance at the way he is being pushed around. He declaims the importance of his ancestral kingship and his refusal ever to relinquish it.

Startlement. As the trilogy unfolds, and especially in this last of the three plays, Henry is startled at the way his wife is taking control of his destiny. For a long time, because he is naïve and trusts her, he thinks she has his benefit in mind, but near the third play’s end he becomes aware of how fiercely she is concentrated on one goal: her son becoming king.

Meditation. At the opening of a crucial battle for his throne, Henry surveys the field in front of him and reflects on the way human fortunes fluctuate like the clouds flowing back and forth before him. Fine language from a character who is starting to become real to us.

Deepening. One of the finest moments of the play occurs as Henry sits watching what has been a destructive field of battle, observing a father who has killed his son and a son who has killed his father. For Henry this observation epitomizes the meaningless brutality of war.

Discussion Questions

Does Shakespeare take sides in the present play, or does he simply present a tableau of scenes from the disintegration of a society? Is he pro-English or pro-French? What does he think of Margaret, or of the unusual brutality of Clifford, in his treatment of York? Is there any ‘message’ in this play for the audience?
Does this third play, in the Henry VI trilogy, wrap things up with Henry’s murder in the Tower? Do you feel that you have completed a unitary experience, or do you feel that you are only just beginning to explore the dimensions of a larger thought-horizon Shakespeare is going to present to us?

Does the present play seem to you to shed light on the broad issues of power politics, wherever or whenever in the world, or do its points apply strictly to a particular period of time, and to a particular political structure, monarchy? Could events within a democracy be fraught with the murderous tensions we meet in the present play about monarchy?

4. King Richard III (1592–1593)

Grade: B. We are on the way to character here, having worked through the Henry VI plays, in the presence of a king who is led by history into royalty, fears his powers, sucks up to his tough wife, and ultimately inclines toward meditation. With Richard we come on a self-conscious Machiavelli, a calculating promoter of his power. We also review the issue of giving life through drama. Maybe we sense that we are climbing this value chain step by step, as Shakespeare starts to open out the playbook of the diverse personalities which constitute the wide gamut of human conditions. Incidentally, don’t we begin to wonder, now, at the dexterities involved in summoning up a world by writing a play in it? A novel comes out of the living self of the maker, while a play has to be constructed from some genius of the maker’s body, his own organism having become a simulacrum in words. The play itself is so many half-completed gestures of the spectral body. To read the play is to imitate your conductor’s neurology in language, the inner voice contributed to another ‘that is of imagination all compact.’

Characters
Edward IV, King of England
Richard, Duke of Gloucester, Edward IV’s brother, later King Richard III
George, Duke of Clarence, Edward IV’s brother
Duchess of York, mother of Edward, Richard, and George
Edward, Prince of Wales, Edward IV’s eldest son
Queen Margaret, widow of King Henry VI
Ghost of King Henry VI
Ghost of Edward of Westminster, Prince of Wales, Henry VI’s son
Lady Anne Neville, widow of Edward of Westminster, later wife of King Richard III
Queen Elizabeth, wife of King Edward IV
Earl Rivers, Elizabeth’s brother
Marquis of Dorset, Elizabeth’s son from her first marriage
Lord Richard Grey, Elizabeth’s son from her first marriage
Sir William Catesby, Duke of Buckingham
Duke of Norfolk
Earl of Surrey, son of the Duke of Buckingham
Sir Richard Ratcliffe
Sir James Tyrrell
Lord Lovel
Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, later King Henry VII
Lord Stanley, Earl of Derby, Henry Tudor’s stepfather
Earl of Oxford
Sir Walter Herbert
Sir James Blunt
Archbishop of Canterbury
Archbishop of York
Bishop of Ely
Lord Hastings, Lord Chamberlain to King Edward IV
Sir Robert Brackenbury, Lieutenant of the Tower
Lord Mayor of London
The Keeper of the Tower
Two murderers

Overview

Henry VI. By the completion of the *Henriad*, his sequence of studies of Kings Henry IV and Henry V (and sometimes taken to include the Henry VI trilogy, as well as *Richard II* and *Richard III*), Shakespeare has begun to achieve judicious popularity on the London stage, both as an actor and as a playwright. While Henry himself is something of a non-character, as far as concerns the manly arts of statesmanship, and in the end yields everything to his wife, Margaret, he serves admirably as a figurehead around whom to assemble a cogent picture of incipient early modern Britain, in the throes of reaching for some kind of constitutional order. In the end, of course, Henry is killed, and his lackluster efforts to promote a national sense of unity are pretty much in vain.

Tudors. The outcome of the Lancastrian search for stable control is that the House of York, in the person of King Edward IV, seizes the throne—always by actual hand-to-hand battle, significantly—and that the backdrop of the present play is established. Edward brings into prominence his two brothers, George, Duke of Clarence, and Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who is to