

HENRY VI, Parts 1, 2, and 3

by William Shakespeare

Before television, in the nineteen-thirties, when radio was the medium of mass entertainment, one of the leading soap operas of the day was called "One Man's Family." That's a title that might be applied to Shakespeare's history plays.

From "Richard II" to "Richard III" (with 6 "Henry" plays in between), Shakespeare dramatized the rivalries, betrayals, and wars among the sons of King Edward III and their descendants.

It's a complex story, having to do with royal descent: which son, grandson, or cousin is rightfully England's king. Edward's progeny might be called a dysfunctional family on an epic scale, fighting each other and their allies across England and France, winning and losing lands, but mostly quarreling about who should be king.

The best explanation of these divisions and how they played out is found in some of the least-performed of the Bard's history plays: the three parts of "Henry VI." They can be confusing to a contemporary audience, largely ignorant - and caring little - about the details of England's medieval history and the niceties of royal genealogy.

But once you get into them, they are roaring good theatre and you can understand why these were the plays which established Shakespeare as the most popular dramatist of his day. "Henry VI" may not have the depth and grandeur of his later offerings, but it contains strong hints of what was to come.

At the center of these three works is King Henry VI, who came to the throne at the age of nine months and reigned for 29 years. The plays demonstrate that, when a child occupies the throne, strong men on every hand try to fill the resulting power vacuum, and they are not about to quit, even when the young king is old enough to rule on his own.

This is especially true in Henry VI's case, since he is unlike any other monarch portrayed by Shakespeare. Shakespeare depicts him as a saintly man, kind, forgiving, peaceful - all characteristics which so-called "men of action" despise. Yet, his gentle nature might well have succeeded, if not for his warlike queen, Margaret, and the insatiably ambitious Richard, son of the Duke of York.

Before examining the sprawling canvas of the individual plays, let's address the problem of kingly succession, an explanation Shakespeare carefully lays out in full three times.

King Edward had seven sons and five daughters, along with at least one illegitimate child. They were all privileged, rich, and arrogant. Among them, they largely created the nobility: the English upper middle class. But the seven sons also had some claim to the crown as well, which made them especially contentious. The seven were:

Edward, the Black Prince, Prince of Wales

William of Hatfield
Lionel, Duke of Clarence
John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster
Edmund Langley, Duke of York
Thomas, Duke of Gloucester
William of Woodstock

The two Williams died young. The eldest, Edward the Black Prince, died before his father, which meant that the crown went to his surviving son, who became Richard II.

Richard lived a disreputable and dissolute life. Shakespeare softens this by making him merely indecisive and poetic. Henry Bolingbroke, son of the Duke of Lancaster, Edward's fourth son, forced Richard to yield the crown to him and consented to Richard's murder.

In doing this, Henry skipped over the claims of Edward's second son, who died with a male heir, and his third son, who had descendants with a better claim than Bolingbroke's, prompting them to instigate rebellions and pitched battles against him when he ruled as Henry IV.

Henry IV held his crown the way a miser hoards his gold, finally passing it on to his son, Henry V. This Henry quelled all opposition by winning stunning victories in France, establishing his sway over much of the land. However, he died suddenly, leaving his infant son, Henry VI, next in line. This loss was doubled when the infant's grandfather, king of France, from whom he inherited the French crown, also died. This awakened all the previous arguments about his right to the throne and the War of the Roses ensued between Henry VI, of the House of Lancaster, and Richard of York, who claimed descent from both Edward's third and fifth sons.

York was killed in battle, but his sons prevailed, producing the reigns of Edward IV and Richard III. Richard was then defeated at Bosworth Field, paving the way for a descendant of John of Gaunt, Edward's fourth son, to become Henry VII and end the argument by eliminating all claimants to the throne and establishing the House of Tudor, which later produced Henry VIII (about whom Shakespeare co-authored another play) and Elizabeth I.

It is a colorful history and worth following, either in Shakespeare's sequence of dramas or in history books, which are more scrupulously accurate. Shakespeare was a dramatist and took liberties with events, even as writers of television docudramas do today.

Let's trace the plots of each play as simply as possible.

The first part - which was actually written last (what you might call a prequel) - begins with English nobles attending the funeral of Henry V. The proceedings are interrupted by messengers who tell them that most of Henry's conquests in France are being won back, in spite of the leadership of Sir Henry Talbot, England's most heroic warrior.

Three levels of conflict are developed in the play: a contest for power among Henry's relatives, all members of the House of Lancaster; a developing struggle between the Houses of York and Lancaster for the crown; and battles for territory in France.

The infant king's guardian, his uncle Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, fights for control with another uncle, the Bishop of Winchester. The situation is complicated when young Henry refuses a politically advantageous marriage to wed the beautiful, but penniless Margaret, who is wooed for him by the Duke of Suffolk, her lover, who conspires to rule England through her.

Shakespeare then invents a scene which helps explain the growing enmity between York and Lancaster, when courtiers take sides in an argument between them by choosing to wear either a white rose (for York) or a red rose (for Lancaster), thus setting off the War of the Roses.

Meanwhile, the French rally to win back conquered cities through the timely intervention of Joan of Arc, or Joan la Pucelle, as she is called. Joan is no saint in English eyes and Shakespeare depicts her as a witch and - possibly - a wanton. Joan is finally captured and burned at the stake, but the English lose much of what Henry V had won, more through personal jealousy and bickering among its leaders than through battle.

In part two, Henry welcomes Margaret as his queen and it is quickly apparent what a domineering character she is. The nobles are choosing sides and Margaret works with Lancastrians to have the Duke of Gloucester murdered. Richard, Duke of York, their enemy, goes along with them, but only to be rid of a potential opponent. He has his eye on the crown.

Gloucester's murder infuriates the commons and they force King Henry to exile the Duke of Suffolk for his part in the crime, Hard on this comes the sudden death of the Bishop of Winchester, who instigated Gloucester's murder. Richard of York is sent to Ireland to put down a rebellion, thus giving him what he needed: an army. In his absence, a clothier, Jack Cade, shakes the kingdom with an uprising of commoners who set out to kill the nobility and the educated. This produces one of the most famous lines in the trilogy, when one of Cade's followers suggests: "The first thing we do is kill all the lawyers."

Cade's rebellion collapses and York returns to find the throne within his grasp. With his army and the backing of his warlike sons, he opposes an army led by Queen Margaret (King Henry refuses to fight) and wins the Battle of St. Albans, the first round of the War of the Roses.

Part three begins with the victorious Richard of York confronting Henry VI in parliament, demanding the crown. Honest Henry has to agree that York's claim to the throne is stronger than his, but asks to be permitted to reign until his death, after which the crown will pass to Richard.

Queen Margaret is furious at having her son disinherited and vows to continue the struggle against York. The killings become more numerous and savage. Young Clifford murders York's youngest son, Rutland, then is killed himself. Saintly King Henry leaves the battlefield to contemplate his fate, earnestly wishing that he had been born a simple shepherd.

Queen Margaret captures York, humiliating him with a paper crown, then giving him a handkerchief soaked in his young son's blood. This elicits another famous line, as York accuses her of having "a tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide." York is then executed. The tables are turned in the Battle of Tewksbury, as the Yorkists capture Margaret and her son, stabbing him in her sight.

York's son, Edward, is then crowned as Edward IV. However, he enrages his closest follower, Warwick, by marrying Lady Jane Grey after he has sent Warwick to arrange a marriage with the sister of the King of France. However, Edward wins the final battles and his brother Richard, who will later become Richard III, murders King Henry VI in the Tower of London.

The play ends with Edward on the throne, Margaret banished to France, and Richard plotting to replace his brother.

This thin outline of the plot is fleshed out with scenes of high emotion and vigorous fighting. There is a touch of romance and humor as well. Shakespeare knew how to enthrall his audience and to engage their emotions. Later on, he would elevate his command of theatre and poetry to produce the greatest works of dramatic art in the English language.

But his skill is already in evident here, in his earliest works. You have only to see the plays in action to appreciate how far developed his mastery of the stage was, even at the beginning.

A production note: doing all three plays taxes even the most well-established theatrical company. In producing the three, the Genesis reduces the three to two, each modified to approximately two hours in length. The largest section to be sacrificed is the Cade Rebellion, which is actually Shakespeare's conflation of two such happenings.

While some humor and further action is lost, the abbreviation does not interfere with the basic story: the plots, dissension, and brutality among the descendants of "one king's family."

