

Resurrecting Silences: Henry VI and his Afterlives

**Thesis submitted to Jadavpur University
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Certified that the Thesis entitled

‘Resurrecting Silences: Henry VI and his Afterlives’ submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Prof. Amlan Das Gupta (Department of English, Jadavpur University), and that neither thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree/ diploma anywhere/ elsewhere.



(AMLAN DAS GUPTA)

11-05-2023

Countersigned by the Supervisor:

Date:



11-05-2023

Candidate:

Date:

Todtnauberg

Arnica, eyebright, the

draft from the well with the
star-die on top,

in the
Hütte,

written in the book
—whose name did it record
before mine?—,
in this book
the line about
a hope, today,
for a thinker's
word
to come,
in the heart,

forest sward, unleveled,
orchis and orchis, singly,

raw exchanges, later, while driving,
clearly,

he who drives us, the mensch,
he also hears it,

the half-
trod log-
trails on the highmoor,

humidity,
much.

— Paul Celan

Contents

Acknowledgements	i
List of Abbreviations	ii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: ‘Loving Pity and Pitiful Love’: The Cult of Henry VI	18
Chapter 2: ‘The Field of Golgotha’: Shakespeare and Henry VI	82
Chapter 3: ‘Is God Speaking to Him?’: Henry’s Sacred Silences in Alexander Pope’s <i>Windsor Forest</i> and Philippa Gregory’s <i>The Cousins’ War</i>	159
Chapter 4: ‘Yet He did not open His mouth’: Henry VI in the Digital Age	237
Conclusion	300
Bibliography of Works Cited	317

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List of Abbreviations:

<i>The First Part of Henry the Sixth.</i>	<i>1 Henry VI</i>
<i>The Second Part of Henry the Sixth, with the death of the Good Duke Humfrey.</i>	<i>2 Henry VI</i>
<i>The Third Part of Henry the Sixth. With the death of the Duke of York.</i>	<i>3 Henry VI</i>
Old Testament	OT
New Testament	NT
Royal Shakespeare Company	RSC
A Song of Ice and Fire	Ice and Fire

INTRODUCTION

Understanding Henry VI

In August 1453, the third and last Lancastrian monarch Henry VI was spending a few days at his hunting lodge, Clarendon Palace, outside Salisbury.¹ This lodge (now populated by herds of llamas) is where the 31-year-old king slowly descended into a catatonic stupor. He couldn't walk, talk, hold his head up, or eat. His only child, Edward, was placed in his lap three months into his illness; he glanced at his heir for a moment and looked away.² He retreated inward in a way that continues to defy medical diagnosis. It could have been a mental illness inherited from his maternal grandfather Charles VI, who used to suffer from fits of murderous rage. During his first such episode, Charles VI had killed many soldiers travelling with him; he believed he was made of glass and wore iron bars within his clothing to prevent himself from breaking. Henry's symptoms were very different, but depressive stupor and catatonic schizophrenia are the most common explanations for his condition.³

He may also have been suffering from clinical depression. Active kingship was not a comfortable proposition for him, and the French wars had forced him into continuous political work. Then came the news of a terrible defeat at Gascony in July, 1453.⁴ This reversed his father's French victories and now there was a duke of York for the king's opponents to rally around. This stupor, which puzzles us to this date, was treated carefully with herbal baths, specially brewed syrups, and attempts to keep the king as calm as possible. For eighteen months, the king showed no signs of recovery.⁵ During the autumn of 1454, he returned to some semblance of normalcy. On 27

¹See Itinerary of Henry VI, 1436-1461 in Bertram Wolffe, *Henry VI* (Great Britain: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1981), 370.

² *Encyclopedia of the Wars of the Roses*, ed. John A. Wagner, (California: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 48.

³ There isn't enough evidence for a definitive diagnosis of his condition. Comments about possible causes have been made by R. L. Storey in *The End of the House of Lancaster* (who suggests catatonic schizophrenia), John Saltmarsh in *King Henry VI and the Royal Foundations*, and Basil Clarke in *Mental Disorder in Earlier Britain*. V. Greene and Bertram Wolffe both postulate that Henry was suffering from a manic depressive stupor. (*The Madness of King's, Personal Trauma and the Fate of Nations*, (New York: 1993), 70-86.

⁴ Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 265.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 267-286.

December, he commanded his almoner to ride to Canterbury to offer thanks and praise to the shrine of St Thomas.⁶ His queen had her son presented to him again four days later. Describing this scene to John Paston, Edward Clere writes:

And then [Henry] asked what the prince's name was, and the Queen told him Edward; and then he held up his hands and thanked God thereof. And he said that he never knew until that time, nor what was said to him, nor knew where he had been while he had been sick until now.⁷

Henry's recovery wasn't permanent. He had a series of breakdowns, rendering him completely unable to rule. The situation in France worsened, and Henry's queen Margaret of Anjou came under direct attack from the increasingly popular cousin of Henry VI, Richard, the duke of York. Tensions mounted over control of the crown and succession to the English throne. In 1455, civil war broke out. Henry VI had lost France, so hard-won by his father. On 10 July 1460, Lancastrian and Yorkist armies opened combat at the Battle of Northampton and the king was taken captive by the Yorkist forces. Queen Margaret and her son Edward fled through Wales to Scotland to the court of James II, where she began rallying forces in favour of her husband again. On 30 December, her forces re-entered England to fight the Yorkists again, and won. A few weeks later, she fought for her husband's custody in the Second Battle of St Albans against the Earl of Warwick. Warwick was defeated in this battle and Henry was freed, but he was reportedly so far gone that he was singing and dancing during the actual fighting. However, the Duke's son soon defeated the king and the queen at Towton; Henry and Margaret evaded capture and escaped into exile to Scotland, from where they began to plan another attack. When Scotland actively sued for peace with England, he was passed over to his homeland once again, safely sheltered in various houses still loyal to the Lancastrians.⁸

Henry and Margaret had their chance to recapture the throne when Edward IV fell out with the Earl of Warwick and his own younger brother George, the Duke of Clarence. Margaret formed an alliance with them at the urging of Louis XI of France and

⁶ David Grummit, *Henry VI* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015). Kindle.

⁷ *Original letters, written during the reigns of Henry VI., Edward IV., and Richard III*, ed. by John Fenn, (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1787). Kindle.

⁸ Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 267-348; Grummit, *Henry VI*, Kindle.

on 3 October, 1470, Henry VI was reinstated on the throne of England. He was too ill to rule, so Warwick and Clarence ruled in his name. They didn't rule for very long. Warwick declared war on Burgundy, and the ruler of Burgundy, Charles the Bold, gave Edward IV the help he needed to win back the throne of England. Yorkists won their final victory at the Battle of Tewkesbury, where Edward (Henry's son) was killed. Warwick had already been killed in the Battle of Barnet. Edward died on 4 May, and on the night of 21 May, Henry VI died.⁹ A Yorkist account (called the *Historie of the arrivall of Edward IV*) said that Henry VI had died of melancholy because of the death of his son but his exhumation (in 1910) showed a violent blow to the base of his skull, proving quite decisively that he had been bludgeoned to death. Lauren Johnson writes a moving account of his burial in *Shadow King: The Life and Death of Henry VI*:

Whatever befell Henry the night before, on the morning of 22 May 1471 his body was embalmed with wax and spices, then wrapped in linen for burial. But before he could be laid to rest there was one last forced procession he had to make. To prove, once and for all, that the House of Lancaster was defeated, Henry's corpse was loaded on to a wagon to wind its way through London's streets to St Paul's Cathedral, surrounded by torchbearers and soldiers. For a few days he was left on display in the cathedral, his unseeing face open to public scrutiny. As his body lay on the pavement of the church it was seen to bleed, a sign that was generally understood to indicate that Henry had been murdered.¹⁰

There was a short funeral service at the Blackfriars Chapel and his body was removed to Chertsey Abbey. He was buried in the Benedictine Lady Chapel.¹¹

This was the 'story' of the man who gave rise to the series of bloody skirmishes now known as the Wars of the Roses.¹² Shortly after his death, miracles were attributed to him. Common people started visiting his burial place, even though Edward IV

⁹ Ibid., 347.

¹⁰ Lauren Johnson, *Shadow King: The Life and Death of Henry VI* (London: Head of Zeus Ltd., 2019). 586-587. Amazon Kindle.

¹¹ Wolfe, *Henry VI*, 347.

¹² The name 'Wars of the Roses' was first coined by Sir Walter Scott after the main badges of the warring factions: a white rose for York and a red rose for Lancaster. However, neither symbol was on liveries during the time of the wars.

discouraged it.¹³ He was worshipped informally as a martyr and a saint who had undergone unjust humiliation and suffering. But Henry VI was also the son of Henry V, the great military commander, the grandson of Henry Bolingbroke, and the great grandson of John of Gaunt, the duke of Lancaster. The dominant political discourse during the two decades before Henry VI's accession was that of methods to legitimise the violent usurpation of Richard II's rights by the Lancastrians.¹⁴ Displays of royal piety and defence of the Church served to strengthen this cause. Consequently, late medieval devotional traditions were shaped by Lancastrian thoughts of piety.¹⁵ Henry V's orthodoxy is shown by his establishment of Carthusian monasteries, the increasing importance of music during church services, and the royal chapel (which was reserved for the king's private use) becoming a more public symbol of worship.¹⁶ It is hardly a surprise, therefore, that princely piety was Henry VI's dominant characteristic.

The Lancastrian political legacy that Henry VI inherited was marked by a public commitment to the church's welfare and an equally public form of piety. Although Henry passed his life as a member of that exclusive family, he was temperamentally an outsider; the way in which his courtiers treated him suggests that he was also seen as such.

He was always an introvert: solitary, bookish, and perhaps a little intellectually arrogant.¹⁷ The popular British historian and journalist Dan Jones describes him thus:

Henry was an innocent-looking young man. In adulthood he stood five foot nine or ten. His face would remain round and boyish well into his mature life. A high brow and curved eyebrows sat above large, wide-spaced eyes, a long nose and a small, delicate mouth much like his mother's. His most famous portrait, produced in the sixteenth century but probably copied from a lost life-likeness, depicts him with smooth, plump cheeks and a weak chin, wearing a look of faint surprise.¹⁸

¹³ *Encyclopedia for the Wars of the Roses*, 114.

¹⁴ See 'Introduction,' Grummit, *Henry VI*. Kindle.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ It is impossible for us to decode what Henry thought of his inheritance and his kingship, but we get a good idea about his demeanour from Wolffe in his biography of the king and the popular writer Dan Jones in *The Hollow Crown: The Rise of the Tudors* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014). Kindle.

¹⁸ Dan Jones, *The Hollow Crown: The Rise of the Tudors* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014). Kindle.

He was nine months old when he was doubly anointed as the dual monarch of England and France. After receiving a first rate religious and political education (the poet Lydgate composed a series of verses on the most notable princes of England specially for the king¹⁹), he assumed the mantle of personal rule, and, by all accounts, was a bad ruler. Most medievalists, historians, and biographers concede that active political governance was beyond him.²⁰ There are a set of historians who argue that his actions were conditioned by Lancastrian values²¹, and therefore not his own, but good men had made dangerous rulers before. In short, even a few Lancastrian loyalists were relieved when Edward IV deposed him.²² After a life marked by abject political humiliation, exile, and murder, Henry had perished. And with him, the Lancastrian claim to the throne. But rumours of the king's bleeding on the steps of the Chertsey Abbey spread like wildfire. His own cult soon rivalled that of his own preferred saint, Thomas Becket of Canterbury. Records of his miracles were collected by custodians at his shrines and presented to the Holy See in 1503.²³

Henry VI the literary figure cannot be called popular the way Alexander the Great or Tamburlaine is popular, although he is the titular character in three plays by Shakespeare. But late medieval prayer books and woodcuts tell us how deeply he influenced traditions of religious thought and devotion. By the time Shakespeare began writing, 'St' Henry had become a metaphor. He was a conflux of influences - social, religious, and political - that promoted political uncertainty. The reason for this was simple: kingship and piety have traditionally conferred mutually reinforcing advantages. Political legitimacy wasn't the subtext of Lancastrian methods of piety - it was the backbone of their legacy. Henry VI is at once a symbol of divinity and political failure.

¹⁹ See Jennifer Sisk, "Lydgate's Problematic Commission: A Legend of St. Edmund for Henry VI," in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* Vol. 109, No. 3 (2010), 349-375.

²⁰ This includes scholars who are predisposed to think well of him. Wolffe, Keith Dockray (in *Henry VI, Margaret of Anjou and the Wars of the Roses: A Source Book*) and Ralph Alan Griffiths (in *The Reign of King Henry VI: The Exercise of Royal Authority, 1422-1461*) blame him for all administrative failures squarely.

²¹ Foremost among these is David Grummit, who is extensively referenced in this study.

²² Many of his nobles were dismayed by his giving away Maine to Charles VII when he married Margaret of Anjou. Normally a marriage meant an extravagant dowry but Henry VI gave precious French land to marry Margaret.

²³ Grummit, *Henry VI*, Kindle

This duality allows him to survive as a potent figure in popular culture, though he no longer evokes the devotion he used to.

As both an abstract idea and a literary character, he has played an interesting but little-researched role in English literature. In the quest to romanticise Henry VI (perhaps to remake him in Lear's image), the possibility that he might have been experiencing a divine madness has often been entertained, most famously by Philippa Gregory in her series of historical novels about powerful women in the Wars of the Roses.²⁴ But irrespective of the mysterious silence during those fateful eighteen months, his humiliation and murder were rich in dramatic possibilities. This may be the reason why Shakespeare began his career with an examination of this elusive figure. A king's silence has direct performative power. Courtiers' responses to Henry's silence provide opportunities for highly wrought lament or political anxiety. Subjects may express grief, resignation, or bewilderment; it can be used as a reflection on language itself. His silence is also negative in another sense. As the personification of all that suffers quietly, he serves as a container for everything individuals or communities reject. This silence may be used to redefine society's boundaries, but it leaves the victim with no positive definition by which to live. A fragmentation of identity is also expressed by our conventional association of silence with a lack of agency, or even death. Christian attitudes to silence also defy easy definitions. While icons of Apostle John the Theologian in Silence²⁵ were very popular in the sixteenth century and St John the Silent (the Hesychast) is still very popular in the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches, the Holy See in Rome did not see eye to eye with the Hesychasts at all. They preferred intellectual discussions around the true nature of divinity to contemplative prayer.

But is mere silent suffering enough to guarantee closeness to God?²⁶ Does Henry VI need official confirmation of his status as a saint or are his posthumous miracles

²⁴ The first three books on her Tudors series are collectively referred to as *The Cousins' War*. The thesis focuses only on *The Red Queen* and *The White Queen*. While *The Lady of the Rivers* is a novel about the same time period, it does not deal with Henry VI to any great extent.

²⁵ These icons appeared in Russia and nearby countries from the sixteenth century. It shows the theologian casting his head down in contemplation as an angel whispers the Gospel into his ear and he holds the Bible in his hands.

²⁶ Except to the evolutionist (to whom Holocaustic misery is requisite to progress), suffering is an unavoidable, complex, and unresolved issue in most religions. From the Buddhist perspective on *dukkha*

enough? Is sanctity a private, mysterious relationship with God? These are some of the issues we will try to explore in the following pages.

This thesis is about the literary afterlives of the Christian king Henry VI. It considers the ways that he has been portrayed in art, literature, and (briefly) film. He has many faces (saint, holy fool, hermit, and psychopath) and they reflect the many roles he has played in history and imagination. His being on the periphery has contributed to his endurance: his role as the ‘silent sufferer’ is a recurrent theme in this work, but for now it is sufficient to note that this concept of a silent king has also served many social and psychological needs. It is possible to identify a pattern in each author’s deployment of his silence; we keep returning to a drama of self-annihilation and self-creation. Deprived of his voice, he becomes the antithesis to his social role. In a way, he becomes the scapegoat, thrust out of his own kingdom, with all its evils on his shoulder. The Henry VI of literature is always forced to rewrite himself to find redemption.

His silence works on a number of levels: it can be a plot device dictated by the narrative structure of the literary work we find it in. It can be an unconscious metaphor for exile, alienation, loss, and grief. It has its inevitable symbolic significance, especially when we compare it to the madness of Saul or Nebuchadnezzar.²⁷ With modern authors, Henry’s silence is always on its way to becoming some other state of mind. As such, it also touches on themes that belong to other traditions: mystical spirituality, the role of contemplation in Christian living, the significance of miracles. But at its heart is the Christian understanding of saints and the dangerous spaces they inhabit.

While tracing the history of Henry’s sanctity, we need to remember that saints belong to God and people, so their sanctity may be preserved in their body, in their miracles, and in places they once visited. Veneration of such matter has always been

to Islamic discussions of the Arabic term *musiba*, suffering has played an enduring role in many religious traditions. Only in Jewish and Catholic traditions, however, does suffering have intrinsic merit because it allows us to share Christ’s redemptive work.

²⁷ The account of Saul is found in the First Book of Samuel. He was the first king of Israel (1029–1005 BCE). The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II is famous as ‘the king who ate grass’: he was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird. (Daniel 4:33) But communion with animals was also an accepted sign of sanctity, especially among ascetics. St Francis and numerous other saints have been known to preach to birds. This comparison can be extended to cover Greek representations of tragic madness in *Herakles* or *Orestes*, especially since they often suffer from no fault of their own.

close to heresy, and the struggle to contain the power of holy matter is virtually a permanent intellectual challenge for the church. Theological intricacies of Origen or Augustine, however, did not worry the medieval layman. Henry VI was a spiritual salve and, more importantly, a path to salvation.

The plurality of ideas about the nature of salvation shows how conveniently medieval Christianity accommodated disparate beliefs. The concept of sanctity was equally fluid.²⁸ For most of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, worshipping the Precious Blood of Christ or the True Cross (a relic Henry VI worshipped) were largely ignored by the Holy See.²⁹ Incidentally, when Henry VI founded Eton College, he wanted it to become a place for pilgrimages and he gave it a large number of relics. Included among these relics were the ubiquitous Thorn and a piece of the True Cross. He also donated a piece of the finger and spine of St John of Bridlington.³⁰ It wasn't until a resurgence of several localised cults in France and Italy in the late twelfth century illustrated how far relic worship had gone that there was a response from the forces of orthodoxy. But the more the medieval church tried to integrate itself into Western society, the more fragmented it became. Medieval religion did have an underlying unifying tendency but the overwhelming need to control heresy drove church insiders apart. Each relic, each shrine, and each cult became 'a coincidence of opposites', to borrow Caroline Walker Bynum's description of holy matter.³¹ This schism is also clear in Henry VI's cult.

²⁸ See Stanley Tambiah's theory of holiness in *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Since saints belong to God in heaven and among us down below, what goes up *comes down*. Canonisation does not prevent further controversy, as we see in the cult of St Francis of Assisi who was canonised in 1228, two years after his death. This did not stop rival factions from disputing his position on apostolic poverty. Humans may become saints by turning away from the world, but their sanctity has to be negotiated and understood in worldly terms.

²⁹ The actual development of pilgrimages and devotional spaces began around the 5th century in Gaul. Later bishops decided to erect structures and monuments to the memories of saints and people flocked to these shrines. The veneration of Christ's Blood (it was an immensely popular cult in Wilsnack, Germany) and The Cross had more complex theological and psychological aspects. The doctrinal bedrock of both cults is Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*.

³⁰ A piece of finger and spine, *Eton College Collections: Archives, Art, Libraries and Museums*, <https://collections.etoncollege.com/> (Accessed August 21, 2021).

³¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011).

By mining many centuries of Western theology and literature, we shall focus on Henry VI's importance to Christian thought and argue that this overlooked character is indispensable to our understanding of the theology of human suffering. The literature of the Wars of the Roses is vast, and it is necessary to choose a particular path through this crowded terrain. While this work will be limited to his religious significance, many other perspectives are possible, some of which we will touch upon. The introduction sets out Henry VI's role in Christian thinking about humiliation, silence, and martyrdom. This is followed by a complete survey of the late medieval Henry VI cult in Chapter One.

We may imagine any late medieval saintly cult as an inchoate group of loosely organised experiments around the problematic issue of salvation, each with its own religious and philosophical heritage. Christian sainthood was made manifest in a number of activities: scholastic pursuits, bodily discipline, martyrdom. They could be an ascetic, a teacher, a healer, a confessor, or a philosopher. But their sanctity came from their closeness to God and Jesus, the God-man. Indeed, Jesus's status as God Incarnate and Resurrection Man was regularly debated during the eleventh century. To understand the nature of saints, we need to understand the nature of Christ and how his divinity is fundamentally different from the divinity of anointed kings or the Pope or a martyr. There are also distinctions between historical early martyrdoms and their representations in medieval martyr cults.

As the first chapter will attempt to highlight, humiliation and martyrdom are politically more meaningful than the earliest Christian traditions would have us think. There were reservations about martyrdom once persecution had subsided in the West. Asceticism, intellectual endeavours, and virginity were prized more than the willingness to sacrifice one's life. For every biblical precedent for heroic deaths, there were others emphasising the importance of living to fight for another day.³² Martyr sainthood gained importance between 300 and 500 after the persecution had ended. Throughout, bodily remains and material memorabilia were important to devotees. They denoted the power of the saintly virtues that were being invoked to win wars and keep the plague at bay. The glory of the early Christians' sacrifices was also used to legitimise contemporary

³² A very different idea was propounded by Candida Moss in *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*, where she describes the idea of 'persecution' as completely fictional and claims that most of the early martyrs' stories are pure invention. They were created and embellished during and after the fourth century.

issues in the 4th century. By the time Henry VI was enthroned, martyrdom was a prominent method for a royal to be venerated as a saint. More significantly, it was a culmination of all early and late medieval devotional traditions, highlighting the church's responses to asceticism, monasticism, and eremiticism, though not in that particular order. Henry VI devotees imagined they had chanced upon a perfect balance of royalty and martyrdom. In many ways, it was an attempt to build a saintly cult that was profitable and free of heresy. But martyrdom was a contested concept, and miracles/relics were in equal parts powerful and dangerous. Even Augustine's scepticism for martyr's shrines eventually softened when Stephen the Protomartyr's relics were unearthed.³³

Martyr cults had social, spiritual, and ethical dimensions that were often in conflict. And how far could Henry's death be manipulated to engage the attentions of the lay devotee? There are no tidy answers to these questions, but these are a few issues the chapter attempts to address. Medievalists are correct to be cautious about whether John Blacman's *Henry VI* and similar stories are evidence of a cult having genuine roots in the past or are just examples of Tudor propaganda. And like all other saints, he has been subject to misunderstandings and misinformation, even among his followers. He is also a divisive figure; to Protestants, veneration of Henry's images looked like idolatry. The literature of the cult acts out this fragmentation, and Henry's obsessive piety and pacifism are treated as evidence of self-abnegation. The English historian Simon Yarrow thought that 'saintly intercession was difficult for churchmen to reduce to simple doctrinal statements. To do so risked legislating for God's actions, perhaps even ventriloquizing his intentions.'³⁴ Nevertheless, as Henry's cult gained more popularity, some guidance was needed. John Blacman's *Henry VI* illustrates how violent death and nobility of status were hallmarks of sanctity in western Europe. There was also the grave issue of the possibility of Henry being physically present in the shrines and relics.

Chapter One outlines the prominent stories and speculations about Henry's martyrdom. Chapter Two examines the implications of these speculations. It also

³³ Hippolyte Delehay explains how Augustine hoped that stories about people cured by Stephen would one day be a counterpart to the miraculous stories in the Bible. Augustine has requested everyone who had been cured by Stephen's relics to write down their spiritual experiences.

³⁴ Simon Yarrow, *Saints: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Kindle

addresses two particular issues with regard to post-sixteenth century portrayals of Henry: his status as an exile and his pacifism.

Shakespeare's portrayal of Henry explores all the legal implications of being a *Mater Misericordia* prototype (the medieval Mother of Mercies tradition³⁵). In spite of its scale and unconventional composition, it was the first representation of Henry VI that did not emerge from some, or many, devotional traditions. Henry VI's exile is metaphorical even as it is taking place: his response works within the literary model Shakespeare uses here, which is the representation of exile as a liberation, and as the realisation of a divine vocation. This is also a valuable entry point for understanding the role of saints on the eve of the Reformation, when England's removal from Rome was being rewritten as a sort of liberation. Shakespeare's own career was also dependent on his exile from Stratford-upon-Avon.³⁶

The cult portrayed him as a royal martyred saint but this was by no means the only identity available to Henry, particularly because he was also a king who fought two dangerous civil insurrections. Pacifism in the face of French and Yorkist contenders becomes an act of heroism in this case. In *'Of an Excellent Actor'* (1615), John Webster writes, 'All men have beene of his occupation: and indeed, what hee doth fainedly that doe others essentially: this day one plaies a Monarch, the next a private person. Heere one Acts a Tyrant, on the morow an Exile: A Parasite this man to-night, to-morow a Precisian, and so of divers others.'³⁷ The exile was a recognisable dramatic character in Elizabethan England, and we will look at Shakespeare's writing and rewriting of Henry's

³⁵ *Mater Misericordiae* is a phrase that means 'Mother of Mercy'. The more precise meaning of *miserericordia* in the medieval ages was explained by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa*, where he described how the entirety of Christianity could be encapsulated in the single word 'mercy'. *Mater Misericordiae* was a very popular subject of devotion in thirteenth century Italy. Although it waned by the fifteenth century, it was alive till the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Mary was represented in various images as the central intercessory figure between humans and Christ. It was, and still is, understood as a devotional image. See Katherine T. Brown, *Mary of Mercy in Medieval and Renaissance Italian Art: Devotional image and civic emblem* (New York: Routledge, 2017)

³⁶ There are multiple works of scholarship that also consider if Shakespeare might have been an exile and connected to Italy by family and language. Chief among these are Richard Paul Roe's *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy: Retracing the Bard's Unknown Travels* and Lamberto Tassinari's *John Florio: The Man Who Was Shakespeare*.

³⁷ See the third edition of Sir Thomas Overbury's *Characters* first published 1613. Webster's addition is reprinted in *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. 4, 257-8, 258.

exile in the context of various dramatic banishments. Exile recurs in multiple Renaissance revenge tragedies, like Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* and *The Malcontent*, Dekker's *Lust's Dominion*, and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*.³⁸ The study also considers if Henry VI's exile is treated as a reason for Henry VII's revenge, besides taking in a number of contexts in which his exile may be defined, particularly how, and if, it relates with Henry's pacifism and his war efforts. It also demonstrates how a cult can become poisonous as soon as the genuine devotion which engendered it vanishes. The sense of intimacy with the humiliated king isn't immediately broken off. At moments of intense conflict, Yorkists treat the king with gentleness and understanding. There is a residue of sweetness in the monarch's broken personality that offers hope. Not hope for reconciliation, but for a limit to the terrors both sides would inflict and sustain. The Wars of the Roses is catastrophic, bizarre, and (Shakespeare would have known) perfectly ordinary.

Shakespeare's picture of Henry isn't entirely objective; his moral judgement is harder on Henry than on Gloucester or Exeter, underlining Henry's self-absorbed and self-pitying ways, but Henry is also the play's emotional centre of gravity. He is blind to the consequences of his extreme pacifism, which includes forgiving Cade's followers after their revolution. Henry's 'insanity' is never mentioned, but his silence during key moments in the play suggests Shakespeare treats it as a sidebar notwithstanding Elizabeth's Lancastrian roots. And while the trilogy delves into the tangled thickets of each character's personal life, it is also tactful about the sexual lives of Henry and Margaret.

An exploration of the state of fatherlessness (extending into issues of God's own silence and absence during key biblical moments) will shape the interpretation of Philippa Gregory's series called *The Cousins' War*, which is also one of the first feminist retellings of the Wars of the Roses. Before proceeding to Gregory's masterful work, the study will pause to reflect on Pope's reference to Henry VI in his poem *Windsor Forest*.³⁹ Pope uses time as a great equaliser, turning tyrants and martyrs into the same thing. But between Shakespeare's 1591 play on the wars and Pope's 1713 topographical poem,

³⁸ Thomas Lodge refers to exile as a proper study of tragedy in his *Defence of Poetry*.

³⁹ Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope* (London: Routledge, 1963), ed. By John Butts. Accessed on Perlego.

something has been lost. Henry VI's failings have ceased to matter. The Lancastrian-Yorkist tussle is no longer politically relevant; in fact, people are no longer facing the consequences of Henry VII's revenge on Richard III, as they were when Shakespeare was writing. *Windsor Forest* isn't so much a story about England as it is a story about stories about England - of the stories that are told about a nation in crisis and the political frameworks that give rise to those stories and prove to be inseparable from their substance. For us, *Windsor Forest* bridges pre-Shakespearean and post-Shakespearean imaginings of Henry, moving in surprising directions to reveal the (sometimes insidious) way we remember stories, and the high price we pay for remembering or forgetting them.

This is a useful reminder of the fact that one half of this study focuses on literature written by scholars and playwrights who were either close to Henry VI and witnessed the development of his cult, or were living through times that were a direct result of his political choices. The other half focuses on two separate Wars of Roses trilogies by extremely popular authors of historical fiction. There are parallels between the two halves, but for Shakespeare and even Henry's devotees, the wars are a baseline complaint. Throughout the unmediated, unstructured personal confrontations in Shakespeare's trilogy, what emerges is a political horror, one that in its monstrosity, shows us exactly why Henry was deposed. The victorious ending of Henry VII's plans for revenge is dramatically earned. The same is not true of 21st century representations of Henry.

It has not been possible within the scope of this study to examine Gregory's use of female narrators, much like we also proceed without any commentary on Pope's use of pastoral elements in *Windsor Forest*. The present work concentrates on how this technique influences Gregory's creation of Henry's identity, if at all. An essential starting point for understanding her perspective is the possibility of Henry's silent suffering being a symbol of Godforsakenness. Godforsakenness is Simon D. Podmore's innovative way of understanding Kierkegaard's theological account of spiritual suffering, and he is referenced often.⁴⁰ These are tragedies of the Wars of the Roses viewed from a distance,

⁴⁰ For a complete understanding of Godforsakenness, see Simon D. Podmore's doctoral thesis, *The Anatomy of the Abyss: Kierkegaard, Modernity, and the Self Before God* (King's College, University of London, 2009).

filtered through memory, and insulated by grief. Chapter Three attempts to bring a popular twentieth century novelist together with a nineteenth century theologian whose own suffering and melancholy are famous. Kierkegaard's thoughts on Christianity's 'inner madness' are used to distil Gregory's evocative images of the silent king. A dreaming king who smiled as he dreamt is an image Gregory creates to evoke empathy. This Henry VI is a risky synthesis of fact and fiction; Gregory only draws on memories of his piety and silence. The chapter closes with a comparison of Henry's 'divine' suffering with another moment of madness in the Bible: the *Akedah*, or Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac.⁴¹

Henry VI would have been an easier monarch to understand if he had been a conventional martial hero like his father and grandfather, or if his story had a 'triumph of the human soul' trajectory. The actual tension in all the works comes from the wars and the omnipresent threat of violence. More than either Shakespeare or Pope, films like *The King*, *Henry V* and the TV series *Game of Thrones* (based on George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*) make clear the nonwitness's desire to experience the wars or memorialise it. This desire is not Martin's alone; nor is it limited to Wars of the Roses experts. Perhaps it's an unspoken desire to be there: in the markets and bridges and swamps where the wars were fought. *Game of Thrones* is the kind of fantasy that can satisfy this kind of desire to witness medieval wars. In many ways, *Game of Thrones* is an attempt to actualise the Wars of the Roses fantasies through exposure to wartime figures. Depictions of religions are manipulated to make the late fifteenth century more real and approachable today in American culture.

What is most interesting about this phenomenon is the *sheer impossibility* of satisfying such desires. We approach *Game of Thrones* expecting to be swallowed up by the horror of the five-decade feud, but after four hundred years, we discover that there's nothing left to overwhelm us anymore. Despite our wish to internalise the pain of the war or the tribulations of Henry VI, we feel distanced from the actuality of what had happened long ago. TV episodes about medieval times are often a way to heal from our sense of estrangement from the past. In retelling the long-forgotten chronicle, we're all trying to

⁴¹ Akedah, of the Binding of Isaac, is a story found in Genesis 22. According to the story, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. Abraham led his son to the mountain, but at the moment of the sacrifice, a messenger of God (Raphael or Gabriel, depending on your source) stayed his hand. Abraham praised the Lord and sacrificed a ram instead.

gain access to and ‘remember’ a past that eludes us. The fourth and final chapter examines such efforts by ‘nonwitnesses’ (a term borrowed from the Holocaust researcher Gary Weissman⁴²) to understand the lived reality of the Wars. There is also a fear of forgetting and the danger of denial, like with any important historical event like the Civil War or slavery. Perhaps the exceptional success of the series and the moderate success of Iggulden’s novels signify the moment Henry VI entered the American mainstream. Here, again, Henry becomes a container for collective memory. The threat that he faces is not of denial, but disassociation. The real worry is that Western civilisation will come to view him much as they view Civil Wars heroes: maybe they will acknowledge his presence during the Wars or his exceptional importance to English religious history, but feel no special commitment to ‘remembering’ who he was.

There are two problems with popularising Henry VI: trivialising him and universalising him. Many popular history websites may be charged with undermining his true importance by depicting him in ways that can be considered crude, or relativising him by comparing him with inappropriate characters and events. A similar charge - of whitewashing the horror of the Wars of the Roses and the dangerous flaws of Henry VI - may be levelled against this current study. Themes of martyrdom, survival, redemption, and the spiritual triumph of humanity over inhumanity are emphasised in popular fiction about Henry VI in order to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. Since the literary marketplace and the box office will continue to influence how the character of Henry VI gets rendered for public consumption to a greater extent than critical writing on the subject, Wars of the Roses stories with magical happy endings will proliferate. However, there is no shortage of scholarship condemning the redemption arc of Wars of the Roses. The most complex form of popularisation occurs when Henry’s historic specificity (so central to understanding his cult and Shakespeare’s choice of him as a protagonist) is ignored or downright disregarded to ensure that people outside England identify with him or care about his fate. Neither Gregory nor Iggulden write of Henry VI as a ‘Lancastrian’ brought up with Lancastrian religious values.⁴³ More frequently, he is universalised when we view him as a symbol or archetype. This happens whenever he is

⁴² See Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2004).

⁴³ See ‘Understanding Lancastrianism’ in Grummit’s *Henry VI*

evaluated (as he often is during the course of this study) as a symbol of ultimate human suffering or a representation of Godforsakenness.

Modern depictions of Henry VI (in *Game of Thrones* or in Iggulden's trilogy) save him from being lost to a distant past by giving his character moral significance beyond a historical moment but it does so at the expense of obscuring who Henry really was and removing his un-universality from history. Avid viewers of *Game of Thrones* or *House of Dragons* (its prequel) might know that the Mad King is a portrayal of Henry VI, yet know nothing about his fascinating life and influence on religion.⁴⁴ On the other hand, Shakespeare uses actual Wars of the Roses events as a backdrop to explore Henry's character as an ethical/moral paradigm.

Although Lancastrians and Yorkists have long ended their feud, the psychic imprint of war trauma is shared by Gregory and Iggulden. Iggulden's father was a fighter pilot for RAF during World War II and Gregory was born during apartheid in Kenya. Both are intensely aware of how their use of history is shaped by their memories.

"I am aware that my interpretation of events is very much influenced by the fact that I am a 21st century woman. In years to come, writers and scholars will re-examine the period and probably my work – and have a different take. I also think it's important not to consciously write for a particular audience, just to write the best you can," said a 65-year-old Gregory during a Goodreads Ask the Author session.⁴⁵ While Iggulden's story can strike one as a romantic fantasy staging a medieval monarch's transformation into a postmodern symbol of war trauma, Gregory presents his life as a convincing argument of how deeply we're still engaging with the same moral conundrums as the Lancastrians and Tudors.

A last example of blurred distinctions between Henry VI literature written by witnesses and nonwitnesses also concerns the absence of God. And any questions about God's absence begin with a more basic question about how perceptions of the Christian God change, unravel, or remain unchanged over time. Henry VI's presence is a black

⁴⁴ The Mad King Aerys II burns down King's Landing (a London city prototype) and is eventually murdered by Jamie Lannister, a member of the King's Guard. Martin bases him on Henry VI, who essentially also threw England into a civil war that ended up destroying thousands of innocent lives.

⁴⁵ "Ask the Author: Philippa Gregory", *Author*, https://www.goodreads.com/author/9987.Phillippa_Gregory/questions (Accessed June 23, 2022)

light pointed at the theological crime scene of today: it's impossible not to see everything that has gone wrong. Writer/director Ingmar Bergman has delivered cinematic equivalents of medieval 'meaning of life' arguments around the issues of ecclesiology, soteriology, the meaning of the sacraments, and the identity of the Godhead and his son. He is grappling with the same basic Christian doctrines as the Council of Nicaea or Origen or Augustine, with his filmography providing a Christian philosophy of history. The difference between them is one of distance rather than substance. The paradoxical tension between God as the fragmented presence, the absent figure of authority, and as an evil concept is presented in *Through a Glass Darkly*, the film we use to establish contact with the religious themes in Iggulden's stories.⁴⁶ However, no matter how all-encompassing a symbol, it cannot compare with a person's lived memories.

We are witnessing representations of Henry VI, all of them created and preserved after his death. Perhaps this study itself blurs distinctions between a late medieval saint's life, a Renaissance drama, and modern historical romances. Henry VI's silence and suffering are challenges to narrative integrity, and our close reading of our literary sources will take in the different contexts in which his 'silence' can be defined, particularly the theological ones.

⁴⁶ *Såsom i en spegel* (Through a Glass Darkly), directed by Ingmar Bergman (Janus Films, 1961).

CHAPTER ONE

‘Loving Pity and Pitiful Love’: The Cult of Henry VI

In an influential lecture on late medieval canonisation processes and the changing nature of tenth and eleventh century saints’ cults at the 2004 International Medieval Congress at Leeds, Gábor Klaniczay characterised the emergence of the cult of royal saints as an abuse of the original model of sainthood that developed from the cult of martyrs who, ‘among others, refused to honour the statutes of the divinized Roman emperor and bravely confronted all kinds of representatives of earthly power.’¹ ‘The glory of sainthood was not destined for rulers’, said Klaniczay, ‘however virtuous a few of them may have been, for their duties included being victorious in bloody battles, pronouncing death sentences to punish the guilty, and upholding their dynasties by generating heirs, if necessary by ending sterile marriages.’² Yet, in spite of strong ecclesiastical hostility, cults were being built around belligerent royal figures by the end of the eleventh century. Both Klaniczay and the famous Czech historian Frantisek Graus have argued that early Anglo Saxon rulers achieved sanctity by being weak leaders and abdicating their positions, and not because of their political rank.³ During the early middle ages, royal sainthood depended almost entirely on martyrdom – the *passiones* suffered by Olaf, Oswald or Edward the Confessor were reminiscent of Christ. Many European kings in the tenth and eleventh centuries would be called ‘holy’, ‘Blessed’ or, at the very least ‘pious’: England’s Henry II and Edward the Confessor, the Norwegian St Olaf and St Vladimir and the French Robert the Pious were part of the attractive cult of martyred kings.⁴ The late medieval cult of Henry VI was, in many ways, a culmination of these

¹ Gábor Klaniczay, “The Power of the Saints and the Authority of the Popes: The History of Sainthood and Late Medieval Canonization Processes,” in *Church and Belief in the Middle Ages: Popes, Saints, and Crusaders*, edited by Kirsi Salonen and Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 121.

² Ibid., 121

³ See Frantisek Graus, *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger: Studien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit*, (Prague: NCSAV, 1965).

⁴ For more information on early medieval royal cults, see Andri Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Gabor Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe*, trans. Eva Palmai, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

traditions of devotion, a final Catholic attempt to venerate an approachably frail character, and a final attempt to discover a method of devotion that would be popular and profitable without being a threat to an increasingly paranoid papal curia. This was achieved by representing Henry VI as a complex mix of a royal miracle-working martyr, a humiliated and tortured innocent, and an authoritative religious leader who suffered *imitatio Christi*-style to save his kingdom from damnation. Medieval Catholicism (as a worldview which emerged around the end of the twelfth century) was a search for balance and harmony, within which there was a great variety of ideas and rituals. As partly divinised human beings, saints were (at least intellectually) the linchpin of the philosophy underlying Catholic beliefs. Studying the Henry VI cult allows us to tease out the systems of lay thought governing these religious movements.

This chapter will begin with a historical overview of how representations of saints influenced medieval Christianity from the point of view of medievalists known for their work on saintly cults, like Klaniczay, Graus, Robert Folz, and Andri Vauchez. The themes that have been chosen reflect the ones most prominent in the Henry VI cult. The focus of the analysis is the way Henry VI's failures were treated after his death, and Henry VI continues to appear in popular literature long after the cult has ceased to dictate how their hero can be represented. A comprehensive survey of saints' cults in the middle ages is beyond the scope of this chapter, and many early medieval saintly lives are irrelevant to this study. A few of the books referenced here are internationally famous (like Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars*)⁵ but for the most part, research on saintly cults on the eve of the reformation is limited. The five hundredth anniversary of Henry VI's death gave us a definitive Henry VI biography, and books on his reign and policies. Unlike more famous English saints like Becket, Edward the Confessor, or Edmund the Pious, there is no book-length work on the Henry VI cult. Perhaps this will change with Eamon Duffy's promising 2018 essay on the devotional tendencies of the Henry VI cult.⁶ The most famous essay on the cult, J. W. McKenna's 'Piety and Propaganda' has been discredited ever since the beginning of this century, when a few young medievalists

⁵ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, C.1400-c.1580*, (Yale: Yale University Press, 2005)

⁶ Eamon Duffy, 'The Cult of 'St' Henry VI' in *Royal Books and Holy Bones: Essays in Medieval Christianity*, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018)

began to probe the assumption that laymen were disillusioned with Catholic practices before the Henrician reformation.⁷

This chapter shall also attempt to provide a full exploration of the cult over the course of five decades. Existing work on the cult (including Duffy's essay) concentrates on religious beliefs that instigated the formation of the cult, and typically ignores any perspective on how the cult was sustained, or how skillfully the Tudors manipulated the veneration of Henry VI to secure their own dynasty. A period divide has been imposed on the cult for the sake of convenience. Part of the argument of this section of the thesis is that the cult was used (or usable) for political propaganda only after Henry Tudor came to the English throne in 1485. Literature and art produced after Henry Tudor's accession have been studied separately also because their thematic concerns were decided by the political requirements of Rome, unlike prayers written immediately after Henry VI's murder. It is argued that the cult began as an interactive process of 'storytelling' following Henry's intense humiliation and mysterious death in the Tower (both humiliation and death have redemptive qualities). The second part of the chapter puts forward the idea that Tudor courtiers altered representations of Henry VI to suit the papal curia's tastes during his canonisation trial. These representations and Henry's miracles are interpreted in the light of growing papal suspicion of heresy, witchcraft, and the dubious adoration of materials. A close textual reading of Henry's *Life* has also been undertaken. Finally, one of the main focuses of the chapter is the frugal Henry Tudor's political motives for promoting the cult of an uncle he hardly knew.

Inevitably, there are many areas of silence in the literature covered here. Neither John Blacman (the author of Henry VI's *Life*) nor any work produced by the cult discuss Henry's illness, although Blacman refers to his devotional silences in passing. The aesthetic of silence is missing within late medieval Henry VI artwork. *Silentium* is central to medieval devotional traditions, but representations of silence would have been as problematic as everything 'material'. Rather than reflect on the problems of artistic experiments with silence, it serves our purpose better to respond to the religious texts of the cult on their own terms. The themes that have been chosen reflect the ones most

⁷ John W. McKenna, "Piety and Propaganda: The Cult of Henry VI," in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

prominent in the cult, and later writers (including Shakespeare and Pope) treat these as significant compositional elements to create their own representations of Henry. This study of the cult, therefore, is the frame within which ‘the ways in which various silences and hearings of silence point to each other’⁸ can be most clearly perceived.

Historical Overview

The first royal who was canonised solely for his apostolic missions and converting Hungarians was St Stephen of Hungary (canonised in 1083), in spite of not having been a martyr.⁹ The church did not give unrestricted veneration any importance. For a long time during the early middle ages, the papacy regarded the cult of royal saints as a marginal issue, to be governed by local custom. As long as there was no abuse of the standards of the Holy See (like venerating a ruler who had fallen dead in a drunken haze),¹⁰ Rome seldom intervened in these affairs. The Holy See knew that the legitimacy of any local cult not validated by them was questionable and unlikely to last too long. The Crusades were a turning point in the evolution of royal sainthood. Military victories, earlier an obstacle in the road to sanctity, became an essential component of it.¹¹ The requirements for canonisation were changing according to the church’s political requirements, and the church needed to strengthen the anti-Hohenstaufen alliance, continue the Crusades, and oppose heretical sects in Europe’s backyard. Twelfth century *chansons de geste* celebrated the military achievements of sacred kings like Alexander the Great, King Arthur, and Charlemagne (who was canonised in 1165). Earlier royal saints were also reshaped as victorious *milites Christi*.¹²

⁸ Susan Sontag, ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’, in *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Vintage, 1994), 3-34; Quoted by Nicky Lossef and Jenny Doctor in the ‘Introduction’ to *Silence, Music, Silent Music* (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 2

⁹ Klaniczay, *The Power of the Saints*, 122

¹⁰ In 1171 Pope Alexander III wrote a horrified letter to a Swedish king whose name began with ‘K’ about the strange veneration of a man who was killed by falling of a horse while drunk. There are many who think this was Knut Eriksson (1167-1196) or King Erik himself, killed by a rival claimant in c. 1160, or King Sverker, killed in c. 1156, or his son, King Karl Sverkersson, killed in 1167; See Klaniczay, *The Power of Saints*, 120

¹¹ Klaniczay, *The Power of Saints*, 122

¹² Ibid., 123

The canonisation of Charlemagne is especially important to this discussion for two reasons: first, it was the most conspicuous papal event of the twelfth century; and because the canonisation depended entirely on the translation of what was believed to be the relic of the Three Magi to Cologne. The *praesentia* of the saints in their relics allowed a new kind of episcopal power to emerge, according to Klaniczay.¹³ Sainly relics buttressed contemporary notions of sacred kingship and held considerable political power. Throughout the middle ages, saintly relics were ‘used’ to help in political affairs like wars, protection of royal dynasties and strengthening abbeys and bishoprics. Further, Charlemagne’s sainthood represented Rome’s encouragement of a ‘fear-inspiring’ face of religious power and an increasing need to control and harness numerous local saints’ cults in places like Sweden, France, or Italy. An extract from Charlemagne’s legend shows how the nature of saintly power was changing:

*patenter declaratur, qualiter sagitta eius nunquam retorsum abierit, nec declinavit clypeus eius a bello et hasta non sit aversa, cum tamen ipsius vigilantissima et deo devote sublimita pro Christinomine nullum subterfugerit periculum vel sancte fidei nomen propagare, vel hostes sancte dei ecclesie expugnare.*¹⁴

(‘It is plainly declared how his arrow never went back, nor did his shield turn away from the war, and his spear was not averted; yet, while he was most watchful and devoutly submitted to God, he did not shun any danger either to propagate the holy name of the faith, or to attack the enemies of God’s holy church.’)

The cult of royal saints also kept alive implications of hereditary sanctity, and entire dynasties in Austria were believed to be blessed. However, if saintly veneration was something that could be inherited from a predecessor – and virtue was carried in blood – papal rights to authorise such veneration were largely meaningless. But these allegedly ‘blessed’ dynasties never relied on their sacral power for concrete political gains. Very few medieval monarchs claimed, or needed to claim, the Divine Right to Rule. Notions of sacrality were built into monarchical ceremonies and rituals throughout Europe, but as a political tool, it was particularly ineffective in reinforcing any claim to

¹³ Ibid., 118.

¹⁴ Gerhard Rauschen, *Die Legende Karls der Grossen im 11. Und 12. Jarhundert*. (Leipzig: 1890), quoted by Gabor Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 172.

authority. The Ottonians never aspired for sacrality in their own right, though there were many saints in their dynasty. The powerful Francis I (1494-1547) never took rumours of his royal saintly bloodline being the Second Chosen People seriously.¹⁵ Legends and myths surrounded the Habsburgs, but issues of domestic authority never troubled the Habsburg monarchy - they were more concerned with their hallowed war against Islam and Protestantism.¹⁶ Richard II (1367-1400) was the sole late medieval English monarch who was concerned with divine kingship. Additionally, no European dynasty could legitimately claim the throne purely on the basis of hereditary sacrality. It was an added advantage to be able to 'incorporate the sacred into the bundle of claims which reinforced their power and status, one of whose strengths was precisely its vagueness and adaptability. Attempts to turn sacred kingship into an actual style of rule, on the other hand, were probably best seen as signs of panic or weakness.'¹⁷ By the fourteenth century, papal attempts to sanctify military monarchs had ended because their initiatives in Denmark, Hungary, and Poland had yielded no significant political returns.¹⁸ The contested canonisation of Charles of Blois was ultimately annulled after 1364 by Pope Gregory IX at the request of his opponent in the war for succession.¹⁹ Leopold III of Babenberg was canonised in 1485, but he had declined the honour of being elected as Kaiser of the Holy Roman Empire, effectively abdicating his position.²⁰ King Louis IX of France was the only king who was canonised in the thirteenth century on the strength of his pious reign, crusades and his eventual brave martyrdom. In spite of these merits, the canonisation was successful because of a strong political deal between the French king Philip the Fair and Pope Boniface VIII, and it took more than twelve years.²¹

Finally, the expensive, unsuccessful late medieval attempt to secure the canonisation of a royal saint (that of Henry VI) was very close to completion on the eve

¹⁵ Robin Briggs, review of *The Power of Kings: Monarchy and Religion in Europe*, (review no. 127), on www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/127.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., Review 127.

¹⁸ Klaniczay, *The Power of the Saints*, 124.

¹⁹ Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, 80.

²⁰ Klaniczay, *The Power of the Saints*, 125.

²¹ Ibid., 125.

of the Reformation.²² The Henry VI cult showed late medieval Europe an innovative way of sanctifying a ruler who was very far removed from Rome's ideal of *rex iustus* (like King Louis IX) or a significant spiritual leader like the Angevin prince Saint Louis of Toulouse who abdicated from his rank to live a religious life.²³ Henry's political failures were softened by his merciful image and intense religiosity, but he never 'gave up' his political role as king of England and France. In truth, he may have been better fitted for the cloister, but he spent his reign in the palace of Windsor. Medieval political and ecclesiastical thought accorded additional sanctity to a ruling monarch who performed his kingly duties and exercised his royal influence. Exercising legislative sovereignty was crucial to Christian kingship. Henry VI was a feeble-minded, indecisive advocate of non-violent leadership who presided over England's loss of French territories and whose sheer inefficiency provoked the dangerous family feud known as the Wars of the Roses. He notoriously fled to London during Jack Cade's Kentish rebellion of 1450. Attempts to identify an alternative 'pious' version of the ideal Christian kingship in Henry VI are modern. Contemporary church authorities would have found it difficult to recognise his sacral powers simply because of his flawed style of rule. At least that was the church's official position. The sermon Pope Boniface VIII delivered on the occasion of the canonisation of Louis IX began, "*Rex pacificus magnificatus est*" – "The peaceful king is magnified." He proceeded to declare that "a person who does not know how to rule himself and his subjects is a false king" and "those who do not rule well are not kings."²⁴ Devotional activities were not incompatible with successfully running a kingdom. Medieval conceptions of royal piety were essentially dependent on good governance and justice; a well-ruled kingdom could be linked to exemplary piety on the part of the king. If we observe the works of hagiographers of early medieval martyr kings like the Venerable Bede and Abbo of Fleury, we can see them working on a new model of Christian conduct for secular officers.²⁵ John Lydgate followed the same tradition when he translated a number of Latin works on the duties of an efficient monarch.²⁶

²² Ibid., 125.

²³ Ibid., 125.

²⁴ Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "Philip the Fair of France – Nemesis of Edward I of England" in *Prowess, Piety and Public Order in Medieval Society: Studies in Honour of Richard W. Kaeuper* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 254.

²⁵ Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*, 115.

²⁶ Katherine J. Lewis, "Edmund of East Anglia, Henry VI, and Ideals of Kingly Masculinity" in *Holiness*

Lydgate's advise tracts and mirrors for princes functioned in the same conceptual framework as hagiographic representations of canonised monarchs, which clearly demonstrated how royal saints were holy because they were kings, and exemplary ones.

Let us also remember that this was the age of the *rois très chrétien*, a papal title reserved for French kings at the end of the reign of Charles V, great grandfather of Henry VI. The quintessence of this privilege is to be found in an affirmation made by the French Chancellory while preserving the title for Charles VI: 'We have resolved to preserve this very holy nickname conquered by our predecessors'. The 'nickname', therefore, is a hereditary title bequeathed to Charles VII by his predecessors, as confirmed by the famous Habsburg Frederick III in a letter to Charles VII. 'Your ancestors have assured your race the very Christian name as inheritance inherited'. From 1464, papal letters to the French king begin '*À mon très cher fils en Jésus-Christ, Louis, roi de France très chrétien.*' ('To my very dear son in Christ Jesus, Louis, King of France very Christian'.)²⁷ The qualifier '*rex christianissimus*' or '*rex catholicissimus*' was Rome's method of conferring religious legitimacy to the Most Christian kingdom of France and its Most Christian People by sanctifying an entire dynasty. The advantages of being on good terms with Rome were considerable. We have to keep in mind the political ramifications of the concept of hereditary sanctity when we turn to the various ways the saintly cults were evolving throughout the middle ages, and the complex power relations encapsulated in their cult. It was easier for Habsburgs, Angevins, and Merovingians to have their candidates considered for sainthood. Henry Tudor had a diplomatic connection with Rome. Pope Julius III had considered transferring the title to the Tudors between 1510 and 1530, but that Papal notice was never issued for obvious reasons.²⁸ Another characteristic feature to be emphasised among the effects of hereditary sacrality is that it constructs a vertical model of dependence.²⁹ The dynastic saint(s) became patrons not only of his heirs but also the families that visited

and *Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. by P.H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 161.

²⁷ For a comprehensive discussion on the concept of *Rex Christianissimus* see Graeme Small, *Late Medieval France* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 8-53.

²⁸ John W. McKenna, "How God became an Englishman", in *Tudor Rule and Revolution: Essays for G R Elton from His American Friends*, ed. by Delloyd J. Guth, John W. McKenna, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 40.

²⁹ Klaniczay, *The Power of the Saints*, 134.

his shrine or any beneficiary of healing miracles. The influence he wielded was tremendous. Notwithstanding the immense appeal of the medieval notion of *beata stirps*, it is possible that the cult of royal saints was ultimately futile for Rome because, as Klaniczay shows us, it was so far removed both from earlier cults of pagan charismatic kings, early medieval martyr kings, and living mendicant saints like Francis of Assisi. Papal encouragement of such cults was declining by the fourteenth century. After the Crusades were over, the secular ideal of *rex iustus* was difficult to harmonise with the image of a pious Christian leader.

Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, most of the saints recognised by Rome were bishops. Intriguingly, this ambivalence is also visible in Lives of Holy Bishops in this era.³⁰ In canonised bishops we find an interesting combination of the qualities of the stern leader and those of the quiet, pious ascetic. ‘Merovingian hagiography added new features to this model: aristocratic origins,’ writes Andri Vauchez, ‘the bishop was inevitably from a rich and powerful family and the role of the defender of the people against royal power and the arbitrary violence inflicted by the lay aristocracy on the people.’³¹ Unsurprisingly, all the bishops canonised between 1198 and 1431 were nobles. Many of them came from great aristocratic lineages and some of them were even from royal stock.³²

In a study of the cult of royal saints called *Les saints rois du Moyen Age en Occident*, Robert Folz identified three main types of royal saints from the sixth to the thirteenth century: martyr, confessor, and miracle worker (thaumaturge).³³ This list was also loosely chronological. The martyr king was a type that flourished in the early middle ages. From the eleventh to the thirteenth century, confessor saints were more popular. We find the miracle workers healing the scrofula, blindness and other diseases after the thirteenth century. Eventually the word confessors could be applied to anyone who had suffered for their faith and the love of Christ. Prelates like Athanasius or Augustine could be called (and they often were) martyrs and confessors. This synthesis is a very useful

³⁰ Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, 288.

³¹ Ibid., 288.

³² Ibid., 288.

³³ Robert Folz, *Les saints rois du Moyen Age en Occident (du VIe au XIIIe siecles)*, Subsidia Hagiographica, (Brussels: Societe de Bollandistes, 1985).

entry point for studying any aspect of late medieval religious power and authority, if only because the memories and relics of royal saints (that worked these miracles) were central to late medieval religious and political life. Like we understand from the evolution of the church's acceptance of the saint king throughout the late medieval age, the concept of *sanctus* itself was being broadened and manipulated by Rome. Additionally, this was a time of competing theological interests and ideologies – doctrinaires struggled to find answers to questions like the number of angels that could successfully balance themselves on the tip of a needle and the number of masses necessary to save the soul from damnation after death. We do not know to what extent apocalyptic expectations affected actual medieval religious practice, but its ubiquity in middle English poetry suggests it must have been a popular element in Christian piety (as opposed to medieval law and politics): 'The Christian anticipation of an apocalyptic event implicitly encourages such a pessimistic worldview, and this attitude is confirmed by a large body of apocalyptic art and literature in the middle ages that encourages personal reform to prepare for God's final judgment. By combining an anticipation for an end of days with an introspective outlook, the medieval Christian was motivated to disregard the social, economic, and political realities around him as vanities of the flesh which would soon be irrelevant at the time of God's ultimate reckoning.'³⁴ Scholars find traces of apocalyptic anxiety within the Great Papal Schism of 1387-1417, the medieval obsession with Christian materiality, their tendency to experience salvation 'physically' through saintly relics, and the proliferation of saints' cults and cults around physical remnants of the Crucifixion, but it did not affect everyday political affairs as much as we seem to think.³⁵ Records of court proceedings and legal deeds show that royals and aristocrats made detailed provisions to secure their estates, wealth, and influence, just in case the apocalypse was delayed, or cancelled.

The Assassination of Henry VI and the Early Days of the Cult

This medieval crisis of faith did not have a single source. Martyrs' cults and their obsession with relics, had flourished from the earliest days of Christianity completely

³⁴ Michael Foster, 'Introduction' to *Spiritual Temporalities in Late-Medieval Europe*, ed. by Michael Foster, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).

³⁵ For a study of how apocalyptic themes affected late medieval European cults see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond*, (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

unrestrained by Rome. As Eamon Duffy expressed it in his 2018 book on medieval Christianity, *Royal Books and Holy Bones*, ‘Christianity is a material religion. Its central tenet is that in the man Jesus the eternal God united himself to human nature and human flesh, and thereby opened both humanity and matter itself to the possibility of divinization. So Christians place their eschatological hope not in the survival of a disembodied soul, but in the resurrection of the body, the transformation into another order of being of the whole person, flesh and spirit... Perhaps the most unabashedly materialist form of Christianity is Catholicism, centred on the sacraments, and making material things – bread, wine, water, olive oil, the touch of human hands – vehicles of divine power.’³⁶ We are reminded, at a very basic level, that the apocalyptic treatises and veneration of relics were part of a very old Christian tradition that was being adapted to a new age. The scramble for salvation was a defining characteristic of late medieval religious life; the stress on a ‘tangible’ spiritual experience, saintly cults, and an utter breakdown of Papal control were religious dimensions of more deep-seated political changes that were transforming Europe in the fifteenth century. The political situation in Europe was consistently dangerous.

Even in countries like England and France, political power was not centralised into a system of absolute monarchy. Royal control in the provinces could be very weak even during times of political stability. The Hundred Years’ War ensured that military monarchs spent most of their time away from their kingdoms. Local authorities were responsible for maintaining order in all provinces; following Henry V’s victory at Agincourt in 1415, both the French and English monarchs were distant figures for their subjects. France was the kingdom of the Most Christian King, and combined with apocalyptic fervour, the image of the holy monarch was gradually transformed into that of the prophesied last world emperor ‘who would unite Christendom and lead a crusade to recapture the Holy Land, ultimately bringing about the end of the world and the beginning of the kingdom of heaven’. The aura of sacral kingship strengthened French monarchy with papal endorsement and from many unprecedented political issues. When Charles VI became completely insane, his propagandist Philippe de Mézières explained it as divinely ordained suffering that the holy monarch had to endure to save

³⁶ Eamon Duffy, ‘Sacred Bones and Blood’ in *Royal Books and Holy Bones: Essays in Medieval Christianity*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 137-148.

Christendom.³⁷ This was a tactic that would be reused. The ‘Good King Henry’³⁸ image reached England with the assassination of Henri III in France, although he had been unpopular during his reign. Henri IV built his legitimacy on his murder.³⁹ Many regicides in early modern France were touted to be religious killings (with very strong political motivations nevertheless). Being committed to the cause of sacral monarchy could also transform into material benefits for noblemen, many of whom gained land by attaching themselves to their hereditary monarch during the Hundred Years’ War both in France and England. Peace in France had been restored only when the entire merchant’s community in Amiens shifted their allegiance to Lancastrians, and the English monarch Henry V had become the dual monarch of both countries.

Peace in England was restored when the Yorkist Edward IV marched unopposed into London in 1461, bringing to an end the dismal reign of Henry VI.⁴⁰ The deposition was not permanent, because Henry VI was restored to the throne for a short while in 1471. With Henry’s assassination on the Vigil of the Ascension, Lancastrian hopes were finally put to an end and French writers amused themselves by complaining about Englishmen’s tendency to regularly murder their monarchs and the children of their monarchs, as had happened in 1327, 1399, 1461, 1471, 1483, and 1485. ‘The tyranny and cruelty of the English are notorious throughout the world, as manifestly appears in

³⁷ For Mézières’ ideas of kingship, see Daisy Delogu, “How to Become the “Roy des Frans”: The Performance of Kingship in Philip Mézières’ *Le Songe Du Vieil Pelerin*” in *Philippe de Mézières and His Age: Piety and Politics in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Kiril Petkov (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 147-164.

³⁸ This was Henri of Navarre. Henri III had no children, and there was a period of uncertainty after his death.

³⁹ Henri III had been murdered by the extremist Catholic Jacques Clément in 1589. When people in France came to know of this murder, they responded with joy and relief.

⁴⁰ Robert Bucholz and Newton Key have an interesting insight: ‘Fortunately for the new regime, Edward IV was, on balance, a good choice to restore the prestige of monarchy and to establish the new line. Unlike Henry VI, who was often criticized for his shabby appearance, Edward had a commanding presence: tall, handsome, approachable, stylish in his dress. These qualities may seem superficial, but they should not be underestimated. The first requirement of a king – indeed, of any head of state – is that he look and act like one.’

Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History* (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), Perlego.

their usurpations against the Welsh, Scots, French, Irish, and neighbouring lands,' the abbey at Dunfermline had claimed in 1442.⁴¹

Reassessing the way Henry VI's religious and political roles played out after his assassination should begin with the understanding that persistent warfare throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England put the entire kingdom under unimaginable financial strain.⁴² There had been no decade since Edward I's reign in which Britain had not been at war either overseas or in the British Isles. Henry VI was nine months old when he inherited a dual monarchy from his father. Britain had braved minority reigns before, and there was no reason why the protectorate would not be able to restore domestic peace and reconcile two warring dynasties. The dual monarchy could have been sustained easily because urban traders in Amiens were loyal to Lancastrians. But the minority turned into an especially long period of magnate rule which created too many pockets of vested interests. The territories in France were primary bones of contention between nobles, and the monarch was too young to resolve political disputes. Edward III, Richard II and Henry V had been warrior kings, and shrewd judges of men and policies. After a long line of military conquerors, Henry VI sought peace. Henry's urgent search for peace ironically first deprived the country of all its conquests in France, encouraged a dangerous rebellion in London (Cade's rebellion), and the country faced a series of bloody civil wars. The Wars of the Roses and the disastrous end to the Hundred Years' War followed the Black Death and the 1381 Peasants' Revolt. The pressures of war were threatening internal political stability, and the influence of landed magnates in favour of war was great. In fact, most successful fourteenth and fifteenth century English monarchs were sensitive to every need of landed magnets. Edward III, Henry IV and Henry V shared the aspirations of these magnates in warfare, ruthlessly imposing taxes on merchants and bankers. They were military monarchs constantly in the thick of battle, something these kings and their magnates enjoyed. Yet this never posed a problem for the internal administration of the kingdom because they appointed ministers selected by

⁴¹ Quoted by Ralph A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI: The Exercise of Royal Authority, 1422–1461* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 411.

⁴² The short summary of Henry VI's politics has been written with the help of three biographies: Bertram Wolfe's *Henry VI*, Ralph A. Griffiths' *The Reign of King Henry VI: The Exercise of Royal Authority, 1422–1461*, and John L. Watt's *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*.

their magnates. Henry VI lacked the tact required to establish a rapport with landed magnates while accommodating requirements of the Parliament.

The fifteenth century was an era in which usurping dynasties won the English throne thrice while looking after military commitments overseas. Co-operating landed magnates were crucial to these usurping upstarts to enforce authority internally and wage war abroad. The magnates invested in these campaigns in France and the bitterness of losing French territory was also borne directly by them. Henry VI was the direct descendant of John of Gaunt, the richest magnate in late medieval England, with 10,000 pounds a year.⁴³ Failing to retain French lands alienated the magnates, and Henry's initiatives for peace in France were met with stern resistance. He tried to conciliate them by raising many of them to peerage, but the Parliament was fragmented under an indecisive and non-violent leader. The government faced bankruptcy.

Englishmen living through Henry's reign understood the consequences of civil strife, external warfare, and a bankrupt government better than any of their forebears. For each of these crises, Henry VI was partially responsible. But before Edward IV's rule was over, an unending stream of pilgrims had transformed him into a figure of veneration. Tudor propagandists and clerics who earned from the revenue to his shrines joined laymen in building a cult around this royal saint. This cult – one of the last pre-Reformation saintly cults in Europe – did not die out with the Reformation. Neither did the cults of Edward II, Becket, the True Cross, the Holy Name, or Precious Blood. Most of them survived locally, and brought in enough revenue to initiate the building of altars and sculptures. But in Henry's case, hagiographic versions of his Life were being written as late as 1923. M.E Christie published her heavily religious version of Henry's biography in 1922; Cardinal Gasquet wrote *Henry VI* in 1923.⁴⁴ The advent of the five hundredth anniversary of the death of Henry VI revived interest in the possibility that he had actually been a saint. Letters urging the Vatican to reconsider his canonisation were sent to newspapers. This development, in turn, encouraged a medievalist called Bertram Wolffe to write a biography of Henry VI detailing his extensive political and personal inadequacies. This book (published in 1981) is still the definitive biography of the late

⁴³ Jonathan Sumpton, *The Hundred Years War 3: Divided Houses* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 124.

⁴⁴ Mabel E. Christie, *Henry VI* (London: Forgotten Books, 2018); Cardinal Gasquet, *The Religious Life of King Henry VI* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1923).

medieval king, although John P. Watts, Ralph A. Griffiths, and Gerald Harriss – renowned English medievalists – published their books about the late medieval political system in England in the same decade. In his original preface, Wolffe complained that ‘writing a biography of such an insubstantial and unsuccessful king as Henry VI has been a long and sometimes dispiriting task.’⁴⁵ John Watts says something quite similar in his own foreword: ‘The great length of the reign, the wide scope of its politics – from the battlefields of France, to the halls of Westminster, the chambers of noblemen and the streets of English towns – the mounds of records, each adding new detail, but none telling us quite what we want to know about how things really were.’⁴⁶

We shall never know; the ‘true’ nature of the royal saint eludes his five biographers, all of whom disagree about the extent to which he can be blamed for the excesses of the 1450s. The long months of Henry VI’s mental instability in 1453 make this ‘truth-seeking’ an even more ‘dispiriting’ task. Griffiths and Watts, however, painted an exciting picture of a dangerous and fascinating era. The bustling court of the king, his relation with barons and magnates, bastard feudalism, and the war with France (key political elements in a work of this nature) make a heady combination. Throughout the seventies and eighties, medievalists attempted in a sustained, thoughtful way to relate Henry’s political shortcomings to the defeat in France.⁴⁷ The considerations that provoked this revisionism were common. To each of them Saints’ Lives, collections of miracles, and Tudor propaganda were unhistorical and unreliable sources. Also common was their decision to focus on the political events of Henry’s reign alone – the posthumous miraculous cult was not discussed in the books, though Wolffe wrote about it in his ‘Apotheosis’, the only biography to do so. Their reason can be surmised: J.W. McKenna had published an extensive article on the cult of Henry VI in 1974, titled ‘Piety and Propaganda: the Cult of Henry VI’.⁴⁸ McKenna’s conclusion is that the cult was not

⁴⁵ Quoted by John L. Watts in “Foreword to the Yale Edition” in Bertram Wolffe, *Henry VI* (London: Methuen, 1983), XXVI.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ This is partly because of cinema exerting considerable influence over the progression of medieval studies throughout the seventies and eighties. Adrian Martin wrote about this in his essay ‘The Long Path Back: Medievalism and Film’: ‘Coming to terms with a clutch of films released throughout the 1980s and the early ‘90s, from Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) and Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985) to Tim Burton’s *Batman Returns* (1992) – films featuring “fantastic cities” in a 20th century cinematic tradition that also includes *Metropolis* (1927) and the original *King Kong* (1933).’

⁴⁸ J. W. McKenna, “Piety and Propaganda: The Cult of King Henry VI,” in *Chaucer and Middle English*

much more than a clever machination of Henry VII to reinforce his own search for legitimacy, an idea Henry's modern biographers agreed with.⁴⁹ Wolffe took the cult to task for another reason; it was 'one of the greatest obstacles in the path of a modern biographer who would penetrate right back to his lifetime in order to present an authentic picture of the living king.'⁵⁰ We may question whether the cult of St Louis was as big an obstacle for William C. Jordan, his biographer. We know for a fact that the cult of Edward II, a ruler as incompetent as Henry VI, was a rich source of information for multiple researchers. The spread of the cult was in stark contrast to Henry's reign, which Hazlitt described as a perfect beargarden. Henry VI's deplorable policies in Gascony had cost England all its French conquests. Margaret of Anjou was an unpopular queen; Henry's initiatives in religion and education were well-intentioned but his kingship was miserable. "Arguments that Henry was 'A Very Small King' and that a saint should achieve his sanctity in harmony, and not at variance with his secular vocation, are valid ones. They must have carried weight then as now," asserted Wolffe.⁵¹ Despite Henry VII's promotion of the cult and the high revenue his relics brought in, Henry VI was also never officially canonised. In 1616, Francis Bacon explained it thus: 'the pope, (who was extremely jealous of the dignity of the see of Rome, and of the acts thereof) knowing that King Henry the Sixth was reputed in the world abroad but for a simple man, was afraid it would but diminish the estimation of that kind of honour, if there were not a distance kept between innocents and saints.'⁵²

But violent assassinations had sparked veneration of murdered kings and bishops before. The transformative power of political martyrdom was great.

By 1471, England had already been witness to two particularly significant martyr cults.⁵³ When Becket had been consecrated archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, he was already being deemed unfit for the post. Within a year Pope Alexander III was asking

Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974).

⁴⁹ J. W. McKenna also recorded the beginning of the Henry VI cult in detail.

⁵⁰ Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 356.

⁵² Quoted by B. H. G. Wormald, *Francis Bacon: History, Politics and Science, 1561-1626* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 250.

⁵³ For the study of saintly cults in England, this chapter is indebted to Danna Piroyski's PhD thesis '*Cults of Political Martyrs in Late Medieval England*' that was submitted to Queen Mary College in 2005.

him to adopt a more conciliatory approach towards Henry II, who demanded Episcopal courts hand over church clerks to lay courts. Becket gave in for a few days, and then repented having given in. Henry II, at the end of his tether, summoned him to court on false charges and asked him to forfeit his estates. While Becket spent years in exile, the judicial system of Brittany was overhauled. There were now urgent negotiations between the Pope, the archbishop, and Henry II to decide the fate of the coronation of the Prince Henry III. In 1170, Becket decided to return to England to punish everyone who had participated in the coronation. Henry's exasperation was enough for four knights to travel to Canterbury to murder Becket in his own cathedral on the 29th of December, 1170. This grisly stabbing stunned Rome. Becket was canonised in record time. In the words of John Gillingham and Ralph A. Griffiths, 'In popular memory the archbishop came to symbolize resistance to the oppressive authority of the State, but in reality everyone was better off with him out of the way. Once the storm of protest had died down it became apparent that the king's hold on his vast empire had in no way been shaken by the Becket controversy.'⁵⁴ Similarly, Edward II's deposition and murder in 1327 sparked veneration of the king, but his reign had been a long crisis of authority. Henry's assassination on 21st May 1471 (the Vigil of the Ascension) gave Lancastrians a cause to keep fighting, but it also restored domestic peace in England. Both Edward II and Henry VI were monarchs who had inherited unsolved political problems at their accession.⁵⁵ As mentioned before, early medieval rulers gained sanctity by being weak leaders unable to conduct warfare, and ultimately abdicating their positions. The assassination strengthened Henry's case – his continuous suffering, humiliation, defeat, and death were fertile ground for Christian veneration. The cult was therefore a traditional martyr/miracle model cult, borrowing doctrine from other local saints' cults, while also claiming hegemony over them because Henry was a royal figure. Hagiographers claiming a certain monarch had been divinely ordained to save Christendom from the throes of destruction was a common occurrence in early medieval Europe: there was the Hungarian St Stephen, the Bohemian St

⁵⁴ John Gillingham and Ralph A. Griffiths, *Medieval Britain: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 28.

⁵⁵ There were long-running Scottish feuds and tensions with the French when Edward II succeeded to the throne.

Wenceslas, and the emperors Otto II and III, to name a few. This was an established theological/intellectual model in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The next century changed how the religious role of the king was perceived, and hagiographers saw nothing amiss in Louis IX maintaining his Christian piety amid his role as *rex iustus*. But with the cult of Henry VI, emphasis is shifted from *dignitas* to *humilitas*, as a necessary royal virtue. Henry was a particularly suitable object of veneration from several points of view. As the first dual monarch of England and France, Henry had been doubly consecrated during his coronation. Additionally, Henry was also the first English ruler to be crowned when he was scarcely eight, and almost each of his modern biographers devote one entire chapter to the altered coronation proceedings, if only to stress the heightened sanctity and regality of Henry's office. The crown placed on the child king's head had belonged to St Edmund, and he was anointed with the holy Becket oil, which was brought from the palace to the abbey in a grand procession 'on the pattern of the Rheims practice with the sacred Clovis oil from abbey to cathedral.' These practices were meant to put the English king on a par with the Most Christian Kings of France:

Borne by deyscent and tytylle of right
Justely to reygne in Ingelonde and yn Fraunce.⁵⁶

The first presentation during the child king's coronation showed the young king supported by St Louis and St Edward. In the final presentation, the Virgin with the Christ child in her lap offers a kneeling Henry (who is still supported by St Louis and St Edward) two crowns.⁵⁷ Dual monarchy was being realised in the person of the baby Henry VI, rumoured to have descended from the popular St Louis IX in the eighth degree from both his father's and mother's side. Dynastic sanctity was not an empty ideological construct; it was one of the most prominent ways in which political order was construed and maintained.

No one expected the son of Henry V to concentrate on peace proceedings in Tours as he did in 1444.⁵⁸ From 1437 to 1450, there was a complete breakdown of order in England, and Henry lost Anjou, Maine, Normandy and Gascony in France. On 24th May, 1450, Jack Cade and his followers revolted against exorbitant taxes (England was still at

⁵⁶ *Gregory's Chronicle*, quoted by Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 51.

⁵⁷ See the chapter 'Coronations' in Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 48-64.

⁵⁸ All political details of Henry VI's reign have been taken from Bertram Wollfe's *Henry VI*.

war), feigned indictments for hunting offences, and false charges of treason. The rebels wished to protect the monarch from poisonous sycophants around him, and the picture we have is that of a thoroughly corrupt provincial administration.⁵⁹ Henry VI fled from London to Lancaster, showing that he was as incapable of decisive political action within England as in France. He alienated the commons as he did the landed magnates, whose single interest was conservation of their property in France. As Henry reached the isolated hunting lodge of Clarendon in August, 1543 to solve a land conflict, news of the army's utter defeat at Castillon also arrived. It might have been the shock of this distress combined with his warring nobles that caused the already feeble monarch to lose his wits for the next eighteen months. Having been presented with his first-born son, the unhappy king looked away. Thoroughly deprived of any semblance of sense or intelligence to direct matters of the state and incapable of nominating a working successor when Cardinal John Kemp died, his 'royal stupor' forced a hasty formation of a Council of Regency, with Richard, the duke of York as its Lord Protector.⁶⁰ Although Richard betrayed no unseemly aspirations to the throne, he asserted his newfound political influences to undermine powerful Lancastrian forces, including arresting Somerset, a strong ally of Henry VI. Henry's continuing mental infirmity strengthened Richard's claim to the throne, and when Richard died, the claim passed on to his heir, Edward, who later became the first Yorkist king of England. At the age of 18, Edward deposed Henry VI and took the throne as King Edward IV. His position was more or less unchallenged until 1483, except Henry VI's brief restoration in 1470-71.

Most of us take our history of the Wars of the Roses from Shakespeare, and throughout the Henry triad, we understand how peripheral Henry was to the actual civil war. Shakespeare's vision of Henry as a mild-mannered, pious man was not an invention. Shakespeare's vision of Henry as a peaceful, feeble man is not entirely incompatible with fifteenth-century perceptions of their well-intentioned but weak leader being led astray by wicked counsellors.

Trowthe and pore men ben appressede,
And myscheff is nothyng redressed;
The kyng knowith not alle.

⁵⁹ All three primary biographers agree on the corruption within provincial governments, though they don't agree on the degree to which it grew during the reign of Henry VI.

⁶⁰ See the chapter 'Madness: 1543-55' in Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 267-86.

Thorowout alle Englonde,
On tho that holdene the fals bonde
Vengeaunce wille cry and calle ...

So pore a kyng was never seene,
Nor richere lordes alle bydene;
The communes may no more.
The lorde Say biddeth holde hem downe,
That worthy dastarde of renowne,
He techithe a fals lore...

Be ware, kynge Henré, how thou doos;
Let no lenger thy traitours go loos;
They wille never be trewe.
The traytours are sworne alle togedere
To holde fast as they were brether;
Let hem drynk as they hanne brewe.⁶¹

John Watts also quotes an anonymous poem written in the early 1460s (after the deposition) where the exiled monarch is depicted as wandering around in forests and mourning the loss of his throne and kingdom:

Than sette I from my ryalte
As angell dede from hevyn to helle;
All crystyn kings be war be me -
God amend wikkyd cownsel!⁶²

He made such little difference to the civil war that his allies left him to roam around the northern parts of England. If he had not been such a strong rallying point for Lancastrians, his life might have been preserved even after his second deposition. When Yorkist leader Edward IV marched unopposed into London on a Maundy Thursday in 1471, Henry appeared glad to be finally supplanted. “Cousin of York, you are very welcome. I hold my life to be in no danger in your hands,” declared poor Henry VI to his supplanter.⁶³ Early in the morning of May 22, 1471, Henry was murdered in the Tower of London on the orders of Edward IV. A heavy army led his uncovered body to St Paul’s, where it lay on the pavement, bleeding profusely. From there it was taken to Blackfriars for his funeral, and here again the body bled. After a while, Henry VI was buried in the Lady

⁶¹ A Warning to King Henry in *Political Poems and Songs Relating to English History: Composed During the Period from the Accession of Edward III. to that of Richard III*, ed. by Thomas Wright (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), 229-230.

⁶² Quoted by John L. Watts in his ‘Foreword to the Yale Edition’ in Bertam Wolffe, *Henry VI*, XIII.

⁶³ Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 345.

Chapel at Chertsey. The ‘*Historie of the arrivall of Edward IV in England, and the finall recoverye of his kingdomes from Henry VI*’, the official account of the Yorkist triumph over the Lancastrian Henry claimed that the former king had died of ‘pure displeasure and melancholy.’⁶⁴ While subjects struggled to make sense of the trauma of the civil war and economic collapse, batches of pilgrims travelled to the abbey of Chertsey, an out-of-the-way, difficult place to reach. Weak monarchs and deposed bishops were attractive paradigms of piety. In his latest work on veneration of relics in medieval Christendom (*Royal Books & Holy Bones: Essays in Medieval Christianity*), Eamon Duffy considers how the subfusc king acquired a reputation for sanctity so soon after his death: ‘The nub of the matter, of course, is that Henry was a murdered king. There was a long tradition in medieval Christendom of veneration for the figure of the suffering leader, the innocent or just ruler struck down and in some sense bearing the sins and suffering of his people. In England even harsh and vindictive figures like Edward II had benefited from this tendency to venerate the ruler victim, and he too had briefly been venerated as a saint after his murder, as had other political victim figures, such as Edward’s opponent Thomas Plantagenet, Earl of Lancaster, executed for treason in 1322, or Archbishop Richard Scrope, executed in 1405.’⁶⁵

Cults of royal saints like St Canute the Pious of Denmark, Edward the Confessor, St Edmund, martyr king of East Anglia, St Kenelm, the child martyr of Mercia, St Olaf of Norway, St Stephen Urosh III Dečanski, king martyr of Serbia and St Wenceslaus I of Bohemia had set precedents for venerating political leaders who had been humiliated and killed. Four medieval English kings were brutally murdered: Edward II, Richard II, Henry VI, and Edward V. Two of these murders sparked veneration for the victims, and only one had a cult following. In his investigation of fifteenth-century Christian cults, Simon Walker locates four cults of ‘political saints’ who were killed for their opposition to the ruling regime: Thomas of Lancaster, Simon de Montfort, Richard of Scrope and Edward II.⁶⁶ None of these were as widespread and popular as Henry’s cult, and they

⁶⁴ Ibid., 347.

⁶⁵ Eamon Duffy, *Royal Books and Holy Bones: Essays in Medieval Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 188.

⁶⁶ Simon Walker, ‘Political saints in Later Medieval England’ in *Political Culture in Late Medieval England: Essays by Simon Walker*, ed. by Michael J. Braddick (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 198-222.

were over long before Henry's canonisation trials began. Henry's popularity surpassed that of historic royal saints and contemporary political saints.⁶⁷

The first indication that the cult began as a lay movement is the lack of any anti-royal tendency in it, unlike the cult of Scrope or Thomas of Lancaster which were expressions of political discontent. The earliest surviving evidence of the cult is an image of Henry VI in York Minster, where his former secretary Dean Richard Andrew had erected a screen with statues of England's former kings. By 1473, Henry's statue on this screen had already been venerated there, confirmed Wolffe.⁶⁸ In 1479, Archbishop Booth denounced all veneration of Henry VI as 'contempt of the church'⁶⁹ (another way of defining 'heretical'), and an insult to the authority of Edward IV. Edward IV himself discouraged pilgrims from going to Windsor to pay their respects to the murdered king and to prevent the steadily increasing number of faithful, forbade the undertaking of any pilgrimage without royal authority.⁷⁰ In 1480, an ordinance of the Mercer's Company reminded people that pilgrimage to Chertsey was forbidden.⁷¹ But once the cult had gained momentum, all attempts to suppress it would fail. Both Eamon Duffy and Leigh Ann Craig refer to multiple informal Latin and English devotions to Henry VI, which were copied into prayer books of literate lay people as proof of the growing influence of this veneration.⁷² The register at Chertsey has not survived (so we do not have any documented miracles while Henry's body lay at Chertsey), but a hymn written to Henry celebrates the king as 'light of the English' and gives a list of the kind of miracles that were happening in Chertsey:

Mitis ut Agnus patiens
Fuisti in Christo confidens

⁶⁷ John P. D. Cooper, *Propaganda and the Tudor State: Political Culture in the Westcountry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 37.

⁶⁸ See Simon Walker, "Between Church and Crown: Master Richard Andrew, King's Clerk," in *Speculum*, Vol. 74, No. 4 (The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 956-991. Accessed on <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2886970>.

⁶⁹ McKenna, *Piety and Propaganda*, 74.

⁷⁰ Wolffe speaks about how he enlisted the help of the London Livery company to stop the huge movement of pilgrims towards Chertsey. Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 352.

⁷¹ Duffy, *Royal Books and Holy Bones*, 190.

⁷² Many medievalists have taken note of the proliferations of these devotions across a broad range of social classes.

*Mira diversa faciens
Brutis et hominis*

*Ave! per quem plures sanantur
Aegroti caeci illuminantor,
Perigrinantes vero liberantor
de magno periculo...*

*Ave revelator carceratorum
Pestis medicina, spes mestorum
Maculas pellens desperatorum
febribus fatigatis...*⁷³

(Meek as a suffering Lamb
You were trusting in Christ
Doing wonderful things
Of beast and of man

Hail! by which many are healed
Enlightener of the sick and blind
He is indeed a saviour of pilgrims
in great danger...

Hail the reliever of the prisoners
The medicine of the plague,
the hope of the reapers
Reliever of the desperate
exhausted by fevers...)

This poem stands in contrast to the view of Henry's assassination taken by Wolffe and McKenna. By the religious laity travelling to Chertsey, the 'martyrdom' was viewed more as a catalyst than a prime reason for the veneration. Henry's prolonged suffering, his generosity, his dangerously impolitic tendency to pardon traitors (incidentally, he issued full pardons to all the Kentish rebels), his inability to intercede in court feuds, and his patronage of Eton and King's College were reminiscent of the still-popular Anglo-Saxon kings who acquired sanctity because of their political weaknesses.⁷⁴ Edward IV had no reason to fear the assassination causing any political strife, as the deaths of

⁷³ This Latin hymn enumerating all of Henry's qualities that made him 'the light' was quoted by Duffy to try and explore the nature of the cult. Duffy, *Royal Books and Holy Bones*, 191.

⁷⁴ Part of this is because of the feuding culture of Anglo-Saxon England: 'Murdered Anglo-Saxon royalty were not unusual. Nor were Anglo-Saxon royal saints. In fact, if we look at Anglo-Saxon murdered royals who were also venerated as saints we come up with a neat and concise list of twelve saints from the seventh-century Kentish princes to Edward the Martyr who was killed in 978,' wrote Laura Wangerin in the essay 'Royal Feuds and the Politics of Sanctity in Anglo-Saxon England and Ottonian Saxony.'

Edward the Confessor, William II, and Henry I had because Henry VI's death (like Edward II and Richard II) restored peace in the kingdom, and it was only after 1471 that there was any real political stability.⁷⁵ It is impossible to dwell on the religious, moral and political repercussions of regicide in medieval Europe because of the vast scope of the subject, so our focus will be on the innovative way in which legends surrounding royal martyr-saints could be successfully exploited to turn a king into a revenue-earning local saint. The earliest founders would have wanted to consciously distance themselves from the surviving Lancastrians by erasing any reference to the murder, violence, or radicalism, and to adapt Henry's actions to the new political situation in which they found themselves. This task was made somewhat easier by the fact that Henry's sanctity did not depend entirely on the manner of his death, unlike Edward II, or Edward the Martyr (d. 978). In fact, as Simon Walker has observed, the violent murder of a popular figure did not ensure his veneration. Despite influential sponsors trying to have both Piers Gaveston, Simon Sudbury, and the Duke of Gloucester recognised as saints, no cult honoured them in the same manner. How, then, did the assassination facilitate the promotion of his cult, if at all?

An exhumation of Henry VI's remains within his tomb was carried out on 4 November, 1910.⁷⁶ The remains of the earthly burial at Chertsey had been reverently enclosed within a wooden casket, inside a small chest of sheet lead and then re-interred inside a full-sized, wooden, iron bound coffin. Dr A. Macalister evaluated what remained of the corpse and the wooden casket had long decayed. The bones of Henry's head were broken, and his right arm was missing, or perhaps it had been carried off as a relic. St John Hope (the expert leading the examination) personally added that some of the hair that was still attached to the skull was matted with blood. Hope concluded that 'they belong to someone who may have died a violent death, as is shown by the blood-clotted hair'.⁷⁷ The pro-Yorkist *Historia Regum Angliae* (in 1474) by John Rous, the Warwickshire Antiquary had insisted that the king's body was incorrupt. The official Yorkist account of the murder - 'Arrival of Edward IV in London' – said 'The certainty

⁷⁵ But, as we now know, it did complicate the political standing of the Yorkists when the pilgrimages to Chertsey grew uncontrollably.

⁷⁶ Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 352. A very informative documentary containing the entire account of the Henry VI reburial was published on YouTube in 2022. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0ROwYvpP_s.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

of all which came to the knowledge of the said Henry, late called King, being in the Tower of London; not having, afore that, knowledge of the said matters, he took it to so great despite, ire, and indignation, that, of pure displeasure, and melancholy, he died the xxiiij day of the month of May.⁷⁸

An anonymous Latin chronicle reported that Henry VI had expired ‘*feliciter*’ on the Vigil of the Ascension⁷⁹, but tradition maintains that Henry had been praying in the small oratory of the Wakefield Tower when he was killed. The exhumation revealed blood-clotted hair: he may have been bludgeoned to death. *Warkworth’s Chronicle* described it:

And the same night that King Edward came to London, King Henry being in ward in person in the Tower of London was put to death the XXI. day of May, on a Tuesday night, betwixt XI. and XII. of the clock, being then at the Tower Duke of Gloucester, brother of King Edward, and many others; and on the morrow he was chested and brought to Pauls, and his face was open that every man might see him; and in his lying he bled on the pavement there; and afterwards at Blackfriars was brought and there he bled new and fresh; and from thence he was carried to Chertsey Abbey in a boat, and buried there in Our Lady’s Chapel.⁸⁰

No other contemporary evidence supports Warkworth’s account of Henry VI bleeding this profusely. In his short article on the influence of Henry VI’s cult, R. J. Tattersall argues it may have been an extension of the medieval belief that a murdered victim would ‘cry out, accusing its murderers in the only way it could - by bleeding in the presence of his murderer’.⁸¹ Reports of a public bleeding may have been a covert accusation of an unjust and violent death. The king’s body was respectfully laid out in St. Paul’s Cathedral for everyone to be certain that Henry VI had died. Onlookers amused themselves by

⁷⁸ Quoted by the reviewer of *Richard III: As Duke Of Gloucester And King Of England* by Caroline A. Halsted in *The Athenæum: A Journal of Literature, Science, the Fine Arts, Music, and the Drama*, Volume 2, page 707. This is corroborated by Thomas Penn’s recent book *The Brothers York* (2019) but select writers like Conn Iggulden argue it might have been Richard’s decision instead, siding with Shakespeare.

⁷⁹ *Three Fifteenth Century Chronicles*, 184; Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 347.

⁸⁰ John Warkworth, *A chronicle of the first thirteen years of the reign of King Edward the Fourth*, ed. by James Orchard Halliwell (London: The Camden Society, 1839), 17.

⁸¹ R. J. Tattersall, “The King’s death,” http://www.henrysixth.com/?page_id=57.

varying the details of the death, and these rumours wormed their way into Warkworth.⁸² The assassination put these clerical chroniclers at work, and they created several variations of this ‘death-story’. ‘Fact’ was not of any consequence to a medieval chronicler. Both Warkworth and Crowland are full of moralising quotes, quotes from classics, and irrelevant anecdotes. The violent death-story and public bleeding of Henry VI is not a political event – it has heavy moral overtones, and is coloured with political bias. The telling and re-telling of death-stories mould the accounts of these deaths. These reports are our primary sources for learning about contemporary attitudes to the murdered figure. Such rumours persisted well into the sixteenth century, as we understand from Thomas More’s explanation of the murder, written after 1513: ‘He (Richard III) slew with his own hands King Henry the Sixth, being prisoner in the Tower, as men constantly say, and that without commandment or knowledge of the King, who would, undoubtedly, if he had intended such a thing, have appointed that butcherly office to some other than his own born brother.’⁸³

Variations of this death-story (which Paul Strohm calls the ‘paradox of the lie that might as well be true’)⁸⁴ and rumours of onlookers having ‘seen’ something, or ‘heard’ something (crucial eyewitness evidence), both reported and instigated by medieval chroniclers, precluded devotional writing and adoration of a murdered figure. The late medieval ideal for a ‘noble death’ was Louis IX, who had died on crusade. His last words had been, “Jerusalem! Jerusalem! We will go to Jerusalem”, thereby fulfilling both his religious and secular duties.⁸⁵ At the height of its reputation, Henry’s biographer and companion John Blacman wrote of him predicting his capture at Clitherwood

⁸² This kind of gossip – especially about a former monarch and about a current monarch – would have been slanderous, and punishable by law.

⁸³ Thomas More, *The History of King Richard III* (Ex-Classics Project, 2013), 7. The free PDF of More’s text is available on <https://www.exclassics.com/richard/richard.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Quoted by Michael Evans in *The Death of Kings: Royal Deaths in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), XIV. The original comment was lifted from the very first sentence by Paul Strohm in *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts*, and Strohm makes a wonderful point about how even texts that have been blatantly made up reveal the truth. Medieval romances are ‘false’, but the value systems they work in are true. Similarly, saints’ lives aren’t always based on reality, but their influence is.

⁸⁵ There is an even more religious version of this: “I will enter in Thy house. I will worship in Thy sanctuary.” Joseph W. Lewis, *Last and Near-Last Words of the Famous, Infamous and Those In-Between* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2016). Ebook accessed on GooglePlay.

forest.⁸⁶ Finally, modern perceptions of this royal death are shaped by Shakespeare, who represents the monarch being stabbed while reading:

Act V. SCENE VI. London. The Tower.

[KING HENRY is discovered sitting with a book in his hand, the
Lieutenant attending. Enter GLOSTER.]⁸⁷

Here Shakespeare works another rumour, Henry VI's penchant for devotional reading, into his treatment of the king's death. This popular idea probably had its origin in Henry's patronage of Eton and Cambridge. Rumour has often been explained as a metaphor for social and economic stresses, and late medieval England was reeling under a thoroughly corrupt provincial administration, the aftermath of the Black Death, the Roses' conflict, and the spiritual trauma of regicide. It helped that many among the literate aristocracy and clergy seem to have sat out the second deposition of Henry and his murder, seeing in it the welcome end of times promised by the scriptures. Chroniclers borrowed thematic structures and symbolism from martyrs' legends and several existing 'death-stories' of royal saints to offer their answer to this threatening socio-political situation.⁸⁸ As the political situation evolved, Henry's 'death-story' went through a snow-ball process, and specific details about his capture and his Christlike suffering in the Tower were added to it. We can compare the 'story' of Henry's murder to the stabbing of Thomas Becket in 1170 (a public assassination), or the execution of William Wallace in 1304.⁸⁹

The beginning of the cult is best understood as an interactive process of storytelling and gathering testimony in which medieval chroniclers played an important

⁸⁶ This is only one of the multiple 'Revelations' that were shown to Henry, as recorded by Blacman, and not the most important one.

⁸⁷ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part 3*, 5.6. Accessed on https://absoluteshakespeare.com/plays/henry_VI_3/a5s6.htm. Not every edition of Shakespeare includes this stage direction.

⁸⁸ We have a range of sources: there are completely fictitious accounts and some that use actual historical fact. They all participate in a pattern of interpretation that relies on thorough knowledge of medieval devotional practices.

⁸⁹ In this case, the comparison is fruitless if we limit ourselves to the historicity of these events; indeed, the events themselves do not matter as much as how they continue to be recounted for decades later. If we expect these cults to tell us valuable facts about the historical lives of the saints, we will be disappointed, but they divulge a wealth of information about fifteenth century beliefs and lifestyles. So the question to be asked is, what kind of history are we pursuing?

role. The extreme humiliation that Henry had suffered during his lifetime (after his capture in 1465, he had been paraded by Warwick the ‘Kingmaker’ on the streets of London in a shabby blue robe, spurs struck from his boots, feet tied to the horse, and a straw hat proclaiming him a ‘rebel’) and his fabled equanimity in death were ‘used’ as additional examples of his likeness to Becket, Edward the Martyr, and many early Anglo Saxon martyr-kings. Mockery, taunting, and jeering are already crucial to lay believers in the exemplary religiosity of the dead king.⁹⁰ Although cultured noblemen preferred not to dwell on the increasingly gory details of violence and torture undergone by Henry, his ‘death-story’ became a part of a more popular culture: serving girls from London, small-time traders from as far as Devon and Cornwall and parents of ailing children offered devotional images to churches. We also have evidence of an elite following of the cult from scribbled prayers found in prayer books.⁹¹

Contemporary imagery of the growing legend of Henry VI attest to this vision of him as a direct descendant of the early martyr king: we find him sharing rood screens with St Olaf and Edward the Confessor. Most of the surviving images of Henry VI are panel paintings on rood screens. They were covered in whitewash throughout the Reformation, which is how they are still untouched.⁹² We find mention of Henry VI in both Aymer Vallance (*English Church Screens: Being Great Roods, Screenwork & Rood-Lofts of Parish Churches in England and Wales*) and Colin Richmond’s essay “The Visual Culture of Fifteenth-Century England” in the 1995 anthology *The Wars of the Roses*, but for a more complete picture of its symbolism we must turn to Craig.⁹³ Eamon Duffy also discusses Henry’s images in some detail in his essay, and this is the latest work on the subject. We shall borrow useful material from all of them to understand how the ‘story’ of Henry’s royal martyrdom adapts itself to suit current political requirements, once its lay appeal had been established.

⁹⁰ We may recall that the crown of thorns (a persistent Catholic image) is a symbol of the mockery Jesus underwent after he was condemned by Pontius Pilate.

⁹¹ Leigh Ann Craig, “Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity: The Cult of King Henry VI” in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (NACBS: Summer, 2003), 194.

⁹² Duffy, *Royal Books and Holy Bones*, 196.

⁹³ J. W. McKenna also has considerable interest in the way the cult flourished.

It is important to note that rood screens, by themselves, were not objects of worship, unless it was a painting of Christ or the Virgin. They were used to decorate the dado, a screen which divided the chancel from the nave in parish churches. Single-panel paintings of saints were never venerated; they were placed only as religious adornment of the church. Many images of Henry in Kent, East Anglia, and Norfolk were placed in proximity to pictures of Christ. There is careful stereotyping in Henry's portrayal as a quasi-saintly royal figure: he is 'always' a young and unbearded king (perhaps a reference to the long years of minority rule), crowned, wearing an ermine robe, holding in his hands an orb and scepter and, sometimes, a book, a reminder of his patronage of Eton and Cambridge.⁹⁴ This was a space dictated by the choice of the laity, so we may interpret these numerous rood screens as evidence of a flourishing interest in this character. Henry is celebrated for his 'feminine' virtues of compassion, mercy, and his preference for celibacy, so he is accompanied by famous virgin saints very often. Edmund of East Anglia and Edward the Confessor (a martyr and a confessor saint) are seen beside him in Eye and Ludham, besides appearing alongside Becket and St John the Evangelist in Eye. He is part of a holy set at Barton Turf in Norfolk, where he is with St Olaf, Edmund, and Edward the Confessor. Veneration of Henry was not confined to London and Windsor. Villages and towns in Whimble, Devon, Manchester, Alnwick, and Northumberland venerated images of Henry VI in little-known parish churches.⁹⁵

Arguably, the most telling representation of Henry VI is in Ludham – an image of Henry VI with Mary Magdalen, one of the earliest Christian figures. Virginia Reinburg has worked on the sympathetic connection between Mary and her devotees, who found her particularly approachable because she was a repentant sinner herself.⁹⁶ Late fifteenth-century devotees found in Henry a companion who had suffered the consequences of a bad economy and aristocratic conflicts, troubles which afflicted them greatly. Rather than glossing over his political failures, the cult celebrated his many shortcomings, commiserating in his 'fallen' status, and assuming he would appreciate their tribulations. Craig attributes the early success of the cult to Henry's 'patronage of adversity', a quality

⁹⁴ Duffy, *Royal Books and Holy Bones*, 196-200.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 196-202.

⁹⁶ Craig, 'Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,' 201.

that was difficult to find in the aggressive Crusaders the papacy had lately advocated as examples of *rex iustus*.⁹⁷ An English prayer in the Bodleian reads

Was never man cam beforne thy face
Rebellion or oder yn adversite
Off thyn compassion commanded them go free.⁹⁸

Another prayer explains that Christ had commanded his servant to bear trials in order to display his patience and merits:

Salvus et salvator omnium in te credencium, piissime Domine Jesu Christe, qui dilectum famulum tuum regem Henricum variis tribulacionum pressuris opprimi voluisti, ut ex eius paciencie innocentissime vite meritis quasi quibusdam botris uberrimus copiosa tue gracie dulcedo per miracolorum gloriam distillaret in plebem...

(Jesus had willed His beloved servant King Henry should be afflicted by the weight of many tribulations, in order that by the merits of his patience and most innocent life... the copious sweetness of His grace may be displayed to the people by the glory of miracles.)⁹⁹

His virtue, when faced by trouble, was also a reason for devotion to him. Henry was “*in omnibus adversis perfectae caritatis amore decorasti.*” (In every adversity adorned by a love of perfect charity.)¹⁰⁰

There is a woodcut pasted into the rear flyleaf of an old English bible, now a manuscript in the Bodleian. Henry VI is shown in his royal robes, with his orb and sceptre, surrounded by eight figures who kneel all around him. There are chains, crutches, and other token offerings pilgrims presented at his shrine behind these figures. Four of these devotees have been seriously harmed by arrow, knife and noose.¹⁰¹ This

⁹⁷ Ibid., 202.

⁹⁸ Bodleian Library, MS.Don.e.120, 4r. Quoted by Craig, ‘Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,’ 201.

⁹⁹ BL, MS Harley 423, fol. 72r and MS Royal 13.c.viii, fol.1v; quoted by Craig, ‘Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,’ 201-202.

¹⁰⁰ BL, MS Harley 5793, fol.1r and MS Stowe 16, fol. 151r, and Oxford, Bodleian, and MS Gough Liturg. 19, fol. 32v; quoted by Craig, ‘Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,’ 200.

¹⁰¹ Ellen Ettlinger has a wonderful article based on this woodcut titled ‘Notes on a Woodcut Depicting King Henry VI Being Invoked as a Saint,’ in which she carefully tries to analyse the characters in the woodcut to understand Henry VI’s influence on different social classes. Craig, ‘Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,’ 202.

stereotyping was essential for the cult to be recognised as a religious movement in the fifteenth century, but in Henry's case, this iconography is problematic and leaves questions of recognition open. In most of his statues and paintings, Henry is depicted simply as a king in an ermine robe, an orb, a sceptre and, in some cases, a book and his device, the antelope.¹⁰² This stereotype lacks any special saintly quality and the instrument of his martyrdom, like St Edmund's arrow or Edward the Confessor's pilgrim ring, perhaps because the real reason for Henry's death was never known. Henry's regal status in the images was deliberately understated because veneration of Henry VI was still forbidden. Pilgrimage to Chertsey was still banned under royal injunction. But devotion to Henry outlived the reign of Edward IV.

Having seen the futility of Edward's measures, Richard III espoused Henry's cause, and he translated the king's remains from the Chertsey Abbey to St George's Chapel at Windsor early in 1484.¹⁰³ Burying Henry's body at Chertsey had been a quick attempt to stall all attempts to visit the grave of the murdered king. This has proved to be an effective strategy; as long as the body was at such a difficult place, a steady, but limited number of pilgrims came to visit. Richard III gave Henry's devotees what they needed most: a cult centre that could be easily reached. Windsor was Henry's birthplace and pilgrims from all over England converged upon the holy place bearing offerings, wax figurines, and candles for Holy King Henry. The operative theme in this political crisis was neutralising the dangerous, rebellious instinct of this cult, and potential anti-royalist tendencies of cults of holy men were dangerous.¹⁰⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, that earlier martyrs like Thomas of Lancaster, Simon de Montfort, Richard Scrope, and Edward II were regarded as a particularly subversive group of people.¹⁰⁵ Walker's central argument, that these saintly cults help restore harmony after political strife was over "in making reconciliation ... easier for the losers by offering a higher, and more objective, constraint to which all could submit without dishonour" is applicable to cults that receive

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 189.

¹⁰⁴ The cult of Becket had such tendencies; the posthumous cult of Archbishop Scrope contributed to the loosening of Lancastrian strongholds in England too.

¹⁰⁵ All of these figures were posthumously venerated, if not worshipped. All of them had local cults in their honour.

political patronage.¹⁰⁶ But the early years of the cult faced serious political resistance, and had it continued in the same strain, Henry would never have become a religious figure striving for restoring socio-political harmony. After Richard III translated Henry's remains, any anti-royalist tendencies the cult might have had were effectively neutralised.¹⁰⁷ Royal patronage helped the 'patron of adversity' assume his regal identity, and fulfil his divinely ordained mission to display to his believers the glory of miracles. The Dean of Windsor began assiduously recording each miracle-story he was told.¹⁰⁸ Political patronage was important for the success of a cult in England, though it could not guarantee its influence. Most English saints were political saints because the state worked closely with ecclesiastical government. Cults initiated and organised locally had to be sanctioned by parish churches. But the strongly insular nature of local cults (in a place like Chertsey) undermined ideas of a universal Christendom.¹⁰⁹ It was safer to have an urban cult centre that could be monitored closely. Even without definitive proof, we know that news of the growth of this local cult would have reached Rome. As the sole mediator between man and the divine, unauthorised cults had begun to worry a divided papacy that tottered on the verge of administrative failure since the Great Papal Schism of 1378.¹¹⁰ Yet Richard III tried to harness the power this uninhibited cult had, often successfully. While it is possible to assume that Henry's royalty could now be celebrated, the concept of sacral kingship was still being controlled by the church, and Henry's kingship would have been deemed problematic, at best, by Rome. His royal imagery in rood screens and statues has already been noted; he appears robed and crowned in the numerous pilgrim badges too, and the most common descriptor for Henry in literary

¹⁰⁶ Walker, *Political Culture in Late Medieval England*, 206.

¹⁰⁷ Or so Richard III thought, but it is also quite true that we cannot say that Henry VI had a hand in the Battle of Bosworth, though Shakespeare makes much of this potent suggestion.

¹⁰⁸ This was James Morgan, dean of Windsor from 1485 to 1496 and bishop of St. David's from 1496 to 1504. He was the one that commissioned the compilation of miracles as well.

¹⁰⁹ Unless, of course, it was an episcopal cult and Rome would clearly be in favour of it. We can argue that this was, by no means, definite: Rome did not always approve of bishops being venerated, but, as a general rule, it was a little more palatable to them than the veneration of dubious political characters who seemed to have been killed for political motives.

¹¹⁰ The Western Schism of 1378 split the bishops in Rome and Avignon because both of them claimed to be the rightful Pope. This was a political complication; Avignon was being backed by the French monarchy. It was solved in the Council of Constance in 1414-1418, where a new pope was elected. Please note that the East-West break is not being referred to at all.

sources is ‘blessed King Henry’.¹¹¹ Craig has located twelve liturgies and hymns that routinely addressed him as ‘blessed King Henry’. Even when he was not hailed as a saint, he was praised as ‘a flower of nobility’.¹¹²

This recognisable set of common descriptors mirrors the careful stereotyping of his statues and panel paintings in various parish churches. Both were meant for an audience to whom Henry’s kingship would have been sacred and unquestionable, and not a series of obstructions in his path to sanctity. Yet beyond the token signs of his kingly status, popular culture tended to portray the monarch as the wandering, exiled leader. Thomas S. Freeman imagines it might have been Henry’s innocence which led to such a swift growth of the cult: ‘Adoration of Henry swelled up swiftly but powerfully not merely because he was killed by his enemies but because of a ubiquitous perception that he did not deserve this fate. There was a pervasive tendency in medieval Europe to invest those who were regarded as the innocent victims of lethal violence with the attributes of sanctity; indeed, it could be argued the cults of many so-called ‘political saints’ owed less to politics than to this tendency.’¹¹³ But who were the audience shaping the representations of Henry in such a decisive way?

The Devotees and Miracles of Henry VI

Let us turn for a moment to the suffering laymen in the woodcut preserved in the Bodleian.

Three men and four women surround the martyr-king. Four of them have been injured or mutilated by arrow, knife, and noose.¹¹⁴ These figures are not unnamed devotees; they have been drawn from real people who benefited from Henry’s miracles. The woman with the knife in her throat is probably Joan Barton, a nine-year-old girl who fell down and lodged a knife in her throat.¹¹⁵ Reginald Scarborough had been practicing

¹¹¹ In the twelve separate liturgies and hymns that addressed him as ‘Blessed King Henry,’ he was also deemed King of France. See Craig, ‘Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,’ 197.

¹¹² Craig, ‘Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,’ 197.

¹¹³ Thomas S Freeman, “‘Ut Verus Christi Sequester’: John Blacman and the Cult of Henry VI” in *Of Mice and Men: Image, Belief and Regulation in Late Medieval England*, ed. by Linda Clark (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2005), 127.

¹¹⁴ Craig, ‘Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,’ 202.

¹¹⁵ She can also be the two-year-old Benedicta Barrow, though Craig thinks it unlikely, given the age

archery in South Luffenham when one of those arrows fatally injured him – he seems to be the man with an arrow piercing his chest.¹¹⁶ Both Thomas Fuller and Richard Beys were condemned to hang, and Henry's timely intervention saved both of them - these are the figures injured by the noose.¹¹⁷ There is also a figurine in the upper left of the woodcut with a hole right in the middle of it. This appears to be Henry Walter de Guildford, a member of the navy.¹¹⁸ He had been fighting enemies at sea when a massive cannonball struck his body. His friends could not stand the sight of this infected wound and put him out to sea in a small boat. After praying to Henry continuously, the martyr appeared to him with St Erasmus in visions, healing and rescuing him. In spite of the set pattern of Henry's appearance in statues and paintings, Henry's miracles were particularly diverse. The most famous of his miracles were those involving children. Little Miles Freebridge of Aldermanbury was rescued from death by choking on a badge when his parents prayed frantically to Henry VI. Miles had swallowed a pilgrim badge of Thomas Becket, and his father could not get it out of his throat. After prayers to the recently murdered king and the Virgin Mary, the lifeless body of the child spat out the badge and was restored to life.¹¹⁹ A volume containing all of Henry's miracles is now MS Royal 13.v.iii – a rich source for studying the complex interrelationship of lay medieval piety and the cult.¹²⁰ As Craig mentions, this same volume was used by papal investigators to locate and interview witnesses to the miracles. Notations in the margins show how most of these tales were being verified according to their rigorous standards, and twenty two of thirty miracles (to which living witnesses could be found) were found

difference. But it can be identified with one of the many children helped by Henry VI. Miles Freebridge of Aldermanbury had swallowed a pilgrim badge of Becket, and his parents had prayed to Henry VI, and it could be a prototype of the 'suffering child' as well.

¹¹⁶ *The Miracles of King Henry VI: Being an account and Translation of Twenty-three Miracles taken from the Manuscript in the British Museum (Royal 13c. viii) with Introductions by Father Ronald Knox and Shane Leslie*, ed. by Father Ronald Knox and Shane Leslie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), 181-182.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89-98, 149-156; Quoted by Craig, 'Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,' 203.

¹¹⁸ Craig, 'Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,' 204.

¹¹⁹ This is referenced by Thomas S. Freeman in his essay *Ut Verus Christi Sequester*. As mentioned earlier, there are multiple instances of infants being brought back from danger in the compilation of miracles, each being used to display specific characteristics of the saint.

¹²⁰ A detailed description of this course is available at <https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=19121&CollID=16&NStart=130308>.

to be ‘*probatum*’.¹²¹ Therefore, most elements in the miracles – names, places, and afflictions – are fairly certain and reliable.

Papal investigators must have been inclined to believe Wolffe’s conclusion about these miracles – that Henry was ‘not above curing horses, cows, or pigs, and would find lost animals, or even a mislaid purse.’¹²² On four different occasions, Henry also frees prisoners.¹²³ The range of afflictions Henry attended to were remarkably contrasting. From the compulsory *imitatio Christi* healing of the blind, lame and deaf to ‘the removal of a foreign object from an ear canal’, medieval people in various kinds of trouble seem to have regularly supplicated to him.¹²⁴ It does not take long to realise that the canons of Windsor (who were painstakingly writing down every detail of each miracle) thought they had another martyr cult of Thomas Becket in their midst. In fifteenth-century England, multiple cults of charismatic healing saints were slowly fading into decline. Long-established shrines of St Cuthbert in Durham, St Hugh in Lincoln, and Thomas Becket in Canterbury also claimed to channel the divine for an effigy, a candle, or a pilgrimage.¹²⁵

What set this invocatory saint apart was the ‘immediate’ nature of his cures. In hindsight, what was of even more importance was the absence of any ‘material’ miracles, but in the context of the growth of the cult, this unique sense of emergency in alleviating the cause of distress suggests that he was invoked specially in emergencies. In eighty seven of 174 miracles, Henry VI saved people from death immediately: ‘he revived people who had just died of illnesses or accidents, cured those who were in mortal danger from injuries, protected suppliants from mortal dangers such as house fires, shipwrecks, death sentences or choking.’¹²⁶ Henry also cured sufferers who had been ill for a long

¹²¹ Craig, ‘Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,’ 202.

¹²² Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 354.

¹²³ *The Miracles of Henry VI*, 57, 121, 127, 128; referred to by Craig, ‘Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,’ 203.

¹²⁴ Wolffe remarks on the range of healings Henry VI conducted, saying, ‘He was indeed no narrow specialist. His collected miracles have the appearance and range of a fifteenth century coroner’s roll as regards his exploits for his fellow men, except that the victims recovered...’

¹²⁵ These were particularly popular, especially the Becket cult, but there were other Marian shrines and sites with precious relics’ like the fragment of the Holy Cross at Norfolk.

¹²⁶ Craig, ‘Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,’ 205.

time, but whose illness had now become fatal. In sixty five of his miracles Henry cured chronic conditions like scrofula, blindness, and paralysis. This 'immediate reversal of crisis' was highly unusual for a medieval saints' cult, 'wherein the majority of devotees brought some chronic complaint with them to the shrine in the hope of leaving them there'.¹²⁷ The recurrence of children in these healing miracles also has special meaning. Henry heals fifty six (of a total of fifty seven) children almost as soon as prayers begin to be offered to him; twenty two of them were either dying or dead while thirty six were either injured or killed in an accident.¹²⁸ Vauchez has noted the rising importance of children in medieval miracles.¹²⁹ This is because children were too delicate to be taken on pilgrimage before they were healed, and this made an urgent response to prayers necessary.¹³⁰ Children, however, are not the sole recipients of Henry's merciful succour. Steven Payne and Henry Lugey were two poor carters from Caversham who were carrying wine into the city. Their cart overturned, and the tun of wine was broken completely, sending these 'simple folk of good reputation' into a terrible frenzy.¹³¹

These scenes have an unmistakable air of theatre to them: the frantic appeals of the parents, the desperate pleas of a wounded man in a small boat, and the distress of two impoverished people in danger of losing all their business have elements of a public performance. Even so, most of the miracles investigated by the papacy were proved, and these stories (much like Henry's death-story) were retold several times before they became part of liturgy and sermons. An even more compelling feature of these miracle-stories is the reappearance of the carefully-stereotyped shabby king in blue and ermine robes:

He appeared even as he had been wont, tall in body, his face full, yet with its features somewhat pinched; but now, his head covered with venerable grey hairs. He was dressed royally, a coat as of blue velvet upon him, in which guise his appearance has been reported by many.¹³²

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Both Craig and Freeman notice this specialty in Henry's miracles.

¹²⁹ Andri Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, tr. by Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 470.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ *The Miracles of Henry VI*, 100-102.

¹³² Ibid., 153.

This was the account of a man called Richard Beys, an innocent whom Henry had saved from hanging by appearing on the scaffold and placing his hand between him and the rope.¹³³ Would Beys have recognised his benefactor if he had appeared in an attire other than one which 'had been reported by many'? Even when he was rescuing poor Henry Walter de Guildford at sea with St Erasmus, he was wearing his trademark blue gown with a yellow cap.¹³⁴ Walter recognised Erasmus because he appeared with his instrument of torture, and Henry by 'his features'. The oral 'death-story' tradition begun by chroniclers with details of his humiliation in the blue gown persisted in the miracles. 'There is,' writes Eamon Duffy, 'in these miracle accounts a complex interplay between the king's story – how he was known to have been – and his visual representations – how he was depicted in the churches.'¹³⁵ Modern historians understandably do not dwell on the miracles of Henry VI. Bertram Wolffe is right when he says that they are at the mercy of the skeptic. 'A natural explanation can be offered for them all,' says Wolffe. 'The patient would have recovered anyway; the illness of injury looked much worse than it was; death was wrongly presumed; the therapeutic value simply of prayer alone, and of being prayed for, could be very high. There is no record of the comparable occasions on which Henry's intervention must have been sought without success.'¹³⁶

Disbelief was strife in the fifteenth century too: medieval thinkers did not deny the possibility of miracles but natural philosophers were wont to express faith in a miraculous event only when all possible explanations for it had been tried and denied, as Caroline Walker Bynum has so adeptly shown us in *Christian Materiality*: 'But because miracles were beyond natural explanation, they were *ipso facto* regarded as miracles only when other understandings failed. How else would one know they were miracles?'¹³⁷ Cathars routinely denounced all miracles as works of the devil. And Henry was one among an untold number of conduits channelling divine power. Unlike many other aspects of a saintly cult, miracle-stories have been a favourite genre for late twentieth century theological, anthropological, and medical research. Nine

¹³³ Ibid., 149.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 77.

¹³⁵ Duffy, *Royal Books and Holy Bones*, 200.

¹³⁶ Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 356.

¹³⁷ Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality*,

high-medieval miracles were analysed intricately by Ronald Finucane in 1977 in a study which is still one of the richest products of medievalism.¹³⁸ His comparison of Becket's miracles with other medieval miracle workers was the basis for Benedicta Ward's research into the early medieval phenomenon called the miracle of vengeance or the miracle of punishment.¹³⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum has used Ward's synthesis for her own recent work on the paradoxical nature of 'Matter and Miracles'. Important conclusions were also drawn from conferences being held in Europe. Notable ones include the conference organised by Evelyne Patlagean and Pierre Riché on *Hagiographie, cultures et sociétés* in Nanterre (1979), Sofia Boesch Gajano on *Miracoli* in Rome (1989), Denise Aigle on *Miracle et karāma* in Ivry, (1995), Klaus Herbers and Martin Heinzelmann on *Mirakel im Mittelalter* in Weingarten or Fernando Vidal on *Miracles as epistemic things* in Berlin (2005).¹⁴⁰ Klaniczay's essay 'Healing with Certain Conditions: The Pedagogy of Medieval Miracles', most relevant to this present study, considers public announcements of miracles and questions if miracles were relevant as constraining devices in late medieval Christendom since much moral discourse on this subject was already well-known.¹⁴¹

Viewed against this backdrop of immense scholarship, Henry's healing miracles fit into several wider histories: they tell us about the late medieval miraculé, about fifteenth-century clerics and canons, and of the religious excesses of laypeople. Alternatively, they also open up questions about the development of miracle-stories as a literary genre, the performative elements in miracles, and the ritualistic nature of the entire process of supplication, making a votive offering, and receiving the miracle.

Like devotional literature and saintly iconography, the miracles also belong to a traditional pattern for the representation of Henry. The focus of the author of the *Vita* is

¹³⁸ Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 81-84.

¹³⁹ Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record, and Event, 1000-1215* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 215.

¹⁴⁰ Important facets of medievalism are being studied in Scandinavia, Switzerland, Germany, and postcolonial South America as well. Clerical leadership was affecting every part of Europe, and, perhaps, beyond.

¹⁴¹ Gabor Klaniczay, "Healing with Certain Conditions: The Pedagogy of Medieval Miracles," in *Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes* (Auxerre: Center for Medieval Studies in Orléans, 2010), 235-248.

clearly on Henry's championing the cause of the poor, helpless, and fragile. Even since the papacy had taken over the process of canonisation, miracles worked by holy people during their lives, after their death, or by their holy bones were primarily 'helping' or 'healing' miracles. The early medieval miracle of vengeance was replaced with restoring bodily balance, rescuing stranded sailors, and curing ailments of many kinds.¹⁴² Material transformations like the changing of water into wine, miraculous relics like bleeding bread, weeping statues or moving sculptures were increasingly eyed with caution. Skepticism regarding this dangerous animation of 'holy living matter' stemmed from a fear of witchcraft. The fifteenth century saw a renewed vigour in pilgrims going to visit such hallowed relics, or weeping crosses, but anxious theological discussions surrounded this popular excess in devotion. Image-bashing increased, and stained glass (being more fragile than most other material) was shattered very often in parish churches. Henry's followers avoided any apparently controversial method of veneration, but this was no simple feat. Rome was torn apart by charges of heresy, blasphemy, and 'magic'. In 1426, a popular preacher of church reform, Bernadino of Siena, had to stand trial in Rome on charges of heresy for his promotion of the Holy Name of Jesus.¹⁴³ He had thought of a special way to worship Jesus by placing the first three letters of Jesus's name (IHS) in Gothic letters on a blazing sun. In 1450, he would be canonised as a saint. He was a popular saint in England during Henry's reign, and Henry himself was a follower of the cult of the Holy Name of Jesus. Even the most scrupulous cults – the Holy Name, Precious Blood or the True Cross cults – were not untouched by this zeal for reform. The peculiar thing about Henry's cult was that their claim to divine grace was based on non-material miracles, and this was significant in two ways: one, this approach assumed that healing miracles involved no transformation of matter, and secondly, Henry VI's own deeply orthodox Catholicism was of a different kind. Henry VI had been a devout follower of the True Cross cult, and a believer in the miraculous change of matter through divine grace, even though this cult had been accused of heresy several times.

Besides, is a healing miracle really as incorrupt as it is supposed to be?

¹⁴² Ward, *Miracles*, 215.

¹⁴³ Franco Mormando, *The Preacher's Demons: Bernardino of Siena and the Social Underworld of Early Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 235-237.

Thomas Aquinas, quoting Augustine, had once remarked: 'True miracles are done by some change of bodies.'¹⁴⁴ Healing miracles did sometimes mean restoring life to a body, or restoring bodily balance during disease, and even if it did not involve changing matter, it was certainly manipulating matter to bring the body back to order. Non-physical miracles were also considered to be material miracles in the fifteenth century. One of Nicolas Oresme's arguments was that only bodies could act on bodies. Around 1300, a congress of Parisian theologians believed that 'the human imagination could cooperate with the grace of God to produce physiological effects such as stigmata.'¹⁴⁵ 'By the fifteenth century, much of the discussion of witches which had earlier involved the charge that it was heresy to believe witchcraft possible, came to focus on ways in which witches might manipulate alien bodies (without actually becoming them) to achieve physical results,' Walker Bynum writes.¹⁴⁶

Henry VI adored all physical remnants of the Crucifixion, and was known to have pardoned a dangerous act of magic in his youth. In 1441, Eleanor, the duchess of Gloucester had been accused of necromancy, a charge she had denied.¹⁴⁷ She admitted to obtaining potions from Margery Jourdemayne, the "Witch of Eye", explaining that she hoped they would help her conceive.¹⁴⁸ The jury found her and her associates guilty of plotting the monarch's death. Bolingbroke was hanged, drawn, and quartered. Southwell died in the Tower, and the "Witch of Eye" was burnt at the stake. But Henry pardoned the Duchess, who had to publicly perform an act of penance in London, divorce her husband, and be condemned to life imprisonment.¹⁴⁹ Very few lives in late medieval England were unaltered by the vehement fear of witchcraft. Founders of the cult took care to position Henry both as an unproblematic thaumaturge and a saint-king famous

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, part 1, question 114, article 4, objection 2, in Busa.

¹⁴⁵ This point Alan Boureau sufficiently demonstrated in "Miracle, volonté et imagination: La Mutation Scholastique (1270-1320)".

¹⁴⁶ Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 229.

¹⁴⁷ Eleanor Cobham, Duchess of Gloucester, has instigated a world of research on her own. A particularly thorough one is Ralph A. Griffiths's study *The Trial of Eleanor Cobham: An Episode in the Fall of Duke Humphrey of Gloucester*.

¹⁴⁸ Jessica Freeman, "Sorcery at Court and Manor: Margery Jourdemayne, the Witch of Eye next Westminster," in *Journal of Medieval History*, 30:4, 343-357, DOI: 10.1016/j.jmedhist.2004.08.001.

¹⁴⁹ If Henry had died, Gloucester would have been in line for the succession, so it was a very serious crime. There were four co-accused along with the duchess, and the witch of Eye was sentenced to death by burning at Smithfield.

for his humiliation and deposition. If we recall, the stranded sailor Henry Walter recognises St Erasmus by the instrument of his torture, and Henry VI by his features – no material relic was associated with Henry either in his iconography, his death-story, or his miracles. One may argue that the shabby blue robe Henry VI had been paraded in was an emblem of his sanctity; at both Eye and Ludham, Henry's robe is blue.¹⁵⁰ 'Patron of adversity' is too generic to be associated with any particular saintly quality, because almost any receiver of miraculous benefits from any miracle-worker must have been in adversity.

Henry's meekness in the face of utter humiliation and shame (symbolised by the blue robe) seems to have been the centre of his posthumous cult more than his kingship and his martyrdom:

*"Vi oppressis vel turbatis
mestis atque desolates
Scola paciencie."*

(To the oppressed and troubled
To the sad and desolate
A school of patience.)¹⁵¹

Redemption through Political Humiliation

Henry's was not the sole cult based on ignominy and self-abasement in late fifteenth-century England. The cult of Walstan was also based on an adoration of humility. Walstan had been born a Saxon king's son in Blythburgh, but he rejected his royal status to travel to Norfolk, where he lived his life as a common reaper. He was obedient to his master on the farm, and lived his life in exemplary poverty and humility.¹⁵² He distributed all his earnings among the poor. His employers were annoyed at first by his strange monkish behaviour, but after they recognised his holiness, offered to adopt him as their son and heir. The barefooted monk asked, instead, for a cow. After a moving recognition

¹⁵⁰ The blue robe is an icon of recognition more than anything else; the sufferer is supposed to identify the saint by this icon, and not worship the garment separately or use it as a representation of Henry VI.

¹⁵¹ British Library, MS Harley 423, fol. 72r and MS Royal 13.c.viii, fol. 1v; quoted by Craig, 'Royalty, Virtue, and Adversity,' 200.

¹⁵² Please note that this is different from the kind of humility Henry VI is known for. Walstan had given up his princely rights before he settled down to a life of simplicity - this kind of sacrifice (which he had been called upon to perform) has a different implication in Christianity.

scene in which his princely identity is revealed, he died a perfect parishioner's death, having given his will to the priest first.¹⁵³ Walstan's cult was local, and drew a following of largely East Anglian farmers. Much like Henry, Walstan appears barefoot, robed in ermine and crowned, with a scythe in the place of his sceptre. His funeral cart is being drawn by two calves in his representation at Ludham.¹⁵⁴

The profound anguish of humiliation is the cornerstone of both popular lay piety and late medieval theological debates. It was part of Augustine's journey toward his conversion: "I was lost and overwhelmed in a terrible kind of shame ... I was crooked, filthy, spotted, and ulcerous."¹⁵⁵ He brings himself low to discover the ecstasy of conversion. Shame and humiliation are also experienced by popular Christian figures like Ignatius of Loyola and John of the Cross.¹⁵⁶ Whether political or religious, intense humiliation triggers a redemptive process, which brings the sufferer closer to forgiveness and God's grace. Henry's political experiences demonstrate an important interaction between secular and religious systems of belief. It is not surprising that Henry's parading and exile was viewed solely through a religious lens within a few years after his death. Frequently, scenes of humiliation evoke what is understood to be private suffering and a moral torment, of which public failures are the source.¹⁵⁷ Political humiliation or martyrdom can be a powerful religious act which turns the sufferer towards God, and a life of exemplary moral virtue. We have a very recent example of this in the death of Princess Diana, who was called a martyr and a saint days after she was killed in the car crash.¹⁵⁸ Henry's experience of political humiliation and physical abuse represents a

¹⁵³ His life seems to be an example of the significance of humble, physical labour. He was the local patron saint of agricultural workers. His miracles focus on restoration: bodies unable to perform labour are restored to working capacity. This is a healing miracle, but the healing has a purpose beyond healing.

¹⁵⁴ The Ludham rood screen is in St. Catherine's Church in Norfolk.

¹⁵⁵ St. Augustine, *Confessions* Book Eight, Chapter VII, 16.

¹⁵⁶ But these, also, are different from the political humiliation of Henry VI. Christianity reveres the experience of humiliation in different forms, from Walstan's shouldering of it to Henry's forced parade in London.

¹⁵⁷ The consolation of theology is in the subversion of the dehumanisation inflicted on individuals undergoing this. Far from making them 'less than human,' humiliation raises the sufferer above others to a superhuman status. Humiliation - even at Auschwitz - is based on exclusion; Christological thought upends this exclusion and treats it as a baptism by fire.

¹⁵⁸ On July 2, 1997, Julie Burchill's article in *The Guardian* read: 'Diana the Martyr,' Prince Charming used to taunt his troubled, needy young wife when she first started to reach out to the sick in order to heal herself, to the dying in order to understand her life. And now she is: martyred by metal piercing that

religious-political act that converted humiliation into an act of religious resistance against the 'heretical' revolt of Edward IV. This religious-political resistance is set in motion by the redemptive *telos* of humiliation (and martyrdom), though Henry's martyrdom was not purely a religious event.¹⁵⁹ This process was accompanied by changes in and additions to Henry's death-story. The putative attempt to give a failing king some good advice – 'Warning to King Henry' – was also fraught with socio-political humiliation. John Blacman's memoir of his friend and monarch contains numerous vignettes from Henry's life where he internalises this *mortificare*. Augustine's shame was based on having failed in the eyes of God; Henry's profound political humiliation and martyrdom can also be equated with the pilgrim-convert's conversion, a process which restores dignity to a fallen leader, and justifies his veneration. Griffiths's and Wolffe's complaints about the cult shying away from the political realities of Henry's long reign ignore both the religious effects and the everyday realities of human suffering bravely borne.

What are we to make of this strange medieval obsession with the moral horror and glorification of humiliation and death? We have already seen how current medieval scholarship, especially the work of Phillipe Ariès and Barbara Tuchman, holds fourteenth- and fifteenth-century social issues – the Death, famine, civil war, public torture – responsible for their apocalyptic expectations, and their work is relevant as a backdrop for understanding this extreme devotion to a humiliated king.¹⁶⁰ It also explains something of the depiction of Henry as a royal martyr in a blue or ermine robe. Just like the *arma Christi* were symbols of victory, and not only of suffering, Henry's blue robe is a reminder of his moral triumph and his authority to judge. This is not to suggest that the successful cult was an exhausted response of an England devastated by a thirty-year civil war. The answer is far more complex, as we have already seen. But the morbid tendencies of late medieval piety (violent depictions of the Passion, drawings of bright red blood streaming out of the Cross, the obsession with bathing in and swallowing Precious Blood) made it easier for the cult to establish political humiliation as salvific and fulfilling.

beautiful body, a body which spent a lifetime being dissected as surely as any corpse up for a post mortem, and the bursting of that big brave heart.

¹⁵⁹ See Leah Whittington, "Thy humiliation shall exalt": Hierarchy and Reconciliation in *Milton's Paradise Lost*, *Renaissance Suppliants: Poetry, Antiquity, Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2016).

¹⁶⁰ Fear of damnation must have been common in these times; the plague and famine reduced life to a preparation for death.

Walker Bynum calls *Precious Blood* 'fertile and salvific in its very terribleness'.¹⁶¹ We may say much the same thing about the veneration of Henry's experiences.

As modern readers, it is also important for us to understand that saints were not regarded as holy men and women who lived exemplary lives, died a martyr's death, and left us their teachings to follow. Their miracles transformed them into living agents of the divine, who now had the authority they had been denied in their lifetime (this does not hold true for late medieval crusading saints). This authority could then be 'used' to legitimise usurpations, gain popular support, or claim dynastic sanctity for the family of the saint. In his characteristically humorous review of Robert Bartlett's *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, staunch protestant Diarmaid MacCulloch sums up this late medieval approach to the kind of religio-political authority saints had: 'The most important thing about the dead was what they went on doing. Most of their miracles occurred after their deaths. We might think that character matters more – the giving of a moral example. Medieval saints, by contrast, were doers, and if someone got killed in the process, hard cheese.'¹⁶²

Early twentieth century historians and biographers of Henry suggest Richard's usurpation of the throne and Tudor propaganda boosted the entire movement but Richard came to the throne a good eleven years after Henry had died.¹⁶³ Henry's sanctity had to be established before another usurper could take advantage of kinship with Henry VI. Henry Tudor won the throne of England fourteen years after his great uncle was murdered. Only a well-established cult could buttress Henry's association with 'blessed stock', and Henry Tudor reaped the benefits of being the guardian of divinity, in a way reminiscent of Roman imperial cults. A large

¹⁶¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, "Violent Imagery in Late Medieval Piety," in *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* (Washington: German Historical Institute, 2002), 17. Please note that this was originally a lecture delivered at the same institute.

¹⁶² Diarmaid MacCulloch, "Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation by Robert Bartlett – review," in *The Guardian*, December 12, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/12/why-can-dead-do-such-great-things-robert-bartlett-review>.

¹⁶³ It's difficult to say how Richard III felt about the cult. We know he had the bones of Henry VI transferred to the Windsor Chapel from Chertsey – he must have known that this would give the cult an impetus.

community of Henry's followers were already present in England and the cult soon spread to various parts of Europe, an event with which Henry Tudor was not involved. Tudor propaganda influenced and changed the cult immeasurably, but it was not the centre of the cult. In its origin, the cult was revivalist, bringing a traditional early Christian worship of innocent martyrs back, but with its revenue and political acceptance, Henry VI became a living presence in late medieval churches. But the fact remained that Richard III was only tolerant of the growing cult and acceptance did not equal promotion.

Political Patronage for the Cult of Henry VI

On the 22nd of August, 1484, a blue-eyed, charming youth called Henry Earl of Richmond fought the 32-year-old Richard in a bloody battle near Market Bosworth in Leicestershire and defeated him. He married Edward IV's daughter Elizabeth of York (his third cousin), and symbolically united the feuding Lancastrians and Yorkists. The example Henry VII left of political leadership, diplomacy, and expert financial administration obscures how extremely questionable his claim to the English throne was. Henry's father, Edmund Earl of Richmond and half-brother to Henry VI was already dead. He could claim the English throne even through his mother Lady Margaret Beaufort, who was the great great granddaughter of Edward III. Henry IV, the first Lancastrian king had recognised the legitimacy of the Gaunt-Swynford line (which Henry VII directly descended from) but specifically barred the Beaufort line from ever inheriting the English throne.¹⁶⁴ Posing as a legitimate blood descendant of Henry VI (he was Henry VI's half-nephew) and promoting his canonisation was Henry Tudor's attempt to confer legitimacy on his own dynasty. He had written to Pope Innocent III by 1492, pressing for his holy uncle's canonisation; 'Innocent started a commission to investigate Henry VI's miracles, which was subsequently renewed in 1494 by Pope Alexander VI and by Pope Julius II in 1504. By 1500, a collection of 174 posthumous miracle stories had been compiled for the inquiry.'¹⁶⁵

Modern historians hold Henry VII and his court historian Polydore Vergil accountable for reshaping a lay cult to accommodate the problematic kingship of Henry

¹⁶⁴ Roger Lockyer and Andrew Thrush, *Henry VII* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁶⁵ Katrina Labun, *Holy Henries: The Cult of the First Tudor and the Last Lancastrian*, Thesis (University of British Columbia, 2014), 5

VI and distorting both history and piety in the process. This should not be surprising. The challenges Henry faced when he usurped the throne explains why he projected himself as the only living blood relative of a royal martyr, and claimed the glory of dynastic sanctity. His victory in the Bosworth battle could be interpreted as a sign of divine guidance, but promoting the already-popular cult was his only hope of representing himself as a restorer, rather than a disrupter, of order. Henry VII treated the cult as a part of the Tudor bloodline. It was the Yorkists (and in the minds of many, Richard III himself) who had committed a crime against nature and against the divine moral order by murdering Henry VI. Henry's friend and court historian Bernard Andre pictured Richard III as a bloodthirsty murderer who deposed the guiltless king – an interesting variation of the 'death-story' we discussed earlier. And, indeed, by 1484 England had become a state that morally approved of placing murderers on the throne. *'Ilz ont une maniere en Angleterre quilx ne tiennent comte de changier leur roy quant bon leur semble, voire de les tuer & faire morir mauvairement,'* wrote Jean Juvenal des Ursins, a fifteenth-century French chronicler.¹⁶⁶ To people awash in apocalyptic excitement, Henry VII had come from the land of the Most Christian Kings to save England from its wretched moral condition. The fact that Henry Tudor chose his uncle's cult for both private and public commemoration suggests that Henry must have become a *visible* figure of authority by the time his nephew decided to invade England, and his status as royal martyr could be used to argue for reconciliation between Yorkists and Lancastrians – an event Henry Tudor stood to benefit from greatly.

In the meantime Rome's persecution of heresy and witchcraft took on new strength. Numerous clergymen were accused of reading and writing magic. The fear that had been spreading across Europe quietly for years became a mania that was to last another two centuries. The German Dominican inquisitor and widely discredited clergyman Heinrich Kramer published the well-known prosecutor's handbook *Malleus Maleficarum* in Speyer in 1487, and this remained an authoritative guide to witch hunts for many years.¹⁶⁷ Pope Innocent VIII had issued a bull named *Summis desiderantes*

¹⁶⁶ "They have a way in England that they don't mind changing their king when they see fit, even killing them and causing them to die badly." Quoted by P. S. Lewis, "Jean Juvenal des Ursins and the Common Literary Attitude Towards Tyranny in Fifteenth-Century France," in *Medium Aevum Vol.34* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 103.

¹⁶⁷ Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft : Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 3.

affectibus (1484) giving inquisitors a number of added powers while persecuting witches. This bull was the foreword to the *Malleus*, though the book was banned by the Church in 1490.¹⁶⁸ By 1500, the *Malleus* had run through eight editions.¹⁶⁹ (We have to note here that the Inquisition was primarily against heresy.) Criminalising heresy and witchcraft transformed Christian thought. Because altered matter (the focus of healing miracles) attracted so much suspicion, all saintly cults were potential fields for magicians and heretics in league with the Devil.¹⁷⁰ Even if miracles had a Christian appearance, jurists and theologians argued that miracle-workers might be unwitting allies of the Devil, who might be deceiving ordinary, pious people. Prominent scholars believe that the papal sanction of treatises like the *Malleus* and Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* were part of 'late medieval reform effort within the church, which attempted to restructure not only the institution from within, but also the religious practices of ordinary people.'¹⁷¹ This effort at reform transforms long-standing Christian concerns over the connections between magic and demons from a theological subject into a matter of practical concern with common belief and practice. The cults of Holy Blood (especially the one at Wilsnack) and the Holy Name were criticised by philosophers repeatedly. Cathars, Free Spirits, and Spiritual Franciscans were executed throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁷²

To borrow Walker Bynum's terminology, we find in most late medieval cults 'a coincidence of opposites' (she borrows this concept from Nicholas of Cusa).¹⁷³ The power of saintly relics and their miracles were both a radical threat and radical opportunity.¹⁷⁴ When Henry Tudor begins his enthusiastic letter-writing to Rome, this

¹⁶⁸ The church did this by placing it on the list of prohibited books, but the first such list wasn't produced before 1559, and the fact of the ban may be questioned. Gutenberg, no doubt, had much to do with the rapid way the text was distributed.

¹⁶⁹ Broedel, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 7.

¹⁷⁰ Matter was viewed as something that both generated and corrupted, and was a focus of much theological debate and anxiety.

¹⁷¹ Peter A. Morton, "Popular Magic, Witchcraft, and Lutheran Religious Literature," in *Staging the Superstitions of Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Verena Theile and Andrew D. McCarthy (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 24.

¹⁷² Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition* (London: The Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2022), 159-161.

¹⁷³ Caroline Walker Bynum, "Introduction" to *Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2020), Perlego.

¹⁷⁴ See "Change as Threat and Opportunity: A Reprise" in *Christian Materiality*, 239-241.

subtle anxiety has already seeped into the devotion of Henry VI. Propagandists of Henry Tudor were not only tasked with legitimising an upstart warrior; standing on the eve of the reformation, they had to reconceptualise the cult (and its central character) to fit Rome's understanding of sacral kingship *without* an emphasis on posthumous miracles. This was the beginning of a short Life of Henry VI, purportedly by Johannes Blacman, Henry's close friend and precentor of Eton College (1445-52).¹⁷⁵ He subsequently shifted to King's Hall, Cambridge and later he was a monk at the Witham Charterhouse, Somerset.¹⁷⁶ The authorship of the piece is a matter of debate. According to Wolffe, 'There is no evidence to support the contention that he died in 1485 before the advent of the first Tudor king. In any case the title of the printed version on which the attribution of the work is solely based reads *Collectarium Mansuetudinum et bonorum morum regis Henrici. VI. ex collectiōe magistri Joannis blacman bacchalaurei theologie / et post Cartusie monachi Londini* and the possibility that this merely signified that it was originally found among Blacman's book and manuscript collections at some unknown date cannot be overlooked. It is presented mainly as the recollections of one of Henry's chaplains and other intimates of the king. Internal evidence places the composition of the tract in the middle or later years of Henry VII's reign.'¹⁷⁷ Sympathetic biographers (like Christie) treat the collection as authentic and base their works on Blacman's tract. Wolffe's argument is historically accurate. It could not have been written before the advent of the Tudors because there is a reference to Henry being twice crowned rightful heir of his realm. 'This would have been treasonable at any time before the battle of Bosworth Field which gave his Tudor nephew the throne,' writes Wolffe. 'There is also a clear reference to the downfall of the House of York. Those who put him to death are referred to as no longer possessing his inheritance.'¹⁷⁸ The short hagiographical piece was published in 1510 when the popularity of the cult was at its peak. For reasons of

¹⁷⁵ John Blacman, *Henry the Sixth: A Reprint of John Blacman's Memoir*, tr. by M. R. James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919). The memoir is available at Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/29689>.

¹⁷⁶ Katherine J. Lewis, "'Imitate, too, this King in Virtue, Who could have done Ill, And did it Not': Lay Sanctity and the Rewriting of Henry VI's Manliness," in *Religious Men and Masculine Identity in the Middle Ages*, ed. by P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), 130.

¹⁷⁷ Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 5-6.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

convenience, we will refer to it as Blacman's *Collectarium*, in spite of doubts regarding its authorship.

Katherine J. Lewis (*Lay Sanctity and the Rewriting of Henry VI's Manliness*) and Thomas S. Freeman (*Ut Verus Christi Sequester: John Blacman and the Cult of Henry VI*) were two scholars who proposed redefinitions not only of the nature and function of the cult but of the very basis of Henry's sanctity based on their interpretations of this *Collectarium*.¹⁷⁹ Neither Lewis nor Freeman is interested in the historical Henry. Freeman especially works on Blacman's 'unique perspective' on Henry and his refusal to depict Henry as a martyr. Lewis builds on the work of scholars who studied the religious significance of the cult, and diverges from their analysis: 'the representation of Henry as saint deals with his equivocal manliness by rewriting him as the embodiment of holy masculinity, and placing him in the same register as other late medieval saints of high social status.'¹⁸⁰

About the identity of John Blacman, M. R. James has this to say: 'He was admitted Fellow of Merton College, Oxford, in 1436, and of Eton in 1447: he was Cantor of Eton College, and, as we read in the title of his book, a bachelor of Divinity, and later a Carthusian monk. But before he 'entered religion' he held an important post in University circles, for, in 1452, on the death of Nicholas Close, he was appointed by the Provosts of Eton and King's (who at that time owned this piece of patronage) Warden of King's Hall at Cambridge, that royal foundation which was eventually absorbed into Trinity College.'¹⁸¹ It is easy to understand why it was necessary for the author of this *Life* to have a tremendous amount of credibility and religious authority, and we know, of course, that it might have been prepared by well-educated Tudor courtiers. The *Collectarium* is a collection of events from Henry's life showing his exemplary moral virtue and devotional piety. To understand its true import we need to know who it is written for. It was written in Latin, and aimed not at lay devotees of Henry but at an urbanised, courtly crowd who realised why Henry could not be presented as a candidate for sainthood for his ineffective kingship – which had never been a problem for his early

¹⁷⁹ We have used Lewis and Freeman for our analyses of other facets of the cult, but they are probably the best scholars to read alongside the *Collectarium*, which they take as a serious tract.

¹⁸⁰ Lewis, *Lay Sanctity*, 129.

¹⁸¹ M. R. James, "Preface" to *Henry the Sixth*, xv.

pilgrims. His royalty could be emphasised in rood screens and lay devotions, but it was a problem for his hagiographer. Blacman chooses to skirt the issue of his noble descent entirely: 'Now of his most noble descent, how he was begotten according to the flesh of the highest blood and the ancient royal stock of England, and how in the two Lands of England and France he was crowned as the rightful heir of each realm, I have purposely said nothing, as of a matter plainly known to all, and not least known because of that most unhappy fortune which befell him against all expectation in after-times.'¹⁸²

The figure of the meek king described by Blacman is charitable, full of humility, and ultimately wronged by his countrymen. Self-abasement is a theme to which Blacman frequently refers. 'Also at the principal feasts of the year, but especially at those when of custom he wore his crown, he would always have put on his bare body a rough hair shirt, that by its roughness his body might be restrained from excess, or more truly that all pride and vainglory, such as is apt to be engendered by pomp, might be repressed,' writes Blacman.¹⁸³ Henry is also uniquely chaste, though celibacy is a problematic issue for a monarch, one of whose primary functions is to secure the throne for his lineage by producing a legitimate male heir (which Henry VI did): 'This King Henry was chaste and pure from the beginning of his days. He eschewed all licentiousness in word and deed while he was young; until he was of marriageable age, when he espoused the most noble lady, Lady Margaret, daughter of the King of Sicily by whom he begat but only one son, the most noble and virtuous Prince Edward; and with her and toward her he kept his marriage vow wholly and sincerely even in the absence of the lady, which were sometimes very long: never dealing unchastely with any other woman. Neither when they lived together did he use his wife unseemly, but with all honesty and gravity.'¹⁸⁴

Of particular interest is Henry's encounter with some lascivious dancers. 'Hence it happened once, that at Christmastime a certain great lord brought before him a dance or show of young ladies with bared bosoms who were to dance in that guise before the king, perhaps to prove him, or to entice his youthful mind. But the king was not blind to it, nor unaware of the devilish wile, and spurned the delusion, and very angrily averted

¹⁸² John Blacman, "Prologue" to *Henry the Sixth*, 25.

¹⁸³ Blacman, *Henry the Sixth*, 36.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

his eyes, turned his back upon them, and went out to his chamber, saying: Fy, fy, for shame, forsothe ye be to blame.'¹⁸⁵

The narrative is that of a young man coming into his own on the strength of his private virtues, marking a shift from divine signs towards interiority. As a young monarch in late medieval England, Henry is faced with two competing sets of demands: the secular world advocates and expects avarice, pride, and lust in a king, and his inner calling for the kingdom of heaven instead. We are given a romanticised picture of a king who never covets what is not his own and relieves the poor 'from his own resources in a most comely sort, and contenting himself with what he had, preferred to live uprightly among them, rather than that they should pine in poverty, trodden down by his harshness.'¹⁸⁶ Henry's nature brings him into constant conflict with greedy nobles (when a great lord offers him an expensive coverlet for his bed, Henry asks everyone to be careful of the likes of him). Blacman anticipates most modern arguments against the canonisation when he speaks of the coverlet (and by extension, of all earthly power and riches): 'But the mind of the king thirsting rather for heavenly and spiritual things and making the things of earth of less account, regarded lightly the gift.'¹⁸⁷ There is also a Cleansing of the Temple moment when Blacman describes Henry has been particular about not allowing weapons of war, birds of prey or business conferences in church: 'Moreover he would never suffer hawks, swords, or daggers to be brought into church, or business agreements or conferences to be carried on there: even his great men and nobles he enjoined to give themselves frequently to prayer, according to the word of the Saviour 'My house is a house of prayer': and they obeyed him devoutly.'¹⁸⁸

Blacman does not refer to Henry's founding of Eton or King's, his murder, or his posthumous miracles at all. Instead, Henry is credited with foreknowledge about his humiliating capture and bloody death. Seventeen days before Henry was taken, an audible voice had sounded in his ears, telling him how treachery would deliver him up, he would be brought to London like a thief, 'and should endure many evils devised by the thoughts of wicked men, and should be imprisoned there in the Tower.' When he

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 30.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 32.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 29.

spoke of this to Masters Bedon and Mannyng, they were incredulous, till the event assured them of Henry's truthfulness.¹⁸⁹ Henry had been informed by revelation from 'the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saints John Baptist, Dunstan, and Anselm (whose consolations he did then at other times enjoy) and was thereby strengthened to bear with patience these and like trials.'¹⁹⁰ He is credited also with 'calmness' in the face of devastation: 'The same prince when in the end he lost both the realms, England and France, which he had ruled before, along with all his wealth and goods, endured it with no broken spirit but with a calm mind, making light of all temporal things, if he might but gain Christ and things eternal.'¹⁹¹

Instead of Henry's proved miracles, there is a single invented tale of how Henry supplied his hungry troops with sufficient bread produced from a negligible amount of wheat: 'Also in the extreme pressure of his wars in the parts of the North, it is told by some who came from that region, that when there was for a time a scarcity of bread among his fellow-soldiers and troops, out of a small quantity of wheat, bread was so multiplied by his merits and prayers that a sufficiency and even a superfluity was forthcoming for all of his who sought and asked for it, whereas the rest that were opposed to him had to suffer from lack of meat.'¹⁹² This is an odd claim for Blacman to make, that Henry somehow exactly replicated one of Christ's most popular miracles, so why did the Latin-speaking courtiers of Henry VII go to the lengths of creating a recognisably false story?

The central theme and undercurrent of the brief tract is the promise of a canonised Lancastrian saint, and heightened dynastic sanctity for Henry Tudor. The revelations and the living miracle are a political argument that Tudor propagandists are putting forward. If Henry's spiritual authority is not derived from his martyrdom and his mystical powers are not passive, they are more effective than his kingship, or any power derived from his political position. The fate of Henry's canonisation hangs in this delicate balance between an acknowledgement of his overwhelming religious authority and the previously drawn picture of a humiliated and suffering monarch more fitted for the cloister. Note how

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 43.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁹² Ibid., 43.

Blacman begins by describing him as ‘a second Job’.¹⁹³ The example of Job does more to dissolve the boundaries between the late medieval king Henry VI and Henry VI the twenty-first century protagonist of popular literature. The aesthetic intentions of saints’ lives and postmodern fiction differ, so the myriad similarities they have go unnoticed. This reference to Job begins a still-ongoing philosophical discourse on the validity of authority divinely-ordained suffering bestows on individuals. By the time the text ends, Henry VI has become a figure of immense religious authority responding perfectly to the religious needs of the time. Henry’s materialistic, Christocentric piety is also rewritten: ‘He would be at the divine office quite early, nay at the very beginning: nor did he ever grow weary at the lengthy prolonging of it, even though it were continued until after noonday.’¹⁹⁴ Nowhere during the early days of the cult was he such a self-marginalised ascetic, although his long years in hiding invited such an interpretation.

Leigh Ann Craig suggests that there was more to Henry’s saintly persona than the surface aspects of sacral kingship and martyrdom. Blacman assimilates Henry’s illness into his piety:

Further, to confirm his notable devotion to God, many who yet survive and were once of his household say that he was wont almost at every moment to raise his eyes heavenward like a denizen of heaven or one rapt, being for the time not conscious of himself or of those about him, as if he were a man in a trance or on the verge of heaven: having his conversation in heaven, according to that word of the apostle: ‘Our conversation is in heaven’.¹⁹⁵

This is a familiar and suspicious image of medieval Christian mysticism. With our knowledge of Protestant (and often Catholic) distrust of mystics and ecstasies, we know how disquieting Henry’s adoration of the Holy Cross and ‘conversations with heaven’ are. A few mystics conformed to Church rules; many did not. Marguerite Porete (1253-1310) was burned for her book *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, a meditation on divine love.¹⁹⁶ Blacman adds that Henry’s privy servants ‘say that the king often saw our Lord

¹⁹³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 28.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 38.

¹⁹⁶ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, tr. by Ellen L. Babinsky (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993).

Jesus presenting Himself in human form in the sacrament of the altar in the hands of the priest,' and mysticism is, in a way, this direct experience of the divine.¹⁹⁷ A simpler explanation of this Christian silence would have been 'prayer', so the question we need to ask is why it was necessary to create this vision of a king in a divine trance (a bit of high drama). One possible explanation for this is the near-militancy of this 'irascible' version of Christianity. The zealotry of this image equals Henry V's martial prowess. The second reason has more to do with the powerful act of 'looking' at a religious figure in a divine trance. Very much like the grief of the Pieta, this vision invites absorption in the experience while denying this absorption to the viewer (Evelyn Reynolds calls this the 'affective paradox').¹⁹⁸ The reader is convinced of the humanity of Henry, but Henry is placed beyond the reader's affective reach. In this instance, Henry's silence is a rejection of the sinfulness of the reader/viewer/thinker: 'The sinful human viewer of this image has no place on the altar with the redeemer and co-redeemer'.¹⁹⁹ Prayer is imitable, but Henry's rapt focus on the divine is not imitable. This is what Reynolds has to say about the dual function of the Pieta: 'Though Christ's mother had to be human enough to stoop to have mercy on sinners, she also had to be exalted enough to gain the ear of God on the sinner's behalf'.²⁰⁰ Henry's 'trance of involvement' fulfils the same purpose, and is a shrewd addition to the Tudor 'dynastic sanctity' argument.

In 1496, St. George's Chapel became the new chapel of the Order of the Garter. Henry VII ordered the construction of a Lady Chapel, his own tomb, and a special shrine over the relics of the holy king.²⁰¹ Lay devotion to Henry was unaltered. The problem of Henry's kingship was recognisable as a substantial barrier only to a new crop of educated, urbanised, Latin-speaking courtiers in England and the Holy See in Rome. For all liturgical purposes, his dual monarchy of England and France, and his patronage of Eton and Cambridge were significantly played up by the courtly gentlemen who were tasked with redefining the image of Henry VI. Post-1485 iconography is not fundamentally

¹⁹⁷ Blacman, *Henry the Sixth*, 36.

¹⁹⁸ Evelyn Reynolds, "Trance of Involvement: Absorption and Denial in Fifteenth-Century Middle English Pietàs," in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 116, no. 4 (2017): 438. doi:10.5406/JENGLGERMPHIL.116.4.0438, 439.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 440.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 442.

²⁰¹ Roger Lockyer and Andrew Thrush, *Henry VII* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 92-94.

different from earlier statues and paintings, but this is hardly surprising. All symbolic expressions of devotion were considered threatening. There were some exceptions. Images of Henry at a Gately church in Norfolk stand out for their unique depiction of Henry VI. Here Henry is in august company. There are four panels on the north screen - two depicting the biblical Visitation, two with minor female saints. Two of the four panels on the south screen show St Gregory and St Augustine. Henry and Master John Shorne (a fourteenth-century rector venerated as a saint after his death) are depicted on the other two panels.²⁰² Pilgrimage saints generated revenue, and in spite of a canonisation trial being set in process, actual pilgrimages to Windsor and devotion to Henry were not discouraged. Only the theological principles governing the cult shift imperceptibly during the trial. This was the work of a few educated courtiers immersed in Christian theology, many of whom began to reconceptualise the character of Henry VI as one that would be acceptable to villagers in Devon and the ecclesiastical government in Rome. Advocates of this 'new' Henry had never seen him when he was alive. Those who had known Henry (like John Blacman) had lived through his deposition, seen him paraded as Edward's prisoner on the streets of London, and heard of his lonely death in the Tower were never influential in defining the nature of the cult. Thus Henry's visual presence was unaffected, but towards the end of Henry Tudor's rule he is as unapproachable as St Louis. There is a little prayer on the flyleaf of a primer kept at Ushaw College, Durham:

O blyssed king so full of vertue
 The flowr of all knyghthood that never was fyled
 Thou pray for us to Christe Jhesu
 And to hys modyr Mary myld
 In all thi warkys thu was never wyld
 Bott full of grace and of charyte
 Mercyfull ever to man and chylde
 Now sweyt kyng Henre pray for me.

O crownyd kyng with sceptur in hand
 Most nobyll conqueror I may thee call
 For thou hast conqueryd I undyrstand A
 hevynly kyngdome most imperyall

²⁰². The South Kensington Museum, *A List of Buildings in Great Britain and Ireland Having Mural and Other Painted Decorations: Of Dates Prior to the Latter Part of the Sixteenth Century, with Historical Introduction and Alphabetical Index of Subjects* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1883), 111.

Hwar joye haboundeth and grace perpetuell In
presens of the holy Trenite
Off wych grace thou make me parcyall Now
swet kyng Henre praye for me.²⁰³

Yet this newfound authority and heavenly crown sat uneasily atop the legacy Henry VI had left behind. The sanctity of saints and any authority derived from this sanctity in fifteenth-century England were contested issues because the authority of the church was being undermined by internal strife. Administrative problems were created by factional quarrels within the church. The Roman papacy had been engaged in its own struggle for survival for three centuries, despite preserving an appearance of absolute strength. In the face of an alarming number of heretical cults, their obsessive fear of witchcraft, and quarrels between contemplative and active orders of Rome, saints' cults were a way of controlling the affective piety which might otherwise find heretical methods of expression.

Henry VII promoted his great uncle's canonisation with three successive popes. He wrote to Innocent VIII at a date earlier than 1492; Alexander VI appointed the Archbishop of Canterbury and the bishop of Durham to investigate the life and miracles of Henry VI.²⁰⁴ On 20th May, 1504 Pope Julius II appointed another commission consisting of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the bishops of London, Durham and Winchester and gave them extra powers to take the help of more people while interviewing aged or infirm people.²⁰⁵ As mentioned earlier, many miracles were '*probatum*' when Henry VIII's break with Rome put an end to all hopes for a sainted Lancastrian king.²⁰⁶ Archbishop Morton's Register provides contemporary evidence about there being no unusual delays barring the deaths of popes, the appointment of commissioners, and the normal amount of time all papal investigations used to take.²⁰⁷ Henry VI would not have appealed to the papal curia as a candidate for canonisation for his outdated claims to sanctity, but Henry Tudor spent liberally on the promotion of the

²⁰³ Cardinal Gasquet, *The Religious Life of King Henry VI* (London: G. Bell, 1923), 127.

²⁰⁴ Labun, *Holy Henries*, 5; Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 355.

²⁰⁵ Wolffe, *Henry VI*, 355.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

cult with Rome, besides maintaining a strong diplomatic alliance with them throughout his reign.²⁰⁸

Dynastic Sanctity and the Reign of Henry VII

One of Henry VII's first political strategies was to emulate Henry VI's monarchical piety, and project himself as a king built on the lines of the famous royal saint. Bernard Andre and Pietro Carmeliano (Tudor propagandists) reshaped the story of Henry VI's death.²⁰⁹ He even took the same route as Henry VI for his royal tours. But local uprisings followed him in Cambridge, Huntingdon, Lincoln, Nottingham, York, Worcester, Hereford, Gloucester, and Bristol. Unfazed, Henry continued his journey. He attended public services in the cathedrals and churches in Lincoln, York, Doncaster, Worcester, and Bristol.²¹⁰ 'On Maundy Thursday he washed the feet of 29 paupers, and on Good Friday he gave extensive alms to the poor, touched for the king's evil, and blessed cramp rings in accordance with monarchic ritual,' says Labun.²¹¹

Another clever invention of Tudor propagandists was the myth of Henry VI the peacemaker – the popular prayer 'Let there be peace on earth, not war' uses the invocation '*Rex Henricus, sis amicus*'.²¹² A poem composed on the happy occasion of the birth of Prince Arthur represents Henry as being chosen by a synod of 'to oversee the restoration of peace and harmony to the kingdom of England as united under Henry VII'.²¹³ Even in less important pieces, Henry VII insisted on being described as the successor of Henry VI: 'The Italian writer Giovanni Gigilis wrote an 'Epithalamium' in 1486 which described Henry VII as Henry VI's 'successor', who '[liberated] England from tyranny after the murder of the princes... Andre's *Historia*, written after 1500, introduces another aspect of the whole connection between two pious Henries that

²⁰⁸ Henry VII could have pushed for his uncle's canonisation harder, most scholars agree, but it was not a project he could devote his unwavering attention to. By all accounts, however, he personally believed in the intercessory powers of his uncle till his death. His devotion to Henry VI might have been quite genuine.

²⁰⁹ John P. D. Cooper, *Propaganda and the Tudor State: Political Culture in the Westcountry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 36.

²¹⁰ Labun, *Holy Henries*, 31.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

²¹² This point was originally made by Simon Walker in 'Political Saints'. Labun, *Holy Henries*, 33.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

continues till Shakespeare. Henry VI is shown to be speaking of the first Tudor king, “*aliquando regni gubernacula suscepturum, omniaque manu sua (ut nunc videmus feliciter possidet) habiturum...*”²¹⁴ This was neither corroborated nor denied by Henry VII, but the fact that this appeared in *Historia* meant it was looked upon with approval by Henry VII. Polydore Vergil also mentions this in his account.²¹⁵ Within five decades, this idea of Henry VI ‘foretelling’ the victory of Henry VII (like he had foretold his own capture and defeat) was so well-established in popular culture that Shakespeare used it too.

It must have been fortunate for Henry VII that the average medieval man had no access to detailed dynastic records of ruling figures, because his was a line barred from succession.²¹⁶ Tudor propagandists went to great lengths because Henry VII was fearful for the security of the dynasty till the end of his life, sometimes with good reason. He was troubled by revolts throughout 1489 and 1491, leading to fresh spates of executions and massive fines. The Perkin Warbeck fiasco (also in 1491) was a deeply unsettling episode.²¹⁷ Henry VII was, above all, suspicious of most people in his court, a lesson he had learnt from the reign of his great uncle. Real and imaginary Yorkist plots played a significant role in Henry Tudor’s quest for legitimacy and his promotion of the cult.

If we look closely, these political flourishes invented by Henry’s propagandists are also additions to an already existing death-story. Blacman’s tract is the story of a pilgrim-convert journeying to his eventual death; Henry foretells his nephew restoring peace to a world thrown into disarray after his own murder. This is not to say that Henry’s martyrdom was *still* the single most important (if invisible) event in his reinvigorated cult, but it reveals how deeply religious Lancastrian and Tudor courtly cultures were. All political events had religious overtones, which is why it was possible to convolute the

²¹⁴ Ibid., 36-38.

²¹⁵ ‘Henry VII made no recorded statement about this legend, but the fact that it appears in André’s history strongly suggests that the king looked upon it with approval and even encouraged it,’ writes Labun in *Holy Henries*.

²¹⁶ An Act of Parliament passed during the reign of Henry IV upheld the legitimacy barred adults from the John of Gaunt and Katherine Swynford union from gaining access to the throne, although it was accepted by Eugene IV.

²¹⁷ The Warbeck problem showed how weak Henry’s position really was. Although Warbeck was exposed and executed, the mystery surrounding the fate of the Princes in the Tower meant the actual second son of York might still be alive, and he would have the superior claim.

harmful political events of Henry's life with Christological significance, and present him as a misunderstood saint. This was certainly easier to replicate with kings like Edward or Edmund, Anglo-Saxons about whom not much was known, but with someone like Henry VI, the entire process of reconceptualisation might have been less effective without Tudor advertisement.²¹⁸ Accounts of medieval religio-political schisms typically ignore how unifying a monarch's demonstrative piety could be. Henry VII's reign is a good example of the way apparently unethical seizures of power could be legalised by manipulating popular piety. Neither medieval political thinkers nor theologians would have undermined Henry's religious efforts to procure a canonisation for his great uncle because this was his royal prerogative and sacral kingship was still a dominant political concept. Henry VI himself had pursued the issue of canonising Alfred during his reign.²¹⁹ In all probability, Henry VII's adoration of his uncle was quite genuine. A Christian king's political moves and piety were interconnected. R. L. Storey called him an obsessive demonstrator of piety.²²⁰ He was certainly preoccupied with the condition of his soul in Purgatory (Henry VII requested 10,000 masses be said for his soul after his death in his will).²²¹ His original plan was to be buried beside Henry VI in the Lady Chapel at Westminster Abbey, but Henry VIII never translated Henry VI's relics to Westminster Abbey, completely contrary to his father's wishes.²²² Henry VIII's impartial instructions were to make Henry VI's and Edward IV's tombs more princely at his charge where they were, and not at Westminster Abbey.²²³ Between the 1470s and Henry VII's death in 1528, the value system of medieval piety had changed completely. The tension between visual representations of Henry VI (and of all royal saints) and the altered Henry VI legend was, again, a result of papal hostility towards holy matter and miracles. The central character of the cult is retained, but his source of sanctity is now different. Henry is venerated as a saint because of his fictitious private virtues and the sole living miracle.

²¹⁸ This was in spite of the fact that Henry's life fit the pattern of the upper-class male being martyred and performing posthumous miracles. This was a famous model of sanctity, but the growth of cults was an uncertain process.

²¹⁹ Lewis, *Lay Sanctity*, 142.

²²⁰ R. L. Storey, *The Reign of Henry VII* (New York: Walker, 1968), 184; Labun, *Holy Henries*, 41.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

²²² Labun, *Holy Henries*, 43.

²²³ Wolfe, *Henry VI*, 358.

Because Henry derives his sanctity from his pious rule and political choice of being a peacemaker, the nature of his political authority also changes and he legitimises the rule of Henry VII in the public eye.

Throughout Henry Tudor's turbulent reign, the cult fed the narrative of Henry VII restoring the English throne to the blessed descendant of Henry VI. Henry VII was not a legitimate descendant of Henry VII, and the only political leader who had restored peace in England was Edward IV, Henry's murderer. The theological formula Henry's propagandists imposed on Henry VI's life was far-removed from the realities of Henry VI's reign, but the cult became a part of the political ideology in the Tudor court.

The attempted canonisation was an aspect of Henry VII's relationship with his own kingship and his Christian responsibility. Henry VII neither pardoned his opposers nor trusted his councillors (although he followed their advice multiple times). In spite of being a Tudor, he received support from a large number of weary Yorkists. Fortunately for Henry, landed magnates were tired of the Wars of the Roses; it depleted their ranks and destroyed whatever estates they owned. Pretenders to his crown were weak, and ultimately could gather no support. His ancestor's sanctity strengthened his claim, but he satisfied his claim through his own unique efforts. He chose ministers that would be acceptable to the parliament and magnates, and was reasonably popular among his subjects. The eventual reconciliation after England's most major civil war was possible because of Henry's skilled diplomacy.

In 1504, Henry VII placed a picture of Henry VI as a royal saint in Prince Arthur's Chantry, depicting him as watching over the dead prince for eternity.²²⁴ This was during the final years of Henry Tudor's rule, and even while his ruthlessness and avarice increased, Henry VI's protective powers were important to him in a very personal way. As merciless as he was, he upheld all crown grants made by Henry VI during his lifetime. He also depended on the approval of the papacy to legitimise his rule in a way that no English ruler had done before. Decades after his death, Henry VIII would tell Thomas More that they were so much 'bounden unto the See of Rome that (they) can not do too much honour unto it.'²²⁵ To recognise only Henry VII's political purposes in his

²²⁴ Piroyanski, *Martyrs in the Making*, 83.

²²⁵ Felicity Heal, *Reformation in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 30.

promotion of the cult is to mistake both his kingship and the complex nature of the power a saintly cult wielded on the eve of the reformation. The story of Henry VI is not only a political instrument that Tudor propagandists manipulated to serve their intended purposes; the cult was far more powerful than that. Through his promotion of the royal piety of Henry VI, Henry VII was celebrating a form of kingship that he had grown up with (the *rois tres chretien*) and sacral responsibilities he believed he had been entrusted with when he won the battle of Bosworth.²²⁶ If the formation of the cult itself was the exhausted response of nobles and laymen facing a grave financial and political crisis, Tudor representations of Henry VI respond to the political need for stability and legitimacy in early sixteenth century England.

Conclusion

The worst effects of the Black Death and peasants' revolts were over when Henry VII came to the throne, but the country was battered by civil wars and the war with France. England remembered the realities of war: 'the ravaged countryside, the burning farm and town, the murder, rape, and brutalisation of the populace'.²²⁷ Seeds of a new kind of nobleman were being sown among the decay of an aristocracy brought to its knees by the plague and agricultural depression. Their assets rapidly diminished, and with Henry VII recalling all crown grants given by a king after Henry VI, their incomes depleted. The emerging aristocrats were either merchants or even lesser men, not landed magnates; dynastic warfare made no difference to them. This was the 'kingdom' that confronted Henry VII.²²⁸ Scholars concentrate on the spiritual decay that had gripped the church and society in England, and the loss of faith in monarchy, but these were problems a king couldn't solve. Most of England's problems were a result of the flawed kingship of Henry VI. Any monarch who had the political will and resourcefulness to not depend on the parliament for decision-making would find effective strategies to rule the suffering country, and Henry VII was that monarch. The existing law ('that the crown can descend only to one person at a time and this succession is decided by primogeniture') couldn't

²²⁶ Henry VII might have been influenced by the Catholic tendencies of his mother's family when he was growing up in Brittany.

²²⁷ G. R. Elton, *England under the Tudors* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-12.

be used. 'In actual fact, he adopted the simplest solution of all: he said that he was king.'²²⁹

Here we must pause to emphasise that Henry VII claimed the throne through his paternal grandmother Katherine of Valois, who had been mother to Henry VI by her first marriage to Henry V.²³⁰ By 1485, Henry VI was a very popular saint and a potential source of political legitimacy. As has been discussed throughout this chapter, the cult of Henry VI had been flourishing for years before Henry Tudor fought Richard III in Bosworth. With his images spread in parish churches throughout the country in places like Devon and Cornwall, he was a *visible* figure of considerable religious authority. This authority originated in his humiliation, exile, and martyrdom, but lay piety had never expounded on the meaning of this authority, or if this authority had any limits. Followers of Henry VI agreed that he was an intercessor with remarkable miraculous powers; he was worshipped as a royal martyr and as an exiled ascetic. No Tudor propagandist defined the nature of Henry VI's religious power. Like the concept of sacral kingship, its vagueness was its soul: Henry VI's sanctity supplied Henry VII with rights and privileges beyond the reaches of rebels like Warbeck and Simnel. Transforming Henry VI into a living saint who foresaw his own downfall and predicted Henry VII's accession naturally portrayed Henry VII as a 'restorer' of divine order. Thus convoluted with ideas of dynastic sanctity, the issue of Henry's legitimacy was effectively skirted. Above all, Henry Tudor's actual restoration of order was further proof of his uncle's divinity. Henry VI's 'patronage' saw Henry VII safely through the 1489 tax riots in Yorkshire, the 1497 Cornish Rising and several later rebellions by pretenders to the crown or foreign kings.²³¹

There were differences between the recommended practices of the cult and the way English lay people actually worshipped 'St' Henry VI. Ordinary people continued visiting the Windsor shrine. It was simpler to shift theological doctrines than to change devotional customs or folk belief concerning a local saint. Throughout Henry VII's reign, the cult was 'a coincidence of opposites'. Praying to images of Henry VI in a church

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Cooper, *Propaganda and the Tudor State*, 36.

²³¹ The fact that he was able to leave a wealthy and orderly nation to Henry VIII was also an indication of him being the rightful king, an extension of the argument that Henry VI was, indeed, the John the Baptist figure in this situation.

unified the cult, but such devotion was now threatening to the Western Church. For a long time in the early sixteenth century, this was tolerated (and the revenue created by pilgrimage was not unwelcome).²³² An essential feature of saintly cults in Northern and Western Europe was that they were run by voluntary lay people who formed a brotherhood of sorts.²³³ These fraternities were quite powerful in places like central Italy, where they organised charities and activities for communal welfare. People could belong to multiple church communities. Combined with regular pilgrimages, such cults bridged the laity-clergy gap – an idea explored in more detail by Diarmaid MacCulloch in ‘*Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700*’. The reformation robbed the laity of this control over their own parish church. Locals could no longer pay sculptors or painters for an extra image of Henry VI on an East Anglian rood screen.²³⁴ Meditating on the blue ermine-robed sculptures of Henry might have reminded devotees of a divine figure standing in solidarity with their war-torn reality, but this was now heretical. As demonstrated in this chapter, Tudor propagandists carefully distanced themselves from such accusations. A canonised dynastic saint would have been a political godsend for Henry Tudor, but all he got was a substantial number of indulgences reserved for pilgrims to the shrine of Henry VI.²³⁵ Still, this recognition from the papacy in the early sixteenth century boded well for the future of the cult. Henry VII's untimely death was unfortunate for the cult, but Henry VIII could not refute any arguments put forward to secure the Tudor dynasty. Besides, it was not possible even for a violent and bloody movement like the European Reformation to put saintly veneration to an end. It was natural for Christian thinkers to discourse on the possibility of a middle ground, in which Henry's private virtues could be glorified without divinising him. A sixteenth-century author would further flesh out the exciting, volatile Henry VI narrative.

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the rich, uncharted devotional world of the Henry VI cult, where the political doctrine of sacred kingship interacted with the lay frenzy for salvation. It drew attention both to how veneration of a humiliated and

²³² It must have depleted greatly, however, once active patronage of the cult was discontinued.

²³³ Joanna Skórzewska, *Constructing a Cult: The Life and Veneration of Guðmundr Arason (1161-1237) in the Icelandic Written Sources* (Leiden: BRILL, 2011), 3-6.

²³⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700* (London: Penguin UK, 2004), 51-102.

²³⁵ Wolfe, *Henry VI*, 356-357.

tortured figure was in keeping with the violent and morbid tendencies of late medieval Christianity, and how Latin-speaking Tudor courtiers had to laboriously refashion the Henry VI story during the canonisation trial. This mixture of image-worship, miracle-working, unofficial theology, and Henry VII's search for political legitimacy is united by its central character, the failed Lancastrian king who was defeated and deposed. The argument of this chapter is not (as might be supposed) that the cult was significant because such attachment towards a failed leader was unprecedented. The cult combined several ancient sub-traditions within Christianity, most of which have been specified in the historical overview of saintly cults: early medieval martyr cults, high medieval cults of royal martyrs, adoration of redemptive humiliation, and a genuine reverence for divine kingship. It is also worth noting that Henry VII did not overturn any of these ideas. The cult had been founded on a wave of pious enthusiasm without any agenda, and this remained unchanged till the break with Rome. If this point of view looks like Catholic revisionism, it is because late medieval Christian piety was deeply Catholic. Henry VI was a staunch Catholic himself. If anything, this chapter makes a case for the popularity of Catholicism during the first decade of the sixteenth century. Indeed, there was no quarrel between being English and being Catholic before the reign of Edward VI. The Henrician reformation was an act of state, not a spontaneous outpouring of orthodox piety. Outlawing a thousand years of papal allegiance was a long process. The Henry VI cult shows how materiality was ensconced in every devotional ritual, and it would take a cultural trauma to drive these tendencies of affective devotion out of the parish church. Or, perhaps, as post-Reformation treatments of Henry VI will show us, fundamental questions about sanctity and divine leadership remained even after the dust had settled on all the state-ordained religious upheavals. Although the Reformation raised issues far more complicated than the sanctity of saints, the chasm between the Pope and the King would forever change the natures of both political and religious authority in England.

CHAPTER TWO

‘The Field of Golgotha’: Shakespeare and Henry VI

In Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, the Bishop of Carlisle makes a sinister prediction just before the unfortunate monarch is about to be deposed. A legitimate monarch was the hand of God. True *noblesse* forbade harbouring thoughts of treason against the sovereign, the land, and God. Dethroning the deputy of Christ was sacrilege, and England was likely to regret it for centuries to come.

The blood of English shall manure the ground
And future ages groan for this foul act,
Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels,
And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars
Shall kin with kin and kind with kind confound.
Disorder, horror, fear, and mutiny
Shall here inhabit, and this land be called
The field of Golgotha and dead men’s skulls.¹

This ‘disorder, horror, fear, and mutiny’ is the subject of the first trilogy of history plays Shakespeare wrote. Understood for three hundred and fifty years as an example of Shakespeare’s belief in the ‘Tudor myth’, research on his chronicle plays are pioneered by E.M.W Tillyard (who believes Shakespeare’s plays agree with official Tudor historiography) and a host of Protestant historians who follow him.² In fact, scholars have made Tillyard the official representation of the Tudor myth, simplifying not only Tillyard’s complex criticism but also the Tudor myth itself (we must remember that there is no one specific Tudor myth; there are at least three recorded versions of the myth). Henry Tudor’s claim to the throne was shaky at best, but England experienced her first breath of relief on international waters after the Hundred Years’ War. The myth – granting divine sanction, ideology and symbol to the entire dynasty – was a prevalent theme at the playhouse, though none of the plays were as popular as the *Henry VI* trilogy.³

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of King Richard the Second* (New York: Dover Publication, 2015), Perlego, 4.1. 139-146.

² Tillyard is especially crucial to this work because of the theological implications of his work. He was Master of Jesus College, Cambridge from 1945-59, and a peerless classical and literary scholar.

³ The source of the Tudor myth is not E.M.W. Tillyard. Early historians like Polydore Vergil and Thomas More produced works that were incredibly biased against Richard III. Hall and Holinshed followed the

This political myth was a moralised version of the history of Tudor monarchs: Henry IV was responsible for usurping Richard II's throne. All the ills visited upon later Lancastrian kings culminated in the Wars of the Roses and the reign of Richard III until Henry Tudor restored peace to the realm. The *Anglica Historia* of Polydore Vergil (Henry VII's official historian), and Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard III* were the main sources of this myth, and both were in print by 1543. It is safe to assume Shakespeare had some knowledge of *Anglica*. To quote the historian Nigel Saul, 'All the ills that were to afflict the realm . . . flowed from Hereford's (Bolingbroke's) rebellion against Richard . . . [Henry Tudor] providentially healed the divisions by marrying Elizabeth of York.'⁴

Nearly fifty years after the publication of Tillyard's seminal work on the history plays, Shakespeare's use of the Tudor myth has perhaps become a clichéd subject for literature scholars. Yet, to begin in true Tillyardian fashion, 'there are several ways of taking Shakespeare's treatment of politics'.⁵ Chapter One reflected on the way the cult wrote and rewrote Henry's story; the ambitious plan of the current chapter is to understand Shakespeare's conception of Henry VI. The approach is selective rather than wide-ranging: there is much to be said about Henry's political stance but nothing, for instance, about the fascinating Margaret of Anjou. Although the chapter deals with the Tudor myth at length, the relation that has been proposed between the myth and Henry VI is complex and uncertain. The first tetralogy is known for deploying narratives and imagery of civil and international war. To a great degree, the first three plays can be read as a commentary on the relationship between the Renaissance stage and war: waiting for war, getting ready for war, and facing the war. Henry VI's character is used to test common sixteenth-century notions of divine kingship, deposition, exile, and what constitutes a 'noble death'.⁶ Here, as with the literature produced by the cult, there is a silence around the silent periods of the king. Unlike Blacman or Tudor propagandists,

tradition and till the 1956 work by historian Paul Murray Kendall called *Richard III* was published, nobody had substantially contradicted this interpretation of the past.

⁴ Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 2–3. Quoted by Neema Parvini, *Shakespeare's History Plays: Rethinking Historicism*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 85.

⁵ E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1962), Preface vii.

⁶ The death of Socrates in 399 BCE is the most famous example of a Noble Death because he chooses to die rather than be exiled.

Shakespeare doesn't feel the need to defensively insist on there being long periods of contemplation in Henry's life. Elizabeth's Lancastrian links would have made it difficult for Shakespeare to even throw an oblique glance at the king's stupor. As thematically rich and compelling as Shakespeare's open silences are, the Wars chronicle has very little moral/theological space to support the weight of the silences of Barnardine or that of Iago. Philip C. McGuire calls Shakespeare's open silences 'a relaxation, a suspension, of the total control that is Shakespeare's prerogative as a playwright to exercise'.⁷ This, specifically, is absent in the first trilogy; there are no unexplained or unreasonable silences. It is also difficult to discuss the role of silence in a Shakespearean play without exploring its performance history exhaustively, and although the comments of certain Henry VI actors have been considered (especially in the final chapter), a study of how *Henry VI* has been performed for four centuries is beyond the scope of this work. This chapter attempts to define Henry's pacifism and his experience of exile, and addresses the difficulties presented by such definitions. Is silence an 'othered' experience in the world of the tetralogy? It is, perhaps, more accurate to call silence a fringe element in *Henry VI*. Shakespeare integrates into the work an overlooked version of silence through symbolism and simple suggestiveness: quietude.⁸ Exile is an exquisite metaphor for the kind of isolation and alienation that silence necessarily imposes on characters. These themes are inevitably linked with the martyrdom of Henry in his quest for redemptive justice.

There is a scarcity of research on Shakespeare's understanding of Henry VI; very few scholars focus on the king in their articles on the history plays. The latest collection of critical essays on the *Henry VI* plays does not contain a single chapter/segment on the character of Henry VI.⁹ This chapter is, therefore, indebted to traditional Shakespeare scholars – Bloom, Greenblatt, Wells – for their work on perception and identity creation

⁷ Philip C. McGuire, *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare's Open Silences* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1985), 25

⁸ Better a handful with quietness Than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind (Ecclesiastes 4:6); For thus says the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel: "In returning and rest you shall be saved; In quietness and confidence shall be your strength." (Isaiah 30:15) Many Gospel verses refer to 'peace', 'rest', and 'quietness', and spiritual stillness is an important Christian accomplishment.

⁹ This refers to the anthology of critical essays edited by Thomas A. Pendleton and published by Routledge in 2013.

in Shakespeare.¹⁰ Margreta de Grazia's arguments around Hamlet have been expanded to enquire if the loss of land is also a driving force behind Henry's obsessive piety.¹¹ Katharine Eisaman Maus's work on *Richard II* and *Henry VI* have been extensively used, as has the now-famous Jane Kingsley-Smith's seminal doctoral dissertation on Shakespeare's exiles (interestingly supervised by Wells).¹²

Kingship and Virtue

Thomas More, Holinshed, and Hall (Shakespeare's primary resources) approach the myth from different angles (personal, religio-political, and supernatural) but they all manage to justify their use of the late medieval ages not only as a generator of the sorrows of civil war but also as an argument about what might happen in the aftermath of deeply flawed kingship.¹³ Shakespeare's first tetralogy is a blatant deconstruction of Tudor imagery and symbols. The sacrosanct figure of King Henry VII is often depicted as a man bent on run-of-the-mill revenge; battlecries are menacing but victories are not cheerful. When Henry Tudor finally rescues England from Richard III's tyranny, his Lancastrian connection is not celebrated, and there is no mention of his fabled descent from Arthur.¹⁴ The Tillyardian interpretation of the myth favours virtue over

¹⁰ Many literary and critical terms, arguments, and ideas used in this thesis were directly influenced by Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* and Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Stanley Wells supervised a doctoral thesis that has been closely referenced in this study.

¹¹ Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹² This chapter is also indebted to Katharine Eisaman Maus's *Being and Having in Shakespeare*, published in 2013 by Oxford University Press. Many ideas suggested by her have been expanded and/or tweaked to accommodate the *Henry VI* trilogy. Her other book on the Renaissance named *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* also looks at interiority during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with a fresh eye. Jane Elizabeth Kingsley Smith's wonderful doctoral work was supervised by Stanley Wells and called *Banishment in Shakespeare's Plays*. She submitted it to the University of Birmingham in April 1999.

¹³ Needless to say, it is impossible to draw up a correct list of sources Shakespeare possibly considered before and while writing the trilogy around the 1590s. His primary sources were most likely Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrate Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548; 2nd ed., 1550) and Holinshed's chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland, although he would have consulted Holinshed primarily for *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, and *Henry VIII*.

¹⁴ This is, perhaps, because of their Welsh origins. Henry VII certainly milked the fact that he might be related to King Arthur. Consequently, the round table in the palace of Winchester had the red rose of the Lancastrians painted on it, and Henry VIII and Elizabeth continued to take advantage of supposedly being ancestors of the fabled Arthur.

primogeniture. Primogeniture was the English custom¹⁵, but theorists from Cicero to Erasmus preferred virtue as the true origin of kingship.¹⁶ Legitimacy could be earned by ‘fearing God, showing mercy to the afflicted, being wise in council and brave in action, modest in prosperity, constant in adversity, a scourge of evil-doers and just to all men.’¹⁷ The ‘true king’¹⁸ was one who obeyed all laws of nature. Thus, according to the great fourteenth and fifteenth century jurists, “to fight and to judge are the office of a king.”¹⁹ Most obviously these virtues were necessary for the crusades. But the Renaissance conception of kingship was Aristotelian: the goal of true kingship was to build a virtuous society. If “political society existed for noble actions”, a king needed to be good before he could successfully govern²⁰. The sixteenth century jurist Jean Bodin supported this view. ‘All who have discussed the subject have agreed that the end of all commonwealths is the encouragement of honour and virtue,’ he writes in *Commonwealth*.²¹ This tradition found its way into mirrors for magistrates and treatises written for royal education. These ‘institutions of the prince’ are not always in agreement on the exact qualities a ‘true king’ possessed. However, throughout their studies of kingship runs the Platonic and Aristotelian notion that politics and ethics are inseparable, says Renaissance scholar Sherman Hawkins. ‘Some treatises, like Bude’s *Del’ Institution du Princi* stress a single virtue, while others, like the *Institutio Principis Christiani* of Erasmus, are shapeless catalogues of all the desirable royal attributes,’ Hawkins writes in his noted essay on Shakespeare’s second tetralogy.²² And if, indeed, the second tetralogy is Shakespeare’s ‘dramatic *institutio principis*’, the first tetralogy is a study of two fatherless rulers facing

¹⁵ Sherman H. Hawkins, “Virtue and Kingship in Shakespeare’s ‘Henry IV’”, *English Literary Renaissance*, Vol. 5, No. 3, *Studies in Shakespeare* (Autumn 1975), 315.

¹⁶ Erasmus, Machiavelli, and More headline all discourse about political counsel in Reformation England, but the tradition relies heavily on Aristotelian ideas about virtuous government. We can trace the line of thought back to Cicero (*De Officiis*) and Herodotus (*The Histories*).

¹⁷ Hawkins, *Virtue and Kingship*, 315.

¹⁸ Jean Bodin, *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1955), 60-66. Quoted by Sherman H. Hawkins in *Virtue and Kingship*, 315.

¹⁹ Cicero, *De Natura*, II, viii, Works, 122, Quoted by Fortescue in *Governance of England*, where he says ‘Lo! To fight and to judge are the office of a king.’ Also quoted by Hawkins, *Virtue and Kingship*, 316.

²⁰ The ‘true king’ argument is also found in plays like *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*, as Hawkins correctly points out. Erasmus preferred election over bloodline because it gave more importance to virtue, and ‘virtue’ itself resided in the way a ruler ruled over his kingdom, and had little to do with his birth.

²¹ Hawkins, *Virtue and Kingship*, 315-17.

²² *Ibid.*, 319.

war and misfortune. Shakespeare's Henry VI is a deliberate contrast to the 'deformed, unfinished'²³ hunchback Richard III: Henry's debilitating form of humility and piety is a counterpoint to Richard's pathological 'determination to prove a villain.'²⁴ Their singularly incompetent models of kingship can, of course, be read in terms of their ignorance of the genre of discourse created for them. Henry's virtue, and Richard's lack of it do not matter because they do not know what people in their position are designated to know.

Jean Bodin distinguishes between private virtue and princely virtue, and he approves of the proverb that "a bad man makes a good king." He chooses as his example of a good person and a bad king Charles the Simple, but his argument applies equally to Henry VI:

Simplicity without prudence is dangerous and pernicious in a king, and much more to be dreaded than the cruelty of a severe, close-fisted, and inaccessible prince. Our forefathers did not without reason coin the phrase 'a bad man makes a good king'. This sounds strange to sensitive ears, and to those not accustomed to weigh one thing against another. The tolerance and foolish simplicity of too good a prince admits flatterers, place-hunters, and undesirables of all sorts to the offices, charges, and places of profit in the commonwealth. Thereby the finances are exhausted, and the faces of the poor ground to serve the rich. Instead of one tyrant they suffer ten thousand. When there is too great generosity of this kind, wicked men, assassins, and disturbers of the peace of all kinds commit their evil deeds with impunity, for the good and liberal king cannot bring himself to refuse a petition of grace. The public good is sacrificed for the benefit of individuals, and the whole burden of the commonwealth falls on the poor.²⁵

It is difficult to place either of the tetralogies within these pedagogic traditions. The complexity and scope of the plays prevent easy classification, and (as we have already seen) it reuses traditions that were central to medieval and early modern notions of true

²³ The entire sentence lends more clarity to the context: 'I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion, / Cheated of feature by dissembling nature. / Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time / Into this breathing world, scarce half made up.' (Act I, Scene I, lines 18–21).

²⁴ And therefore since I cannot prove a lover
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
(I.i.1–40) Note how Richard's speech points towards destroying peace in the kingdom and Henry's watchword is peace.

²⁵ Bodin, *The Commonwealth*, 64.

kingship. In Shakespeare's own summary of his first trilogy (that Thomas Pendleton calls 'the most significant criticism of the *Henry VI* plays'²⁶) he blames the infant Henry's legal protectors for the civil war:

Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crown'd King
Of France and England, did this king succeed;
Whose state so many had the managing,
That they lost France, and made his England bleed;²⁷

The idea that child-kings create dangerous power vacuums at the centre is old. Yet the child-king in question is uncharacteristically bright.

Civil dissension is a viperous worm,
That gnaws at the bowels of the commonwealth...²⁸

The play starts with an acknowledgement that the child-king has been rendered powerless by intrigue. He is not in control of his narrative. His precociousness appears like 'sententious moralism'²⁹ to Stephen Greenblatt: 'Henry does not have whatever it would take – charisma, cunning, or ruthlessness – to quell the bitterly feuding factions.'³⁰ Not being entirely unversed in scripture and politics, the child king finds himself on the wrong side of knowledge. What Henry knows does not matter, because he does not know what he should. Henry's childish wisdom frequently acts as a forewarning, if not a straightforward prophecy. Tillyardian 'hand of God' scholars see a providential impetus driving events towards the war and Henry Tudor's victory, but there is no such predictable pattern in the triad. Henry's downfall is inevitable but there is an effort to make the 'glorious summer'³¹ last a little longer. Issues of princely training and the role of predestination are especially relevant because key questions about kingship remained unanswered.

²⁶ "Considering the source, the most significant criticism of the *Henry VI* plays may well be the closing lines of the Epilogue to *Henry V*," writes Thomas A. Pendleton in his *Introduction to Henry VI: Critical Essays*.

²⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Life of King Henry V* (Folger Shakespeare Library). Accessed at https://folger-main-site-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2022/11/henry-v_PDF_FolgerShakespeare.pdf

²⁸ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part One* (Hastings: Delphi Classics, 2017), 12.

²⁹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics* (London: Bodley Head, 2018), Kindle.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

The Tudors were still ruling by divine right, but the Reformation had altered the nature of sacral kingship as well.

Is true kingship absolute kingship? Can kingship ever actually be absolute? Does kingship inhere in the man, in his blood, his virtue or his charisma, or is it something that he can obtain for himself? Or is kingship separate from the man? Does it reside primarily in the office? To what extent is kingship a political institution and a constitutional office, and to what extent a discourse of power relationships mediated through office-holding? To what extent is it a sacral or political office? What does one do when the legitimate king is incompetent? How is the realm of a king defined, and how does a king relate to his kingdom?

Henry VI explores these issues through a series of unique character studies. The underlying psychologies of historic characters might seem familiar, but they are presented in strange, disturbing ways in scenes observed from unexpected perspectives, in a carefully manipulated sense of time. Each of Shakespeare's kings in his two tetralogies exerts a near-hypnotic control over readers. Henry VI is the lone powerless ruler whose futility exasperates readers. It is almost paradoxical that, undergirding the normal verbosity of Shakespearean critics, their silence around the fate and personality of Henry VI is persistent. There have been a remarkable number of writings analysing the chronicle plays, but few help us navigate Shakespeare's understanding of this extraordinary blend of religious learning, monkish self-control, and political ineptitude. Thomas A. Pendleton (famous historical scholar and editor of the most recent compilation of critical works on *Henry VI*) blames Shakespearean criticism for focusing too much on questions of text and authorship instead of the plays.³² *Henry VI* was quickly relegated to the 'minor Shakespeare' category also because scholars preferred to concentrate on the more mature *Henry IV* trilogy, or solely on *Richard III*, easily the most popular play of both the tetralogies: 'The great misfortune of the *Henry VI* plays is that they were written very early in Shakespeare's career, and succeeded by other and better work. Almost immediately after Part 3, Shakespeare closed the sequence with *Richard*

³² Pendleton, *Henry VI*, 9.

III, then and ever after one of his most popular plays... And shortly thereafter came the major romantic comedies and the great tragedies.’³³

If this is, indeed, the first play Shakespeare wrote, he was taking an unprecedented risk. Henry VI is a singular character, with his exaggerated ideals of Christian living and near-total disinterestedness in the Anglo-French Wars. But the gamble paid off: Philip Henslowe's diary and Nashe attest to its commercial success. So does Marlowe's next venture, says Greenblatt: ‘Not only did Nashe acknowledge in print that something extraordinary had happened – thousands of people wept for the death of an English hero who had been dead for two hundred years – but Marlowe offered the still more important tribute of imitation: he sat down to write his own English history play, chronicling the tragic life and death of a king, Edward II, brought down by his consuming love for his handsome favourite. Several of the others also began to mine the chronicles and scribble English history plays, though only Marlowe came close to what Shakespeare had achieved.’³⁴

The Child King and Conceptions of Authority

For Tillyardians and New Historicists, *Henry VI* is Shakespeare's account of the Wars of the Roses, with impressive characters like Gloucester, York, Talbot, the she-wolf of Anjou, Jack Cade, and Richard III³⁵. Given the fact that Henry followed and was followed by kings like Henry V, Edward IV, and Richard III, he must have been particularly difficult to represent with understanding and sympathy. The play opens with a conversation between Exeter and Gloucester about the death of Henry V, who, we are told, was ‘the King of Kings.’

Gloucester: England ne'er had a king until his time.
Virtue he had, deserving to command:
His brandish'd sword did blind men with his beams;
His arms spread wider than a dragon's wings;
His sparking eyes, replete with wrathful fire,
More dazzled and drove back his enemies

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 21

³⁵ Unlike Tillyard's interpretation, there are important differences between the critical approaches of New Historicist interpretations of Henry VI. However, they're unanimous in their choice to concentrate on the characters more central to the war and rebellions.

Than mid-day sun fierce bent against their faces.
What should I say? his deeds exceed all speech:
He ne'er lift up his hand but conquered.³⁶

Gloucester's fervent speech already invokes a traditional ideal of kingship: Henry V was a warrior king. The warrior archetype was derived from ancient depictions of Old Testament military commanders (warrior kings are also often lawgivers, establishing legal codes for successful administration of the lands they conquered) and Henry V had just conquered France. This was a recognisable paradigm of chivalry established by Richard the Lionheart, Charlemagne and Saint Louis.³⁷ Henry VI could also credibly be presented as a new model for chivalry with his serious interest in appeasement and pacifism. Shakespeare approaches this problem with an honest uncertainty about the kind of monarch a fatherless, thoughtful, serious child would make. This uncertainty is never abandoned; it is used to subvert traditional images of effective leadership and focus on diplomacy or peace as the essence of sound administration. Henry V's martial prowess turns out to be empty very early in the play; 'Guienne, Champagne, Rheims, Orleans, Paris, Guysors, and Poitiers' are all lost as soon as the monarch is dead.³⁸ Shakespeare uses the loss of France to question accepted historical notions: of what use is military prowess without a constructive plan to govern newly-won territory? Lancastrian and Yorkist admiration for Henry's kingship reveals a dependence on a more medieval, romantic notion of princely chivalry: the true king was expected to be the representative of Christ, have healing powers, guarantee justice and protection to the poor, and ensure that his subjects lived a lawful, virtuous life.³⁹ This is partly the reason Renaissance authors of didactic works had to refer to a dizzying array of kings to illustrate the qualities required to rule successfully. And although changing political circumstances continued to condition these requirements (we may recall how Elizabeth likened herself to Richard

³⁶ William Shakespeare, *1 Henry VI*, 1.1. 8-16.

³⁷ The saga probably began with William the Conqueror, but it was really Edward I who was seen as a martial king proper in England. The warrior-saint king was a different, but equally important amalgamation of princely virtues. St. Ladislaus of Hungary is a prime example. Richard the Lionheart (while not one of the best English warriors) did fight in the Holy Lands and achieved a significant truce. Henry V, of course, is remembered as one of the best martial kings that Europe has known.

³⁸ Shakespeare, *1 Henry VI*, 1.1. 60-61.

³⁹ By the time Henry VI was born, 'chivalry' had lost its roots. Chivalry was a Carolingian idea of bravery, comradeship, sportsman spirit, and military prowess. In the late medieval ages, chivalry came to imply a more general socio-political virtue that carried connotations of honour, nobility, and piety.

II), divinity, a search for legitimacy and the manipulation of political power emerged as themes commonly found in medieval and early modern political writings on kingship.⁴⁰ A central tenet of the Tillyardian school is that Shakespeare imposed an order on the natural disorder of history, and this order had its counterpart in heaven. But the uncertainty of the opening pages of *1 Henry VI* is not simply an expository technique; it's Shakespeare's chosen method of addressing the problems late medieval politics posed to thinkers.⁴¹ It was also near-impossible to impose any reasonable pattern on a subject that borrowed from writers as diverse as Calvin and Machiavelli. The arrival of a new king stirs these forgotten traditions, though it is clear that the child would be governed by a protectorate and, as such, have no say in important affairs of the court. There are many reasons we should not read the play as a summation of these several mirrors for princes traditions, yet it is possible to argue that the chronicles (and not just the *Henry VI* plays) make much of the unbridgeable gaps between these disparate traditions of kingship: the line dividing usurper from legitimate heir, or tyrant from royal saint, is drawn very fine. Henry VI's function goes beyond simply problematising accepted political beliefs; he rewrites his own political role in response to the threat of deposition and exile.⁴² Shakespearean exiles habitually redefine their experience of banishment by adopting a disguise, a new language and a new identity for themselves. Coriolanus, Richard II, Romeo, and King Lear do not survive this self-annihilation; Henry VI does.⁴³ Considering that Henry VI was Shakespeare's first blueprint for characters such as Lear or Prospero, it seems difficult to dismiss him as a king famous for his 'molehill speech'.⁴⁴ When moving from Renaissance theories of kingship to an analysis of Henry VI's role

⁴⁰ Refer to J.M. Theilman's "Political Canonization and Political Symbolism in Medieval England" in *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Jul., 1990), pp. 241-266 for a comprehensive study of this subject. It is available for online access at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/175729>.

⁴¹ Figures close to sainthood were very much a part of what worried early modern thinkers, and a saint who had once been a political leader would have been even more problematic.

⁴² This study is indebted to Jane Elizabeth Kingsley-Smith's dissertation titled *Banishment in Shakespeare's Plays*. The thesis was supervised by Stanley Wells and submitted to the University of Birmingham in April 1999. Not only have her ideas on exile directly influenced the ones presented here, her analyses of Shakespeare's use of the exiled figure have been very useful to our understanding of isolation in *Henry VI*. Her chapter on King Lear's epiphany has been extensively referenced here as well.

⁴³ See 'Rewriting Exile in Renaissance England' in Jane Kingsley-Smith, "Banishment in Shakespeare's Plays", PhD diss., (University of Birmingham, 1999).

⁴⁴ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 1.4.342.

in the trilogy, this question is an appropriate place to start: of all the protagonists in ‘minor Shakespeare’, why is he the least studied?

A possible answer is that Henry VI resolutely refuses to be drawn into the plot that should be centred on him. His asceticism and piety set him apart from the malevolent Yorkists and manipulative courtiers, and he is the sole voice of reason.

Uncles of Gloucester and of Winchester,
The special watchmen of our English weal,
I would prevail, if prayers might prevail,
To join your hearts in love and amity.
O, what a scandal is it to our crown,
That two such noble peers as ye should jar!
Believe me, lords, my tender years can tell
Civil dissension is a viperous worm
That gnaws the bowels of the commonwealth⁴⁵

But the youthful wisdom soon turns into a tearful, unkingly appeal for peace:

O, how this discord doth afflict my soul!
Can you, my Lord of Winchester, behold
My sighs and tears and will not once relent?
Who should be pitiful, if you be not?
Or who should study to prefer a peace,
If holy churchmen take delight in broils?⁴⁶

The reader finds himself in the unenviable position of agreeing with Winchester and York (who believe this sentimental king is too weak to rule), but Shakespeare never treats Henry’s calls for unity as *merely* sentimental; indeed, peace was the only way a protectorate defending a minor king’s rights could function.⁴⁷ Shakespeare’s use of liberal sympathy is very different from quasi-hagiographic Tudor reimaginings of Henry as an innocent since he is still considering Henry’s response as politically valid.

⁴⁵ Shakespeare, *1 Henry VI*, 3.1.69-77

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 113-118

⁴⁷ The rule of a child king was very common in medieval Europe and everything was not completely dependent on the protectorate in power. Princes were prepared to rule the moment they were born. Philip II of France famously attended diplomatic meetings with his father when he was four years old. Political leadership was a very flexible concept in medieval England, and yet, adjustments had to be made when a nine-month-old baby had to be crowned king immediately after the rule of a successful king. The protectorate was an important part of government, but the child king was given his share of authority as well.

However, unlike Richard II and Richard III, critics rarely refer to Henry VI as an example of flawed kingship.

Another reason for this may be the profound unease Shakespeare's depiction of Henry generates. In *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, the reader accompanies the protagonist on a sorrowful, troubled journey towards self-realisation. Richard's conception of his own kingship is part of the problem. Instead, in young Henry we have a child's moral sense critiquing the courtiers' political behaviour incessantly. Henry's sense of political fairness and natural intelligence is something of a problem for us, especially when we try to reconcile it with his religious passion.

If Richard will be true, not that alone
But all the whole inheritance I give
That doth belong unto the house of York,
From whence you spring by lineal descent.

Plantagenet: Thy humble servant vows obedience
And humble service till the point of death.

King: Stoop then and set your knee against my foot;
And, in reguerdon of that duty done,
I girt thee with the valiant sword of York:
Rise, Richard, like a true Plantagenet,
And rise created princely Duke of York.⁴⁸

Exeter recalls the curse that hangs over the young king's head as everyone prepares to leave for the second coronation in France: that Henry born at Windsor should lose all that Henry of Monmouth had gained. Although this seems to fulfil Tillyardian expectations of predestination, the loss of France had been logically set in motion immediately after the death of Henry V. Despite the child's inability to hold on to conquered territory, the first three acts of *1 Henry VI* exposes late medieval mirrors for princes as questionable moral strategies; the cardinal virtues made for excellent reading but had no place in an early modern court. Henry's presence does not only disrupt these discourses on kingly virtue; his high moral ideals constantly remind the reader (and the audience) that kingship was no more than a mere political institution and one that advocated Machiavellian techniques of administration without openly denying that it derived its authority from heaven. This is, thus, a departure from Shakespeare's treatment

⁴⁸ Shakespeare, *1 Henry VI*, 3.1.172-182.

of the theme in the other chronicle plays or his major tragedies - what drives him to relegate this rich dramatic symbol to a machinery for pure power? Absent Shakespeare's own explanation, there is no way for us to know what he had in mind while departing from his source material (Tillyard gives us an exhaustive list of possible historical authors Shakespeare might have consulted while writing the play).⁴⁹

However, we may take a cue from Henry's painful realisation of the dangers inherent in looking at kingship as an exclusive connection to Christ. We have a clearer picture of the implications of this train of philosophical reasoning in *Richard II*:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king.⁵⁰

Therefore it is God's responsibility alone to redress any wrong committed by his viceregent. We see here that Tudors continue to use the Divine Right of Kings theory the way Carolingians and Ottonians adopted the concept of sacerdotal kingship, an idea we explored in the first chapter.⁵¹ The voice of reason in *Richard II* is John of Gaunt, an unruly magnate according to Froissart's *Chronicles*, and he promotes Richard's right to rule the land.

God's is the quarrel; for God's substitute,
His deputy anointed in His sight,
Hath caused his death; the which is wrongfully,
Let heaven revenge; for I may never lift
An angry arm against His minister.⁵²

The religious sentiment we find here matches Hugh Latimer's popular 1551 sermon against treason: 'God hath sent us a noble king in this his visitation; let us not provoke against him. Let us beware; let us not displease him; let us receive with all obedience and prayer the word of God. . . I hear say ye walk inordinately, ye talk unseemly, otherwise

⁴⁹ The second chapter of Tillyard's *Shakespeare's History Plays* deals with the historical background of the historical plays and includes sections on Machiavelli, Froissart, Vergil, More, Holinshed, Hall, and the Tudor Myth as it was understood before Shakespeare began writing.

⁵⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of King Richard the Second*, 3.2. 54-55.

⁵¹ Yet we need to remember that many historians and medievalists think that monarchy had been desacralised in high-medieval Germany by the twelfth century. When king Henry IV submitted to Pope Gregory VII at Canossa, Ottonian sacerdotal rights were officially over. Between the seventh and twelfth centuries, however, sacerdotal kingship held complete sway in Western European nations.

⁵² Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 1. 2. 37-41.

it becometh Christian subjects: yea take upon you to judge the judgments of judges. I will not make the king a pope; for the pope will have all things that he doth taken for an article of our faith. I will not say but the king and his council may err; I pray daily that they may not err. It becometh us, whatsoever they decree, to stand unto it, and receive it obediently. . .'⁵³

Obedience is cleverly construed as a Christian duty enjoined on all subjects irrespective of the motivations of the monarch. Such obedience enables rulers to legitimately co-ordinate conflicting interests for public welfare (Erasmus might say).⁵⁴ Henry VI initially agrees to marry the daughter of the Earl of Armagnac to stem the 'bloody strife among professors of the same faith' but he changes his mind before long, a move that mirrors Edward IV's rejection of Lady Bona.⁵⁵ Having had misgivings about 'wanton dalliance with a paramour' while he should study, Henry VI is nevertheless beguiled by Suffolk's rapturous reports of Margaret's beauty. He wishes to marry Margaret instead, and asks Suffolk to arrange it.

For your expenses and sufficient charge,
Among the people gather up a tenth.
Be gone, I say; for, till you do return,
I rest perplexed with a thousand cares.
And you, good uncle, banish all offence:
If you do censure me by what you were,
Not what you are, I know it will excuse
This sudden execution of my will.
And so, conduct me where, from company,
I may revolve and ruminate my grief.⁵⁶

⁵³ The entire sermon is available to read at <http://articles.ochristian.com/article10743.shtml>. Since this is unfortunately neither edited nor annotated, a better alternative to this is the book is *The Sermons of the Right Reverend Father in God, and Constant Martyr of Jesus Christ, Hugh Latimer, Sometime Bishop of Worcester: Now First Arranged According to the Order of Time in which They Were Preached, Collated by the Early Impressions, and Occasionally Illustrated with Notes Explanatory of Obsolete Phrases, Particular Customs, and Historical Allusions. To which is Prefixed A Memoir of the Bishop, by John Watkins, Volume 1*. This free ebook can be accessed at Google Books and is an excellently updated version of the sermons.

⁵⁴ The Erasmian model ruler needs to be obeyed not only because he is a moral guardian in lieu of being God's representative on earth; he has his subjects' interests at heart. He writes, 'The good prince uses the public interest as a yardstick in every field, otherwise he is no prince. He has not the same rights over men as over cattle.' (Desiderius Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 284.)

⁵⁵ Shakespeare, *1 Henry VI*, 5.1. 13-14.

⁵⁶ Shakespeare, *1 Henry VI*, 5.5.92-101.

Obedience is now Gloucester's and Exeter's cross to bear. Henry's marriage to Margaret completes what his father's death triggered: France is completely lost.

Henry IV is plagued by the guilt of usurpation throughout his life, and neither his political acumen nor the merits of his cause provide any historical justification for disobedience even when a noble thinks rebellion is justified. Richard II dies prophesying disaster:

The time shall not be many hours of age
More than it is ere foul sin gathering head
Shalt break into corruption...⁵⁷

The prophecy is accurate. Additionally, Gaunt's wisdom and Bolingbroke's remorse aren't the only unhistorical elements in the second tetralogy. Shakespeare also puts important words in the mouth of the soon-to-be-deposed monarch. When York tries to dissuade Richard II from confiscating Bolingbroke's lands and properties, his words are summarily rejected. 'Think what you will, we seize into our hands / His plate, his goods, his money, and his lands,' says Richard II.⁵⁸ And underlying Bolingbroke's intense guilt is an equally intense desire for penance in the form of waging a yielding crusade. However, his keen sense of political sophistication allows him to *perform* his role better than his predecessor. His heir, the merry prince Hal knows Machiavelli's advice ('experience shows us that in our times the rulers who have done great things are those who have set little store by keeping their word, being skillful rather in cunningly confusing men') well enough to pretend to while his time away thieving and drinking with Falstaff throughout his youth.⁵⁹ It is a clever political ploy to doubly impress his courtiers and subjects when he becomes a serious administrator of justice.

Tillyard and influential New Historicist critics argue that legitimate authority was a concept Shakespeare believed in because he was an Elizabethan conservative. Possibly Shakespeare's historical Henries would not be able to come to an agreement about what

⁵⁷ Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 5.1. 57-61.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 215-216.

⁵⁹ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Trans. by Tim Parks (United Kingdom: Penguin Classics, 2009), 61

‘legitimate political power’ meant but they sought it because a legitimate source of authority promised security.⁶⁰

Possessions, Pacifism, and Henry’s Political Behaviour

Katherine Eisamann Maus made an interesting claim about the legitimacy of rebellion during her Oxford Wells lecture in November 2010.⁶¹ According to her, Shakespeare’s horror of political discord originated in his understanding of kingship as a kind of possessing. We may here pause to remember that the king of England was the greatest landowner in the kingdom. ‘Richard’s policies of taxation and of land management, perceived as confiscatory and abusive, have infuriated his subjects,’ writes Maus. ‘The last straw is the King’s seizure of the Duchy of Lancaster upon the death of John of Gaunt. This act seems to justify Gaunt’s son Bolingbroke’s premature return from exile at the head of an army. Nobles and commoners flock to Bolingbroke’s cause, putting in train the events that lead to Richard’s deposition... An offense against property, in other words, not an offense against life, is the remote cause of the Wars of the Roses.’⁶² Kingship is defined as having, rather than being. As Margreta de Grazia adds, ‘not having is tantamount to non-being’. *Hamlet without Hamlet* claims that scholarship on Hamlet’s character and psychology misunderstand the way the plot revolves around land and inheritance: ‘The premise is this: at his father’s death, just at the point when in a patrilineal system stands to inherit, Hamlet is dispossessed--and, as far as the court is concerned, legitimately.’⁶³ Henry’s dispossession and the unfortunate outcomes of court intrigue are vital to his personality. (The analogy is limited to the angle of dispossession alone, because Hamlet’s loss is very different from Henry’s and Lear’s. There are similarities between the eschatological lessons of Henry’s dispossession and de Grazia’s brilliant idea that ‘the lay of the land is fixed or altered in anticipation of the

⁶⁰ Even before Tillyardian criticism gave shape to Shakespeare’s political background, the popular notion was that he was, fundamentally, conservative and believed in divine rights. Divine kingship was an Elizabethan and Jacobean reality, but Shakespeare demonstrated an acute awareness of its flaws, as we see in both tetralogies and the tragedies. Tim Spiekerman has a comprehensive study of Shakespeare’s borrowings from Machiavelli in a chapter entitled ‘Shakespeare’s Politics’ in his book *Shakespeare’s Political Realism: The English History Plays*. This book, however, was not referenced for this chapter.

⁶¹ Katharine Eisamann Maus, *Being and Having in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). From the series *Oxford Wells Shakespeare lectures*.

⁶² Maus, *Being and Having in Shakespeare*, 2.

⁶³ Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

world's end, the consummation of salvational history,' but that is quite beyond the scope of this study.)⁶⁴

We may expand Maus's and de Grazia's thoughts on property (kingship) and people (king) to accommodate the Divine Right theory. Modern scholarship on subject-object relationships in the Renaissance insist that objects substantiate subjects.⁶⁵ It was a dialectical, mutually constitutive relationship – not an antagonistic one. We may also take a similar position on Shakespeare's treatment of the connection between a king's possessions and his sacral office in his chronicle plays (more particularly in the *Henry VI* trilogy). Deeply influenced by the work of Plato and Aristotle, Paul and the patristic fathers distinguish between spirit and material repeatedly 'precisely because it is easily forgotten or confused.'⁶⁶ Theoretically the king's office is incorruptible and cannot be stolen – it is a treasure granted by heaven. But the lands and wealth granted to the king because of his office can be stolen. These implications muddle the difference between 'treasures in Heaven' and 'treasures upon the earth', but also make the connection between the two more 'imaginatively productive'.⁶⁷

Jesus draws analogies between God's interactions with men and property transactions in Jerusalem throughout Matthew and Luke's parables. 'Yet again and again, the stories are memorable because they feature a "twist" or surprise,' writes Maus. 'A vineyard owner pays those who have worked an hour as much as those who have worked all day. A father favours the son who has squandered his inheritance over the son who has spent his life in dutiful toil. A servant who scrupulously conserves his master's money is condemned for his lack of enterprise. An unrighteous steward, in danger of losing his position because of financial malfeasance, regains his master's trust by committing additional frauds.'⁶⁸ The way Jesus defies expectations reflects God's defiance of 'quotidian conceptions of relative value, normal economic incentives, and ordinary

⁶⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁵ The book *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (edited by Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass) is still the most popular book on this topic. Yet, during our present excursion into this well-researched area, we are inevitably confronted by the question they had addressed: 'What new configurations will emerge when subject and object are kept in relation?'

⁶⁶ Maus, *Being and Having in Shakespeare*, 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 8.

principles of fairness.⁶⁹ Rules guarding the possession of kingship are just as complex, if indeed kingship may be called a 'possession'.⁷⁰ 'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown' might as well refer to the uneasy accommodation between the material and spiritual aspects of the kingly office (although it is clearly about the 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,' as goes Jesus's saying).⁷¹ Shakespeare's chronicle plays skirt around this territory. The idea that identity is intricately linked with what one owns is present throughout. However, what is far more telling (but more elusive) are the psychological requirements and consequences of the sacral position of king. Tyranny and piety are mindsets that this job might breed in two different individuals. The practical externals of kingship – war strategy, administration of justice, and the rather tedious process of governing a kingdom – takes a toll on the inner lives of Henry IV, Richard II, or our own subject Henry VI, expanding them, and more importantly, limiting them. The spirit is always vulnerable to the public role one has to play. This opens a few unusual avenues of interrogation.

There is one fundamental question we might ask ourselves: would Henry VI (or any Shakespearean monarch) have been a different person without his 'possession' of his political office? The answer is invariably yes. This is not because Henry VI is more suited to the cloister than the throne, but because the presence of this moral and earnest young man would never have threatened a monastery as it does a late sixteenth century court of nobles. What, after all, is the social and moral standing of a deposed king? Notwithstanding the 'disorder, horror, fear, and mutiny' unleashed on the guilty kingdom, what happens to the anointed king whose balm has been washed off 'by the rough, rude sea'? Contained within the two tetralogies are three plausible versions of the answer – Richard II's deposition, Henry VI's exile, and Richard III's deplorable end. Years later, Shakespeare would also explore the social standing of leaders who choose to give away everything that they possess in plays like *Timon of Athens* and *King Lear*.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ It is possible to argue that all theories of kingship depend on some kind of possession: the wise king must possess wisdom, the prince who inherits kingship must possess the blood of his father, and the elected king must possess public approval.

⁷¹ Matthew 6:18-21; also quoted by Maus in *Being and Having in Shakespeare*, 8.

Kings without kingdoms become a familiar character in Shakespeare: the Duke of Arden and Prospero are popular examples of this type.⁷² But does this deprivation of identity acquire special significance in Henry VI's case, because this particular holy king derives his sacrality not only from his political role but also from his legendary piety and humiliation? This is one of the issues this chapter attempts to address. No monarch can avoid their share of 'sound and fury'. The question is if Henry's story ultimately 'signifies nothing' (as suggested by de Grazia) or if we may be able to find something profoundly redemptive in the tale of this well-meaning, purblind, dignified pacifist struggling against enormous political odds. Germaine Greer compares the unprecedented success of *1 Henry VI* with cinema blockbusters of our time in her introduction to Shakespeare's works. Illiterate people flocked to see epic histories. It is not difficult to understand why the death of Talbot would have been an entertaining experience for the ragamuffin lot, and why Nashe would have chosen that episode from 'Harey the vj' to describe the arrival of the fresh young dramatist in London.⁷³

How would it have joyed brave Talbot (the terror of the French) to think after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb, he should triumph again on the stage, and have his bones new embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least (at several times) who, in the tragedian who represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding!⁷⁴

Henry himself had none of the qualities that inspired patriotic theatre-goers. His father had been taught these qualities by Henry IV, and Henry VII underwent very severe military training as he grew up in Burgundy. And even then, appearances were highly deceptive, as we learn from England's weak footing in Normandy and Maine. The conflict between Henry's moral determination and his ancestors' military qualities forms

⁷² 'The fall of kings' is also a recognisable and complex Biblical trope, as seen in the rise and fall of Solomon, Saul, and David. In the case of Saul, in particular, a priest formally announces God's rejection of his kingship. David fights against his own son. Political responsibilities are always in conflict with personal obligations, but personal equations change the future of kingdoms. As in the Wars of the Roses, familial situations become overwhelmingly important in the politics-religion nexus.

⁷³ Germaine Greer, *A Very Short Introduction to Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 78-79.

⁷⁴ 'Thomas Nashe is probably referring here to *Henry VI Part 1*, while Greene's envious reference to Shakespeare dates from the same period and quotes another play from the trilogy, evidently in the full expectation that it will be familiar to his readers,' writes Greer in the same section on Shakespeare's epic theatre.

the basis of Shakespeare's treatment of the Wars of the Roses.⁷⁵ The two diametrically opposing virtues acted upon the other, creating a constant dialectic between them: Henry's pacifism is completely comprehensible only in terms of the lack of mercy shown by his counsellors and courtiers including the Duke of Gloucester. The House of Lancaster has no practical theory for the conduct of the war because the head of their house neither has a reasonable political end in mind, nor the military means to attain it. The monarch has no final purpose; retaining his throne is not even an intermediate objective for him. This is explained in *Richard II*: 'Lancaster' is compromised after Henry IV's usurpation and neither his son nor his grandson can escape the curse. Henry V's military prowess is as ineffective as his son's moral courage.⁷⁶

The quality of Henry VI's moral/intellectual courage is different from a pious obstinacy. Unlike King Lear or the duke of Arden, his moral insight and piety are rooted in a shrewd intellectual and philosophical insight:

Why, Warwick, hath thy knee forgot to bow?—
Old Salisbury, shame to thy silver hair...
What, wilt thou on thy death-bed play the ruffian,
And seek for sorrow with thy spectacles?
O, where is faith? O, where is loyalty?
If it be banish'd from the frosty head,
Where shall it find a harbour in the earth?
Wilt thou go dig a grave to find out war,
And shame thine honourable age with blood?
Why art thou old, and want'st experience?
Or wherefore dost abuse it, if thou hast it?
For shame! in duty bend thy knee to me
That bows unto the grave with mickle age.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ This does not mean, however, that 'Lancastrianism' had no religious aspect to it. Henry IV and Henry V were martial rulers but Henry VI was practising values that were deeply Lancastrian at heart.

⁷⁶ Richard Dutton's 'Shakespeare and Lancaster', a chapter in the anthology *Region, Religion and Patronage: Lancastrian Shakespeare* (edited by Richard Dutton, Alison Gail Findlay, and Richard Wilson), is a wonderful exploration of how the duchy of Lancaster and its archaeological/geographical significance influenced Shakespeare's representation of the Lancastrian monarchy in his tetralogies. His purpose is to demonstrate how the historical plays can be read like succession plays, an issue surrounded by the anxiety of Elizabeth not having an immediate heir.

⁷⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of Henry the Sixth with the death of the Good Duke Humphrey*, edited by Dr. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 5.1.165-178, 235.

In the last years of his life the distinguished Prussian thinker and statesman Karl von Clausewitz came to the conclusion that 'war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.'⁷⁸ This is a commonplace in the political world of the chronicles, and 2 *Henry VI* stresses the importance of intra-war operations as a means to a specific political end. York's manoeuvres and military vigour cannot adjust to the slightest shifts in the political scene.

The examples of Henry V and Henry VII suggest that wars should ideally be fought by leaders who possess both political and military qualities but this did not happen very often even in late medieval Europe. Strategy was the business of military commanders.

Most casual readers would be forgiven for assuming that Henry's gloomy prophecies do not count as war strategy. Indeed Henry's interest in problems of the military was slight compared to his obsessive interest in not straying from the righteous path. But his desire to serve his purposes by any means other than actual hard fighting is grounded in tactical shrewdness. Engagement should be encouraged only on the condition that victory is inevitable, otherwise every loss of life is of no value.⁷⁹ Henry's preference of a bloodless victory (or Shakespeare's representation of his position as such) is a valid strategic position and it never lets the reader forget the devastating reality that lay at the heart of the Wars. Taken out of their immediate context, Henry's speeches give an impression of a thoughtful, moderate leader. No one can quarrel with his appeal to his former nobles:

O, where is faith? O, where is loyalty?
If it be banish'd from the frosty head,
Where shall it find a harbour in the earth?

⁷⁸ Note also Foucault's twist on Clausewitz's dictum: Politics is war by other means. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.

⁷⁹ This is certainly not intended to separate the Wars from its political context. War cannot be completely divorced from statecraft, even though it is political communication 'via other means'. Pacifism does count for a meaningful 'grand strategy' (to use Clausewitz's language again), that calls for a different kind of diplomacy and political negotiation.

Wilt thou go dig a grave to find out war,
And shame thine honourable age with blood?⁸⁰

For a play that has been accused of mishandling war, *2 Henry VI* is really fascinated by the political tensions of war and civil insurrection. Henry's court was already grappling with the failure of their leader in France and in controlling squabbling nobles. Conventional wisdom⁸¹ looked at battles as a divine trial - the victorious side was necessarily right. But the Wars of the Roses was a battle of attrition; armies remain parked in tents waiting for their general's orders, while the monarch waits for his lords to arrive with happy tidings. The Wars are characterised by this tedium as much as by physical violence.⁸² Seldom during the War did both Lancastrians and Yorkists launch offensive operations simultaneously. It was impractical to risk a scorched earth approach, or initiate lengthy sieges. Actual pitched battles must have been very dangerous. Military commanders were held morally responsible for dying army men. Henry IV built a battlefield chantry near Shrewsbury; Yorkists had a chantry near Towton and Edward IV was associated with a chantry built exclusively for Kentishmen. Gloucester held masses for the dead in Barnet.⁸³

Throughout the fifth act of *2 Henry VI* and the first act of *3 Henry VI* both sides plan diplomatic tactics and no fighting actually happens for a long time. In spite of York's fiery oratory, his moves during the campaign are indecisive and ponderous.⁸⁴ Henry VI opted to sit back in Windsor and wait, and the Lancastrian army was still proceeding to

⁸⁰ Shakespeare, *2 Henry VI*, 5.1. 177-181.

⁸¹ This includes not only Hall and Holinshed but also eighteenth century writers Daniel Defoe and David Hume.

⁸² An easy way to understand the viciousness of these long-drawn out battles is Dan Jones's *The Wars of the Roses: The Fall of the Plantagenets and the Rise of the Tudors*. The wars were a series of overlapping stories, and Tudor historiography does distort these complex stories and reduce them to a Lancaster vs. York narrative.

⁸³ Rosemary Horrox, "Introduction," in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.

⁸⁴ It would be remiss not to mention that a substantial amount of the 'waiting' was because of the cumbersome weaponry and armour used during the battles. Every offensive did not result in combat; armies could just wait for battle to commence and it never did. The expertise and professionalism of battle commanders, however, definitely affected outcomes.

the battlefield when the second play ended.⁸⁵ Perhaps there is no cohesive approach to war strategy (or any discussion of ‘the art of war’) because the Wars of the Roses depended on chance victories. Armies became smaller, and deserters were welcomed back to their folds.⁸⁶ Because plundering and looting were frowned on, volunteers had little reason to fight for either house. As we see in the little skit on the molehill, it was actually possible to grievously injure an ‘enemy’. It was more reasonable to have a full-time commitment to the situation in France instead, and nobles who were prepared to do that were thought of highly. Under these circumstances, it was difficult to sustain enthusiasm for this series of skirmishes that lasted for more than three decades. Minor ambushes acquire an exaggerated importance in Wars chronicles, and are erroneously thought to constitute the entirety of the war.

Two points about the Lancastrians’ choice of defensive strategy completes this short discussion of Henry’s pacifism as a political argument. As we have already seen, sixty years of unbroken rule sufficed to form a ‘since time immemorial’ claim after Henry VIII. Henry’s claim would have been the stronger one to the Renaissance audience (the memory of his posthumous miracles *might* have played its part in legitimising his weak claim). It was always easier to defend a throne than to acquire it. Blessed were those in possession, in law as in war.⁸⁷ Henry could have maximised the advantages of his position by waiting for the blow to fall and depending on his generals for an effective counterblow. Ironically, York is just as peace-loving as Henry; he would prefer to take over the throne unopposed. Henry need not be willing to wage war to prevent this from happening, but the ruling monarch was too righteous to brook a war of words:

Somerset: My lord,
I'll yield myself to prison willingly,
Or unto death, to do my country good.

⁸⁵ Gathering soldiers did not always mean battle; there could be long periods of standoff and no combat. It was unlucky that St Albans turned out to be a full-fledged battle and not a standoff, but it was certainly not politically unreasonable to be as prepared for a stalemate as armed combat.

⁸⁶ In *On the Run: Deserters Through the Ages*, Graeme Kent speaks of Henry Lovelace, a Kentish squire, who arranged with his Lancastrian captors to defect in return for his life. If this was the case, this likely was not a one-off situation. Many imprisoned Yorkist soldiers defected to be true to their word to Lancastrians.

⁸⁷ Translated from the Latin *beati sunt possidentes*. Clausewitz, *On War*, 358.

King Henry: [*to Buckingham*] In any case be not too rough in terms,
For he is fierce and cannot brook hard language.

Buckingham: I will, my lord, and doubt not so to deal
As all things shall redound unto your good.

King Henry: Come, wife, let's in, and learn to govern better;
For yet may England curse my wretched reign.⁸⁸

Barred from the option of an immediate riposte by Henry's dilly-dallying, Lancastrians resort to wearing the enemies out on their own. While the king waited for York in his palace, the Yorkist forces had supply problems, their strength weakened, and they faced an increasingly hostile population the further they advanced. The Lancastrians had possibly planned a moment of vengeance when Yorkists were at their weakest and the kingdom was safe from prying foreigners. This, at least, seems to be Holinshed's conception of the period when York refuses to initiate any attack:

King Henrie and his counsell, perceiuing the duke of Yorke laie still and stirred not, returned to London, and there called a great counsell, openlie declaring how the French and Scots (imboldden by the ciuill discord within this realme) attempted to annoie the same, as of late they had shewed apparant tokens, and likelie not ceasse vpon occasions to doo further displeasures, till a perfect concord were concluded betwéene him and his fréends, and those of the contrarie part and confederacie. And to the intent that he would be the cheefe author of peace, he promised of his dignitie so to interteine the duke of Yorke and his fréends, that all old grudges should be not onelie inwardlie forgotten, but also outwardlie forgiuen, which should be cause of perpetuall loue and assured amitie.⁸⁹

However, all this is not borne out by the two acts Shakespeare dedicates to the Lancastrians' hard-fought withdrawal. By the third act, Henry is already knee-deep in calamity, and has limited options (especially since he refuses to fight the battle). Margaret's reproach of Henry when he refuses to flee York's advancing army helps explain why his courtiers were so exasperated with him:

What are you made of?
You'll nor fight nor fly.

⁸⁸ Shakespeare, *2 Henry VI*, 4.9. 43-51.

⁸⁹ Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, in The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (3 of 6): England (7 of 9) (Project Gutenberg, 2014). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45681>.

Now is it manhood, wisdom, and defence,
To give the enemy way, and to secure us
By what we can, which can no more but fly.⁹⁰

The scene is designed as an exploration of a political catastrophe to show us what can happen and also how it can be borne. Henry's flight is a dramatic instance of a perpetual condition: royal authority was always slippery.⁹¹ The fifteenth-century depositions (twice by Edward IV and once by Henry VII) were all results of chance military victories, not long-drawn-out wars. There is a pattern: Edward IV deposed Henry VI twice and was murdered by Richard III, who was in turn deposed by Henry VII. Both dynasties remain fundamentally on the edge of extinction. Should this lead us to despair, or would it have led the sixteenth century audience to recognise the absurdity in this balance of power? It can be viewed from a redemptive tragi-comic perspective as well. Audiences familiar with the next cycle of the 'chronicle plays' know Henry's journey to becoming an exile faithfully addresses the original sin that made his kingship possible: the usurpation of Richard II's rights.⁹² Richard II lost his divine rights to Henry of Bolingbroke (as politically astute as York) because of his 'saintly sentimental selfishness'⁹³; there is a sense of providential justice when York declares war against Henry IV's grandson for the very same reason. Clifford's death, on the other hand, epitomises a perfect fusion of martial, aristocratic and Christian values.

⁹⁰ Shakespeare, *2 Henry VI*, 5.2. 78-82.

⁹¹ There are three ways to approach this: through Tudor historiography, through the lens of Renaissance self-fashioning, and through lived medieval experiences of chaotic governance. We know by now that Henry's ignominy is the direct outcome of Bolingbroke's usurpation of Richard II's divine rights in the world of Tudor mythmakers; Edward IV's rule was a welcome break from the uncertainty of Lancastrian family feuding and the many revolts, of which Cade's revolt was an important one. From the point of view of identity creation, the 'fall of kings' is a socio-political event that enables and limits individual agency.

⁹² Note Shakespeare's description of the usurpation in *Richard II* Act 3 Scene 4: 'What Eve, what serpent, hath suggested thee / To make a second fall of cursed man?' Likening Richard's deposition to the Fall of Man makes a serpent of Bolingbroke.

⁹³ Samuel Neill, "Introduction" to William Shakespeare's *King Henry the Fifth* (London: William Collins, sons, and Co., 1878), 8.

Clifford: What seest thou in me, York? Why dost thou pause?

York: With thy brave bearing should I be in love

But that thou art so fast mine enemy.⁹⁴

There is some truth in the less popular theory of Andrew Murphy's: that the Irish wars in Richard II, the Welsh campaign in Henry IV and the York/Cade rebellions reconstruct the anxiety of the Nine Years' War and the remarkable career of Hugh O'Neill during the 1590's. There is a 'complex historical interrelation' between the Irish crisis of the 1590s and York's use of Ireland as the starting point for his offensive in the 1450's.⁹⁵ Yet for all the reasons outlined in this discussion of the difference between 'war on paper' and a civil insurrection, each conflict in *2 Henry VI* is generated internally and resists all definitions in terms of the anxieties within Renaissance political discourse. All political decisions are intertwined with the personal choices made by the nobles, the commoners, and the monarch just the way it is in *Richard II*, the *Henry IV* plays and *Macbeth* later.⁹⁶

The Bishop of Carlisle's prediction comes true when Henry VI is stripped of his crown and throne:

The blood of English shall manure the ground
And future ages groan for this foul act,
Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels,
And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars
Shall kin with kin and kind with kind confound.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Shakespeare, *2 Henry VI*, 5.2. 20-22.

⁹⁵ Andrew Murphy, "Shakespeare's Irish Histories", in *Shakespeare's Histories*, ed. Emma Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

⁹⁶ This is borrowed from the intertwined tales of Saul, David, and Solomon, in which the main problem is the sinful desire that people have for being ruled by tyrants. It is possible to trace this theme also across Shakespeare's historical plays, though that would be an ambitious exercise in itself. 'Since the people's motivation in seeking a king was not pure,' writes Vladimir Moss in *An Exposition of the Nature of Early Israelite Kingship in the Persons of Kings Saul, David and Solomon*, 'God gave them at first a king who brought them more harm than good. For while Saul was a mighty man of war and temporarily expanded the frontiers of Israel, he persecuted true piety, as represented by the future King David and the prophet Gad, and he disobeyed the Church, as represented by the Judge and Prophet Samuel and the high priests Abiathar and Ahimelech.' If kingship is either a divine gift or punishment, it is worth asking *who* the gift is for.

⁹⁷ Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 4.1. 139-143.

By the end of Richard II's reign, his policies of taxation and landholding angered even the most submissive subject. When he seizes the Duchy of Lancaster on John of Gaunt's death (Gaunt had steadfastly refused to sanction armed rebellion against Richard) Bolingbroke is forced to return from his travels and lead an army to bring his rightful king down. 'An offense against property, in other words, not an offense against life is the remote cause of the Wars of the Roses,' in the words of Maus.⁹⁸ This would hardly shock the rather substantial number of later Shakespearean protagonists who crossdress, disguise themselves as beggars, conjure up fantastical illusions and stage dangerous plays to retain or regain what is rightfully their property.⁹⁹ Theft of patrimony was a crime to be avoided by the ideal ruler, also according to Machiavelli, because people were quicker in forgetting their fathers' deaths than any loss of property.¹⁰⁰ The link between identity and property ownership (or the distinction between having/owning something and identifying yourself in terms of that ownership) was not a Renaissance invention. Plato distinguished between goods of the body, goods of the soul or 'possessions' and goods of the spirit and the first two are inferior to the last one. It was impossible, however, to be extremely virtuous and rich.

'Why?' it may be asked. 'Because,' we shall reply, 'the profits from using just and unjust methods is more than twice as much as that from just methods alone, and a man who only refuses to spend his money either worthily or shamefully spends only half the sum laid out by worthwhile people who are prepared to spend on worthy purposes too.'¹⁰¹

The physical/spiritual goods duality recur in the Sermon on the Mount: 'But lay up your treasures for yourselves in Heaven, where neither the moth nor the canker corrupteth, and where thieves neither dig through, nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'.¹⁰² Maus also refers to the parables that represent the grace of God as a sort of property transaction. The vineyard owner in the parable of talents favours the

⁹⁸ Maus, *Being and Having in Shakespeare*, 3.

⁹⁹ This section is indebted to Jane Elizabeth Kingsley-Smith's *Banishment in Shakespeare's Plays*. From Romeo to Coriolanus to Valentine, Shakespearean exiles refashion their narratives in a variety of ways.

¹⁰⁰ 'Above all, he mustn't seize other people's property. A man will sooner forget the death of his father than the loss of his inheritance.' Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 67.

¹⁰¹ Plato, 'Laws V' in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1423. Also quoted by Maus, *Being and Having in Shakespeare*, 7.

¹⁰² Matthew 6: 19-21.

workers who worked for an hour as much as the ones who worked all day. The father in the parable of the prodigal son prefers the son who wasted his inheritance to the one who obeyed him. ‘These parables draw analogies between human and divine dealings, but at the same time their scandalous outcomes suggest, paradoxically, exactly the opposite: the way God’s ways defy quotidian conceptions of relative value, normal economic incentive, and ordinary principles of fairness,’ writes Maus about the link between self-identity and possessions.¹⁰³ With Henry VI there is an absolute rejection of wealth; a strange situation where Caesar opts to give God what is God’s. This neat division is at the very least an uneasy one – Henry is England’s largest landholder but has displayed no sense of ownership of his title. Jesus says, ‘For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’ – ought we to look for Henry’s sense of his kingship in his steadfast refusal to give up the throne? Has his kingly rights taken root in his being?¹⁰⁴ The detached and monkish monarch discovers a fondness for the throne (that he had longed to sacrifice earlier) in the final play of the trilogy.

King Henry: My Lord of Warwick, hear but one word:
 Let me for this my life-time reign as king.
 York: Confirm the crown to me and to mine heirs,
 And thou shalt reign in quiet while thou liv'st.
 King Henry: I am content. Richard Plantagenet,
 Enjoy the kingdom after my decease.¹⁰⁵

The courtiers do not condone Henry’s decision to disinherit his own bloodline. The connection between material possessions and spiritual value, although unclear, still exists. Compare this with Richard’s uncrowning:

Give me the crown. Here, cousin, seize the crown;
 Here cousin:
 On this side my hand, and on that side yours.
 Now is this golden crown like a deep well
 That owes two buckets, filling one another,
 The emptier ever dancing in the air,

¹⁰³ Maus, *Being and Having in Shakespeare*, 8.

¹⁰⁴ Is it possible to look at the subject-object relation in the Renaissance from a solid Christian perspective? Is the treasure of the heart, in reality, indestructible, if the value of it is derived from something tangible?

¹⁰⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Third Part of King Henry the Sixth, with the death of the Duke of York*, edited by Dr. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 1. 1. 176-181.

The other down, unseen and full of water:
That bucket down and full of tears am I,
Drinking my griefs, whilst you mount up on high.¹⁰⁶

Fenton (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*) and Bassanio (*The Merchant of Venice*) woo their ladies from initially mercenary motives before realising their intrinsic value. In a reversal of this comedy staple, Henry finds his self-identity is intricately entangled in his political role and financial entitlements.¹⁰⁷ This is not entirely divorced from the Catholic interpretation of this divine office. The King's Oil consecrated the ruler's body, mind and soul – partly why protestants were so suspicious of all medieval coronation rituals.¹⁰⁸ As Richard transforms into a self-absorbed poet, he realises how tenuous the very concept of divine kingship is. In the beginning he had been far more secure in his knowledge of the invulnerability of his position:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord.¹⁰⁹

Sacred kingship – a deeply Catholic understanding of the ruler-ruled dynamics – continues to influence Richard as he strips himself of his sacred status, implying thereby that the usurper does not have the authority to 'wash the balm off from an anointed king':

With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
With mine own hands I give away my crown,
With mine own tongue deny my sacred state
With mine own breath release all duty's rites:¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 4.1. 186-194.

¹⁰⁷ It is an uneasy reconciliation between Lancaster and York when Henry chooses to disinherit his own son in favour of York's offspring but it was the prerogative of the monarch to give his inheritance to whoever he chose. Consider the complex way in which inheritance functions in the parable of the prodigal son. Additionally there was the imposed condition of York immediately ceasing the civil war, which was already destroying the land. Henry's decision to disinherit Edward is not a simple attempt to clutch at the last straw.

¹⁰⁸ These rituals only served to reinforce the immortality of the kingly office, as is widely known, and were integral to the consolidation of newly acquired political authority, though the context of specific coronation ceremonies keep changing.

¹⁰⁹ Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 3.2. 54-57.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.1. 212-215.

In *Richard II* and *Henry VI*, property rights and power include a study of the relationships property creates: king and subject, the absent parent and the child, master and servants, siblings and enemies. In the absence of property, do these relationships still continue? When Richard II seizes the Duchy of Lancaster, Bolingbroke returns home to fight for his property rights:

Will you permit that I shall stand condemned
A wandering vagabond, my rights and royalties
Plucked from my arms perforce and given away
To upstart upthrifts? Wherefore was I born?
If that my cousin King be King in England
It must be granted I am Duke of Lancaster.¹¹¹

Henry VI, robbed of his political authority, also becomes a wandering vagabond in Shakespeare's invocation of providential justice. There are a few important conclusions we can draw about Henry's status as a royal vagabond from his ancestor's speech. By denying him his natural inheritance, York leaves Henry VI not only without his political identity but also without a reason to live. Bolingbroke's estate is similar to Henry's claim to the throne of England: both are proprietary rights to land (an entire kingdom, in Henry's case), and large property rights were always analogous to political authority in medieval Europe. Henry's landholding undercuts his political role, and it is also a means by which his authority can be restrained. There is no other immediate reason for York to rebel and the justice of his cause is undeniable, Henry knows all too well:

King Henry: Henry the Fourth by conquest got the crown.
York: 'Twas by rebellion against his king.
King Henry: [Aside] I know not what to say; my title's weak.¹¹²

The problem, therefore, is not that Henry VI has done something particularly reprehensible as a king (since Shakespeare establishes early on that the loss of France is the responsibility of the Lord Protector). Royal power is itself perilously slippery during this period. Political conflict had long been an ordinary feature in various modes of political interaction throughout northern Europe in the fifteenth century. There were five depositions in England from 1327 to 1485; no consolidation of rule occurred till the long rule of Henry VIII. Edward II, Richard II, Henry VI, Edward V, and Richard III lost the

¹¹¹ Ibid., 2.3. 123-128.

¹¹² Shakespeare, 3 *Henry VI*, 1.1. 140-141.

throne and four usurpers (Henry IV, Edward IV, Richard III, and Henry VII) seized land from their rightful kings.¹¹³

Two Depositions: Henry VI and Richard II

Fifteenth-century chronicles admonish Henry's criminal disinterestedness.

And the Meire of London with the comynes of the cite came to the kynge besekynge him that he wolde tarye in the cite and they wolde lyve and dye with him, and pay for his costes of housholde and halff yere; but he wold nott, but toke his journey to Kyllingworthe.¹¹⁴

Hall and Holinshed portray a king doubling under the weight of foreign invasions and factional conspiracies. Shakespeare relies on these traditions, but his realist depiction of Henry goes beyond his sources. The meaning of the 'Kingly Throne', a constant symbol in the narrative, is already uncertain. The ruling king is going to be deposed, and the empty throne haunts the reader as much as the fainting aristocrats. Nevertheless, the possibility of a new ruler was a welcome one to a court and country reeling under the civil war. Intriguingly, Henry is troubled enough to sacrifice his ideal of pacifism.¹¹⁵ The point about royal power is that it may be absurdly inconsistent and often is.

The audience are drawn into an elaborate exploration of Henry VI's journey towards complete self-destruction. Readers who rue the delegitimation of Edward in favour of Plantagenet's heirs may appreciate how subtly this act explains the *raison d'être* for the deposition while also soliciting compassion for his misfortunes. The Catholic concept of kingship in the late middle ages was a prototype of a holy crusader or a dispenser of divine justice, but the embodiments of these virtues allow these religious notions to play out as actively good or evil forces.¹¹⁶ From Henry's and Richard's experiences of political humiliation, it is clear that during the middle ages (as during Elizabeth's rule), monarchical authority was an extension of monarchical wealth and

¹¹³ William Huse Dunham, Jr., and Charles T. Wood, "The Right to Rule in England: Depositions and the Kingdom's Authority, 1327-1485", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Oct., 1976): 738.

¹¹⁴ *Three Fifteenth Century Chronicles*, ed. James Gairdner (Westminster: J. B. Nichols and Sons, 1845), 67.

¹¹⁵ He advocates beating the army of York back when he hears of them marching to open battle with Lancaster again.

¹¹⁶ Richard the Lionheart is still the chivalrous knight prototype we are referring to here.

property, not derived from his status as the anointed divine delegate. Royalty operated within a system that could be manipulated successfully, but not recreated. And indeed 3 *Henry VI* is about one important usurpation; if the holy king were completely constrained by laws or could exceed them conveniently, deposition would become an unlikely event. Richard II's stripping himself of his kingship redeems him, and political humiliation becomes the baptism by fire it has traditionally been.¹¹⁷ Maus sees in Richard's radical renunciation of property and sudden turn towards interiority the seeds of Hamlet's tragedy:

Ay, no; no, ay; for I must nothing be;
Therefore no no, for I resign to thee.
Now mark me, how I will undo myself;
I give this heavy weight from off my head
And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand,
The pride of kingly sway from out my heart;
With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
With mine own hands I give away my crown,
With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,
With mine own breath release all duty's rites:
All pomp and majesty I do forswear;
My manors, rents, revenues I forego;
My acts, decrees, and statutes I deny:
God pardon all oaths that are broke to me!
God keep all vows unbroke that swear to thee!
Make me, that nothing have, with nothing grieved,
And thou with all pleased, that hast all achieved!¹¹⁸

'I must nothing be' is echoed many years later by another aristocratic vagabond who has been robbed of his patrimony:

¹¹⁷ Though this topic has been considered in Chapter One, 'political humiliation' means different things to different generations. Humiliation is closely related to restrictions and rights; political restrictions and political rights vary according to the economic circumstances countries find themselves in. When we say 'traditionally', we refer to the kind of humiliation that leaders find glorification in, from Christ to Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela.

¹¹⁸ Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 4.1. 206-222.

And with this horrible object from low farms,
Poor pelting villages, sheepcotes, and mills,
Sometime with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,
Enforce their charity. "Poor Turlygod!" "Poor Tom!"—
That's something yet. Edgar I nothing am.¹¹⁹

Henry VI and Richard II share with many prominent tragic heroes the prerequisite for becoming meaningful to the stories of their own lives: a wrenching loss of all they possessed.¹²⁰ But Henry VI survives his deposition and exile, making his drawn-out journey towards defeat more theatrically consequential. Richard II correctly predicts that his downfall makes his story worth telling on a 'winter's tedious night' in foreign lands. This ability to exteriorise suffering is what saves Richard.

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings;
How some have been deposed; some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed;
Some poison'd by their wives: some sleeping kill'd;
All murder'd:¹²¹

The scant mollification that his downfall makes him a cautionary tale (and an exalted poet) is available to Richard and a number of early modern tragic protagonists. But loss is a powerful catalyst for change even when the monarch is not facing utter destitution. No prince seems to be as altered by loss as the fun-loving Hal. The death of Henry IV changes his son into a warrior king who can no longer scorn the state: he *is* the state. 'Presume not that I am the thing I was,' says the young Hal to his former favourite Falstaff.

¹¹⁹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. Jay L. Halio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 2.3. 17-21.

¹²⁰ This is true of most Shakespearean exiles, including comic characters like Rosalind who has only been permitted to remain at court.

¹²¹ Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 3.2. 156-161.

For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
That I have turned away my former self;¹²²

Coronation and deposition involve a series of sacramental signs that alter the state of the human soul. These miraculous changes justified these sudden shifts in personality, and made redemption possible. But this optimistic outlook was also thoroughly anti-Calvinist. 'In Shakespeare's view, which was the view of most English Christians of his time, Protestant or Catholic, human potential was delimited by grace,' writes Germaine Greer in her short analysis of *Henry V* in *Shakespeare*. 'No matter how potent the working of evil in tempting human frailty, divine intercession was always within the reach of prayer. No one's damnation was foreordained.'¹²³ Both of them meet noble and heroic deaths, and the stage is now ready for the two plays on Henry IV's reign that Shakespeare was to write two years later. In Greer's words, 'We have learnt of young Henry's wild ways, we have seen the unscrupulousness of the elder Percy, and we have heard the reiterated prophecy of civil war and the desolation of England.'¹²⁴ It is always interesting to remember that the prophecies had already been fulfilled in the first plays that he wrote, and *Richard III* was chronologically the last play in the series.

The incredible regeneration of Richard II and Prince Hal are made possible because of God's grace. This was not incompatible with the Lancaster myth. It was also God's grace that helped Henry IV overthrow the tyrannical Richard II, and assisted Henry V in his French conquests. Before long the Tudors would claim the force of divine grace to justify Henry VII's war against Richard III. It was divine grace that also sustained the Yorkist cause through the reigns of the three Lancastrian monarchs and ultimately drove the last one out of the kingdom. Richard II's and Henry IV's usurpation may both be seen as instances of divine justice. We may look at the fate of all Shakespearean monarchs as divinely ordained but the trilogy only presents us with flesh and blood agents of these godly purposes. The characterisation of Henry VI throughout

¹²² William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 2* (Phoemixx Classics Ebooks, 2021), 5.5. 60-62. There are definite traces of an Augustinian conversion in Shakespeare's vision of Hal's change of mind. There are many important conversion stories in Christian history (St. Francis, for instance, was imprisoned before his vision) and it was, perhaps, even more important in the sixteenth century because 'reformation' itself is a sort of conversion.

¹²³ Greer, *Shakespeare*, 59.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

1 *Henry VI* and 2 *Henry VI* is in keeping with fifteenth-century Lancastrian readings of him but the entire first act of the final play is anti-Lancastrian.¹²⁵ Act One of 3 *Henry VI* has no connection to history or any written or recorded literature available to Shakespeare. Handing over his son's birthright to York's heirs turns out to be little more than an abstract consolation. This is of importance in our understanding of Henry's pacifism: reasonable as the decision may have been for peacekeeping, it imperilled the kingdom by weakening both the reigning monarch's standing and jeopardising the future ruler's legitimacy¹²⁶. As soon as they inherit the kingdom, York's sons begin disputing the decision. The fact that York has more than one male offspring already threatens the safety of the realm. (It would still have been in the Plantagenet male line, of course.)

Henry VI's political humiliation has traditionally been interpreted as profoundly redemptive: his regeneration is more credible than his father's and Richard II's. As a holy monarch, he belongs to many established literary/theological traditions: he is a saint-king on the lines of Saint Louis IX, a royal martyr like Edward II, a proponent of Franciscan asceticism and the Great Catholic Monarch.¹²⁷ More than just a staunch Catholic section of his audience would have been bewildered by Shakespeare's rather Stoic depiction of Henry's dispossession. But Henry's sense of self is not dependent on the possession of his kingdom (unlike Richard or Lear), and there is no noticeable shift in his voice when he loses this absolute power – his mental complexity is not more than an extension of his moral complexity.¹²⁸ The trilogy does not operate within an identifiable moral compass where any of the morally good protagonists are defined by their opposition to an evil antagonist. The communist ideals of Cade's revolt and the knotty question of legitimacy

¹²⁵ The Lancastrian myth is simple and providential in its theme: Bolingbroke was the Godsent ruler who defeated Richard II because of God's grace. Please note that there exists a Yorkist myth as well.

¹²⁶ The sources of political legitimacy were as flexible as political legitimacy itself. Dynastic change was legitimised often, and there were well-tested strategies to ensure it, in which popular media and will played a part. However we look at it, heredity was the fundamental source of legitimacy in medieval and early modern Europe. It was legal to disinherit your bloodline, but it was extremely rare because bloodline continuity was a huge advantage for any dynasty. For more details see *Blood Royal: Dynastic Politics in Medieval Europe* by Robert Bartlett.

¹²⁷ Henry can be placed in most significant medieval theological traditions because expressions of devotion/piety were also a significant call for political legitimacy. Even when he was ruling, he was the first doubly anointed monarch, thereby doubly consecrated.

¹²⁸ There is no conversion in this loss, because Henry needs no repentance. Conversion is grounded in repentance and the will to turn towards God ('That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face') while Henry is a classic example of unchangeable and good.

may be natural outcomes of social inequality and a projection of Renaissance anxieties about an uncontrollable catastrophe befalling them.¹²⁹ Cade's rebellion depicts nobles getting strangled, beaten up and hanged with a brutality experienced normally by commoners only. Honourable nobles like Clifford and Exeter endanger the realm no less than Cardinal Beaufort and Warwick because of their insistence on the rules of righteous inheritance.¹³⁰ Tales of courage and self-sacrifice (like the death of the brave Talbot) ring false in the face of this bleakness.

There is still a sharp focus on the suffering of Henry VI, though we cannot be sure if this signals sympathetic commiseration or satire. Henry's perspective may be used to enlist pity for the wronged party:

Was ever king that joy'd an earthly throne,
And could command no more content than I?
No sooner was I crept out of my cradle
But I was made a king, at nine months old.
Was never subject long'd to be a king
As I do long and wish to be a subject.¹³¹

However, it is also possible that Shakespeare chooses a more neutral, philosophical treatment of the king's trials. Henry's suffering is not an idealised Christian picture of sacrifice.¹³² York's call for rebellion follows at the heels of the Cade episode.¹³³ This was

¹²⁹ Neema Parvini, "Personal Action and Agency in Henry VI," in *Shakespeare's History Plays: Rethinking Historicism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 122-173.

¹³⁰ Parvini thinks this is Shakespeare's aim is to 'come to an understanding of the attitudes, decisions, and actions of the individuals who produced these complexities. And the second aim is to question the effectiveness of their political strategies, both in terms of personal survival and the sustenance of the body politic, which are two ends that increasingly come into conflict.'

¹³¹ Shakespeare, *2 Henry VI*, 4.9. 1-6.

¹³² Henry likens his condition to a ship that narrowly escapes a tempest only to be boarded by a pirate. The word he uses is 'state', which refers both to him and England. However, what has he really suffered during Cade's rebellion? Clifford and Buckingham deal with the revolt, the rebels flee, and Iden defeats and beheads Cade.

¹³³ But now is Cade driven back, his men dispersed;
And now is York in arms to second him.
I pray thee, Buckingham, go and meet him,
And ask him what's the reason of these arms.
Shakespeare condenses these two episodes to represent Humphrey's words, 'These days are dangerous'. Henry VI knows he cannot handle the crisis on his own; nobody could. Clouds were darkening on all sides and France was already strong enough to be a threat, despite the marriage. There is a good reason for his

the kind of storm medieval governments were trained to resist or absorb without disturbing the social order. Indeed, as we have seen in the first chapter, these become a legitimate way for a young king to consolidate his rule without launching an expensive crusade or foreign invasion. We may here recall the several wars Henry's Lancastrian ancestors had willingly initiated for glory and honour.¹³⁴ Is it possible that Henry represents the seeds of a reformed model of kingship that attempts to resolve these internal contradictions in Catholic virtue politics? His behaviour is also a result of his fatherlessness: unlike Henry V, he has never seen a monarch at work. He struggles with issues of loyalty and honour, to appease aggrieved nobles, and to win the love of Gloucester because he has so little else to depend on. For these reasons, the audience expects his moral triumph to be sweeter than York's military victories.

And if the reader finds himself sympathising with Henry VI's predicament, what is that suffering compared with the pain of a kingdom at war with itself? Of what worth is a single event of dispossession in a land where thousands are dispossessed daily?

Before beginning an inquiry into the weighty identity conflict that emerges from the battle of St Albans (where Henry loses his throne), it is important to reiterate that Henry VI hands the throne over to the heirs of York ostentatiously to save his realm from destruction. This episode expressly underlines the philosophical importance of the boundaries of power. One advantage of being a sovereign ruler is being free to choose your successor, irrespective of the actual laws of succession. In an ironic turn of the screw, Shakespeare's Henry exercises this advantage to disinherit his own blood to achieve a bloodless defeat.¹³⁵ Rights of inheritance needn't have had the final say in such issues, but monarchs were bound to place the authority of tradition over their own authority. As we have already discussed, disinheriting his own son is Henry's greatest shortfall.

being surrounded by his counsellors constantly. This episode shows how impractical the idea of a one-person government was.

¹³⁴ Henry IV faced rebellion after usurping Richard's throne. Henry V learnt his military skills during the revolt of Gruffydd and the Percy family at the Battle of Shrewsbury.

¹³⁵ This was the Act of Accord, a statute of Parliament enacted on 25 October 1460. It did, indeed, disinherit Henry's only son, but it was very unlikely that Margaret would ever accept the Act. She did not, and the result was the Battle of Wakefield on the 30th of December, 1460, in which the Yorkist forces were defeated.

Why would Henry choose such an impolitic course of action? Because it was already clear that an immediate battle with a huge Yorkist army (his only alternative) wouldn't have been any better, since historically Yorkists had a far larger army and the Lancastrians were facing certain defeat. This seeming caprice stokes an important moral debate: would we, as readers and the audience, prefer to see the unknown thousands sent to their deaths to keep the Lancastrian prince Edward in his rightful place? The possibility that Henry's starkly utilitarian decision was also politically sound looms large over the tragic death of Prince Edward. Medieval and early modern culture rarely depicted non-insane parents harming their heirs. But the narrative of an innocent being sacrificed by his father for the greater good is all-powerful because of its resemblance to legendary characters like Jesus or Isaac or even Iphigenia. The moral underpinning is an Old Testament staple: the more valuable the sacrifice, the more precious it is as a gift to God. Henry's delegitimising his son would have been in keeping with Calvinist thoughts on propitiation.¹³⁶ It also stands as an excellent example of the futility of invoking 'honour' or 'loyalty' while devising battleplans because the audience knows that York would not keep his promise to his rightful monarch.

A fugitive and a wanderer: The 'mark' of Henry VI

The famous *Reports of Edmund Plowden* (1571) describes the theory of the king's two bodies being used by the Queen's advocates in the Duchy of Lancaster case (1561): the well-known theory that a monarch possesses two bodies – the body natural and the body politic – within himself.¹³⁷ One is eternal and unmoving (government and policy) and the other is susceptible to age and infirmity. Advocates apply this theory to settle a land dispute in the Duchy of Lancaster case. In her seminal thesis on banishment in Shakespeare's plays, Jane Elizabeth Kinglsey-Smith describes this as a metaphor

¹³⁶ It is, in fact, a process mirroring that of the sacrifice of Christ: redemption, propitiation and reconciliation. NT references to 'propitiation' indicate that it is meant only for the elect of God. The crucifixion is "a propitiation through faith in his blood." (Romans 3:25) If people have no faith, there is no propitiation.

¹³⁷ The entire text is accessible on the website of the British Library (<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-kings-two-bodies-in-edmund-plowdens-reports-1588>). This was about the lands Edward VI had leased during his minority, and crown lawyers argued that decisions made in his minority were valid because he had acted as king and the 'body politic' was neither subject to childhood nor vulnerable to old age.

‘needed to explain and codify the continuity of England.’¹³⁸ In *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession*, Marie Axton compares it with the ecclesiastical ‘*corpus mysticum*’ which had been useful in the maintenance of church estate. Her description of the paradox at the heart of this concept captures the problem Tudor lawyers must have faced:

Men died and the land endured; kings died, the crown survived; individual subjects died but subjects always remained to be governed. Perhaps the lawyers were unwilling to envisage England itself as a perpetual corporation because the law had always vested land in a person. Anyway, for the purposes of law it was found necessary by 1561 to endow the Queen with two bodies: a *body natural* and a *body politic* [...] When lawyers spoke of this body politic they referred to a specific quality: the essence of *corporate perpetuity*.¹³⁹

The theory, therefore, is a legal argument meant to check aristocrats’ penchant for land grabbing. Neither the two bodies theory nor the principle of divine right were treated as anything other than legal myths to be appropriated to secure crownlands. In his internationally-acclaimed work on the topic, Ernst Kantorowicz looks at Richard II as eternalising the metaphor about the king’s two bodies, ‘making it the very substance and essence of one of his greatest plays’.¹⁴⁰ Inasmuch as *Henry VI* also revolves around a monarch’s inability to ‘possess’ what he is legally called upon to, Kantorowicz’s argument can be applied also to the trilogy. All virtuous, noble Shakespearean characters who have been cut off from their lawful patrimonies question the processes of identity creation, the possibility that self-identity is purely a fictional construct, and the fact that material possessions (and their loss) often influence their transformations from ‘having’ to a state of nothingness. Many of these dispossessed aristocrats in comedies – the Duke of Arden, Sebastian, and Valentine – have been exiled, or have imposed the state of exile on themselves (Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, for instance). Romeo, Coriolanus, Kent and King Lear have been banished; both exiled and banished reinforce and subvert

¹³⁸ Kingsley-Smith, *Banishment*, 84.

¹³⁹ Marie Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977), 12. Quoted by Kingsley-Smith, *Banishment*, 84.

¹⁴⁰ ‘It seems all very trivial and irrelevant, since the image of the twinned nature of a king, or even of man in general, was most genuinely Shakespeare’s own and proper vision’, says Kantorowicz. (Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton university Press, 2016), Perlego.

Petrarchan/Ovidian tropes of exile.¹⁴¹ The state of exile is profound and dramatically rich, yet Shakespeare returns again and again to a definition of exile as a radical form of self-annihilation and self-reconceptualisation in *As You Like It*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, *Coriolanus*, and all the conflicting narratives in *King Lear*.¹⁴² This pattern is in keeping with Margaret de Grazia's reading of *King Lear* as an amoral pre-modern concept in which having is being: 'removing what a person has simultaneously takes away what a person is...having is tantamount to being, not having is tantamount to non-being.' Whether the protagonist progresses to reintegration into society or death, this state of non-being instils in him the spirit of regeneration, making exile more meaningful than 'death mistimed'.¹⁴³ If she is correct, Valentine is in a state of non-being while wandering around with his band of wronged aristocrats and *King Lear* is mistaken in believing that any emotion may exist independent of a property entitlement. This explains why Romeo is profoundly shocked when he is banished from Verona:

There is no world without Verona walls
But purgatory, torture, hell itself.
Hence banished is banished from the world.
And world's exile is death.¹⁴⁴

Valentine also predicts his own destruction if he is banished from Sylvia: 'She is my essence, and I leave to be/ If I be not by her fair influence/ Fostered, illumined, cherished, kept alive'.¹⁴⁵ Yet neither Valentine nor Romeo experiences the annihilation they fear; Romeo returns and Valentine finds self-worth with his band of outlaws. For almost every Shakespearean outlaw banishment never translates to 'death'. Their non-being allows them to create a space in which they are free to define themselves unburdened of their political and property roles. Nothing could be farther from Henry VI's trajectory than

¹⁴¹ See Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

¹⁴² Kingsley-Smith, *Banishment*, 10-11.

¹⁴³ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Barbara E. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 3.3. 21-22.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 17-20.

¹⁴⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 3.1.182-184.

this 'self-abandonment to self-actualisation' pattern Shakespeare's popular exiles represent.

To begin with, Henry VI is a fugitive. The monarch flees after losing the First Battle of St Albans to York's eldest son Edward. The time he spends on the run is comfortable, the Lancastrians still have enough men to plan a strategic retreat, and Queen Margaret has been fiercely rallying supporters for the Lancastrian cause. At a glance this is enough to distinguish Henry from the sufferings of Richard II, Prospero with his daughter in a boat, or the banished Falstaff – to say nothing of the naked Lear or poor Tom on the stormy night. A dramatist may use exile for a number for any number of purposes; Shakespeare often employed exile to broaden his dramatic world and redefine the boundaries of identity-creation: 'The man cast out from society is deprived of the roles by which he has known himself. He is the scapegoat, thrust beyond the town's limits with all its evils on his back. In Elizabethan and Jacobean England, the exile may be a Catholic, gypsy, vagabond or strolling player. Society may use the exile to redefine its own limits but this does not leave the victim himself with any positive definition by which to live. Indeed, the fracturing or dissolution of identity attendant upon exile seems to be expressed in the conventional association of banishment with death.'¹⁴⁶ For those who view Henry VI as the illegitimate, ineffective usurper of the throne, his royalty is immaterial. He is a 'wolf snarling beyond the city walls' every time he appears onstage.¹⁴⁷ There is no reason to consider his exile as anything more than a price for peaceful relations between Lancastrians and Yorkists. In any case, Henry would have known that his withdrawal alone would not result in non-resistance. It was in preparation for the unavoidable loss of the throne that he swings between an acceptance of his misfortunes and the hope that the queen and his son would successfully restore him to the throne:

Poor queen! How love to me and to her son
Hath made her break out into terms of rage!
Reveng'd may she be on that hateful Duke,
Whose haughty spirit, winged with desire,
Will cost my crown, and like an empty eagle

¹⁴⁶ Kingsley-Smith, *Banishment*, 3.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Tire on the flesh of me and of my son!
The loss of those three lords torments my heart.¹⁴⁸

Yet he refuses to answer the charges York levels against him, perhaps because there is no answer available. His ancestor had revolted against the lawful king. What follows - as a clean split becomes a shattering and bloody rupture - is a reversal of Shakespeare's trusted narrative. Henry's state of 'exile' is inexpressible, and one that exists outside the main narrative entirely. Henry VI has always been a character in a drama he has not attempted to control, but Margaret, Edward, and Clifford try to 'tell his story'. This is a trying proposition, even after the Lancastrians cruelly assassinate the Duke of York (the paper crown scene is probably historically inaccurate, but a satisfying visionary spectacle). By the time the second battle of St Albans is underway, Henry has become a fairly predictable tragic character, in turns baffled, terrified and ashamed of his own inefficiency - the kind that lives only to suffer horribly till they reach an enlightenment that looks suspiciously like retribution.¹⁴⁹ He is not happy to see his rival killed, although he previously hoped the queen would do precisely that when we last saw him onstage.¹⁵⁰ This sudden shift in thought predicts the near-constant indecisiveness that besets him once he escapes from the battlefield of St Albans.

¹⁴⁸ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 1.1. 276-283.

¹⁴⁹ Since exile is variously understood as loss, isolation, and abandonment, this suffering is a realisation of not having a home to return to, and in Henry's case, no kingdom to call his own. This search for some kind of a connection (we do see this in Henry's longing for his home country) itself becomes a connection of sorts, and, instead of being a spiritual death, becomes a spiritual rejuvenation.

¹⁵⁰ 'Reveng'd may she be on that hateful Duke,' Henry had wished.

‘How these nobodies jostle each other’: Henry VI and King Lear¹⁵¹

Most stage versions of the play clothe the monarch very simply¹⁵² - in a one-piece monkish robe - and this highlights the difference in the thought-processes of the richly-garbed lords and the priestlike king. The fine clothes present a constant temptation and Henry does not succumb to the threat of avarice or greed. When he does, an outer self-image distorts his inner self as well, goading him onto a more pronounced piety. But this unaffected normality has also given us perspective into the drama and the several battles. Soon, this disturbing form of piety finds a real-life correlate. Anticipating Henry's terrible death redoubles the fragility, ambiguity, and the poignancy of this heightened religiosity. Deposition looming on all corners, he reinforces the terrible Renaissance trope of the old soul. In his unkingly ordinariness, Henry embodies Maus's idea that 'in 2 *Henry VI*, the problems of distributive justice are apparently both distinct from, and more profound than, problems of entitlement.'¹⁵³ She goes on to distinguish this pattern from a similar problem of social justice in *King Lear*: 'Yet it is also important that in *Lear*, the suffering poor are not a different group from the entitled rich, but the same persons at different points in time.'¹⁵⁴ It would be fair to argue that in 2 *Henry VI* (as in *King Lear*) the chasm between the ragged Cade and the finely-dressed nobles is bridged by the sparsely-clothed king who is soon to lose his kingdom. However, Henry is neither *Lear*, nor Poor Tom and the distinction never completely disappears as it does in *King Lear*. To that end, Maus is correct. But her conclusion is flawed:

In 2 *Henry VI* the mutability of fortune produces an endless cycle of retributive violence as the newly vagabond struggle to reclaim what they believe to be their entitlements from the "pirates" who have appropriated them. In *Lear*, by contrast, the experience of immiseration, crushing the fortunate man's fantasy

¹⁵¹ 'How these nobodies jostle each other' is a phrase from Franz Kafka's very first published collection, *Betrachtung* (Meditation). 'If nobody comes, then nobody comes,' he says. 'I've done nobody any harm, nobody's done me any harm, but nobody will help me. Nothing but nobodies. But that isn't how it is. Only, that nobody helps me - a group of nobodies would be fine, on the other hand. I'd love to go on an excursion - why not? - with a pack of nobodies. Into the mountains, of course, where else?' Just like with *Lear* and Henry, our understanding of this depends on how we define 'nothing'. Becoming nothing is as much a paradox as vacuum occupying space or 'darkness visible'.

¹⁵² As opposed to his movements, which are formalised. However, many post-war versions clothe Henry in military clothes. Cade has been given punk rock makeovers. The 1988 RSC production of *Henry VI* with Ralph Fiennes in the lead role repeatedly gave Henry VI monkish clothes and a very noticeable crucifix.

¹⁵³ Maus, *Being and Having in Shakespeare*, 124.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

of exemption from suffering, encourages an empathetic impulse to distribute resources widely.¹⁵⁵

The famous molehill speech in *3 Henry VI* directly addresses the strain military action places on social and distributive justice. Having made his way from the battlefield to a molehill, Henry contemplates the sweetness of a shepherd's life (and the misery of a king's) until he has his own epiphany.

The plight of poor wretches exposed to the storm makes Lear cry out in anguish:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.¹⁵⁶

Henry's self-reproach echoes this sentiment:

O piteous spectacle! O bloody times!
Whiles lions war and battle for their dens,
Poor harmless lambs abide their enmity.
Weep, wretched man, I'll aid thee tear for tear;
And let our hearts and eyes, like civil war,
Be blind with tears, and break o'ercharged with grief...¹⁵⁷

In both plays the central issue is not a popular uprising, a civil war, the distribution of England, diplomatic ties with France or unification with Scotland, although these are important political themes. At the heart of both plays is a monarch discovering they have taken 'too little care' of their kingdoms when it is too late for any form of moral redemption.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 126.

¹⁵⁶ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.4. 32-40.

¹⁵⁷ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 2.5. 73-78.

His enemy Edward finds only these words to say to Margaret in gentle censure of the ruling monarch:

For what hath broach'd this tumult but thy pride?
Hadst thou been meek, our title still had slept;
And we, in pity of the gentle King,
Had slipp'd our claim until another age.¹⁵⁸

Are these words Edward's, or Henry's own unquiet mind? Or are the main characters channelling his traumatised shame back at him? At the end of *King Lear*, his bloodline is over. 'The promised end' is elusive. But there is a residue of sweetness in *3 Henry VI* - the father and son (who kill their kin) repent their acts and withdraw from the battle. Although no reconciliation is possible, maybe the damage can be limited especially since Henry Richmond has been growing up in France.

The play lurches from uncertainty to uncertainty in search of a new equilibrium. Henry's piety begins to appear pathological and mistakes become potential crimes. His strangeness, by turns teasing and eerie, keeps the audience guessing. But the sudden political disaster it seems to set up doesn't follow; the end of the trilogy unnerves the reader with nothing really happening. Once the war is lost, Henry is either alone, on the move, or interacting with strangers. The shifting interplay of intense piety and blankness proves ideal for a frank exploration of Henry's fears. This interplay is what makes the stylised interaction between the monarch-father-son group so riveting. Watching the son-who-killed-his-father and the father-who-killed-his-son is one of two foundational experiences Henry has while the war wages. The little scene is lifted from Eubulus's prediction of civil war in *Gorboduc*.

The wives shall suffer rape, the maids deflowered,
And children fatherless shall weep and wail;
With fire and sword thy native folk shall perish
One kinsman shall bereave another's life,

¹⁵⁸ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 2.2. 161-164.

The father shall unwitting slay the son,
The son shall slay the sire and know it not.¹⁵⁹

There is a characteristically condensed vision of war in a play that is so insistently humanising even as it mounts a monumental look at a fifty-year feud.¹⁶⁰ The play could have chosen to delve fully into the horrors of war genre (which was an established Renaissance favourite) from this point. The fact that it pursues a completely separate path is due, in part, to Shakespeare's plans for a much longer cycle of plays than he had foreseen before the absolutely unprecedented success of *Henry VI*. The little play-within-a-play encourages Henry to recognise and acknowledge complete powerlessness. The Wars of the Roses narrative is not told through the lived or near-death experiences of soldiers; names of houses are generally irrelevant, as are rank, unit, or isolated operations. War narratives clearly mark an enemy, but here the enemy is not identified as the Yorkist armies or the Cade rebellion. Armies know who they are fighting, perhaps even why. The eponymous enemy is not (as it would have been in the Hundred Years' War) the stranger trying to kill you. One may slaughter one's heir on the field. There is little visual and emotional distance between the hobbling father with his son strapped to his shoulders and the huddling, impoverished homeless that Lear encounters during the storm.¹⁶¹

These two threads - the tragedy of kin killing kin, and the possibility that the menace is deeper than the horrors of a civil war (as in *King Lear*) - are taken forward in the rest of the chronicle plays.¹⁶² In the rest of the play Henry's genuine disinterestedness increases the ambiguity around his divine status. As his piety increases, Shakespeare's metaphors become more provocative, urging us to indulge the forbidden fascination of saint-worship.

And to conclude: the shepherd's homely curds,
His cold thin drink out of his leather bottle,

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, *The Tragedie of Gorboduc* (London: W. Griffith, 1565), 371-380. Ebook accessed on Google Play.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.5. 55-125.

¹⁶¹ Is the battlefield more complex than the storm or the heath in *Lear*? That is definitely not the case. A battlefield is easier to interpret – it is more clearly a symbol of divine providence. What better place to explore sovereignty and power, and piety than a war ground where families meet to slaughter one another?

¹⁶² With the important difference that *King Lear* has a tragic ending and the tetralogies end with Tudor rule.

His wonted sleep under a fresh tree's shade,
 All which secure and sweetly he enjoys,
 Is far beyond a prince's delicates-
 His viands sparkling in a golden cup,
 His body couched in a curious bed,
 When care, mistrust, and treason waits on him.¹⁶³

The little father-son tableau that follows is also a metaphorical expression of deeply personal grief. Henry has lost the only father figure he had. He has been grieving, his soul torn apart by the loss of the crown.¹⁶⁴ The drama may be a manifestation of his trauma, and his interactions with the world are informed by this post-deposition trauma. In spite of his tremendous aversion to bloodshed, the war provides an outlet through which Henry can channel his grief and the consequent search for whatever remained of his fractured identity. The only chance for Henry's journey to find meaning is for him to go inward and address his suffering soul. But this balance shifts as soon as it is achieved.

The next time we see Henry, he has stolen away from his hideout in Scotland to take a look at his country. He seems to reject the political trappings of this world (he carries a prayer book as he enters, raising the possibility that this scene, again, is a reflection of his muted grief)¹⁶⁵ but the pious strain is not sustained. Henry's internal contradictions are teased out.

From Scotland am I stol'n, even of pure love,
 To greet mine own land with my wishful sight.
 No, Harry, Harry, 'tis no land of thine;
 Thy place is fill'd, thy sceptre wrung from thee,
 Thy balm wash'd off wherewith thou wast anointed.
 No bending knee will call thee Caesar now,
 No humble suitors press to speak for right,

¹⁶³ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 2.5. 47-54.

¹⁶⁴ Michael Hattaway, the editor of the New Cambridge editions of *Henry VI*, writes, 'the political centre of [2 Henry VI] is the bond between Henry and Gloucester'.

Michael Hattaway, 'Introduction', in *The Second Part of King Henry VI*, ed. Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19.

¹⁶⁵ It could very well be a disguise. Monks and friars commonly carried their devotional books with them and Henry VI might have wished to pass for one of them.

No, not a man comes for redress of thee;
For how can I help them and not myself?¹⁶⁶

The first audiences of the play would have been mystified by the saint's attachment to his lost throne. Shakespeare's reading possibly aims to avoid the implied passivity of dethronement, portraying Henry's capture as an active choice:

Let me embrace thee, sour adversity,
For wise men say it is the wisest course.¹⁶⁷

We cannot be sure that the royal vagabond is completely in control, but there is a persistent desire of belonging to a morally superior world than the one he sees around himself. This trajectory is more layered and rewarding than Lear's search for meaning: the monarch is not transformed when he loses his political identity. Henry's internal contradictions are never resolved. This oscillation between diffidence and detachment creates an unsentimental emotional power. It is easy to overlook that this perplexity often accompanies grieving so it may feel like Henry's wandering mind echoes the play's departure from realism. That, however, is not the only probable explanation for the pathological piety and inertia. For anyone familiar with Henry's biography, it is not very difficult to fill in the blanks. No obfuscation about the meaning of this oscillation would keep the audience from recognising the mental malady that caused it.¹⁶⁸

Mental waywardness is not the only thematic link between Henry VI and King Lear, as we have learned till now. Lear's senility is comparable with Henry's frantic indecisiveness but Henry VI was a monarch in his prime when he had his breakdown, not 'fourscore and upward.'¹⁶⁹

Perhaps we find a more accurate description of Henry's malady in Polonius's incorrect diagnosis of Hamlet:

¹⁶⁶ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 3.1. 14-22.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

¹⁶⁸ This is a reference to his mental breakdown after the Battle of St Albans and the years of silence he went through.

¹⁶⁹ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.7. 71;

Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and by this declension,
Into the madness wherein he now raves.¹⁷⁰

Anxious doubt can also take the form of Brutus's comparison of his tormented mind with a city in insurrection:

Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream:
The Genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers thence
The nature of an insurrection.¹⁷¹

Only it would have been treasonous to refer to the king's condition as 'madness.' The line between divine inspiration, romantic despair, melancholy, and fitfulness was thin during the sixteenth century. Henry does not fit any of the divine paradigms accepted in the late sixteenth century, nor did he fulfil a single requirement expected of a clinically insane person. This is intriguingly similar to the dilemma of early Tudor chroniclers in the late fifteenth century, but Shakespeare could hardly alter standards of divine kingship to suit his dramatic needs, or choose from different depictions of melancholia to create a new model of royal insanity.¹⁷² Tudor chroniclers recreated Henry's sainthood according to the political requirements of Henry VII and that was how Shakespeare's audience understood Henry's identity, though not how Shakespeare himself viewed it. Henry may not have been a saint, pacifist, or a madman. When Henry calls himself 'a King, more wofull then you are' even while he is losing his title, he is making a clear statement about

¹⁷⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (Classics Books Library, 2018), Perlego, 2.2.146–50.

¹⁷¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* (Classics Books Library, 2015), Perlego, 2.1. 65–67.

¹⁷² The most helpful work on melancholy during Shakespeare's time was Bright's *Treatise of Melancholie* (1586). There are several treatments of melancholy in Shakespeare - melancholics are parodied, sympathised with, and studied seriously. Hamlet and Romeo are famously 'melancholy', but Benedick and Jacques can also be considered melancholic. Remember also that Yorkist accounts of Henry's death said that he had died of melancholy because of his son's death.

how he views his identity: his duty is not to merely hold onto his possessions, it is to rule England on God's behalf. Any narrative tension that exists arises from Henry's unwillingness to perform his duty, as evidenced by the popular 'crown of content' speech:

My crown is in my heart, not on my head;
Not deck'd with diamonds and Indian stones,
Not to be seen. My crown is call'd content;
A crown it is that seldom kings enjoy.¹⁷³

This may not be a frantic attempt to gloss over Henry's actual state of mental instability; it reads more like a clever way to make royal insanity as safe and palatable as possible. The price for years of inefficiency must be paid: the death of Gloucester, Cade's rebellion, Henry's excessive lenity and his wildly swaying senses have led to this inevitable moment of humiliation. This moment is one upon which multiple traditions of the Henry VI cult have relied on for their tale of Henry's sainthood. The homilies and liturgies set up a basic structure of events that pilgrims believed occurred at the end of his life - the deposition, the escape from England, his recapture and humiliation, his son's murder and his own mysterious death in the London Tower. It did not contain a narrative, but a ritualised death story had been designed for liturgical purposes to begin with, and then embellished for purposes of propaganda. There is no mention of this arrest in Hall or Holinshed, to whom the story of Henry's tribulations was irrelevant.¹⁷⁴ The only means Shakespeare had at his disposal was to strip away the religious overlay imposed by early Tudors on this scene and focus on the most primitive version of the capture he found in fifteenth century chronicles. He goes one step further and omits any agent in Henry's recapture.

In other words, Edward's men do not capture Henry. Henry wishes to be captured.

It is ironic that Shakespeare also strips Henry's capture of all its theatrics when he represents it on the Elizabethan stage after concocting patently fictitious scenes throughout the trilogy. The explanation is simple: the equilibrium Henry has been

¹⁷³ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 3.1. 63-66.

¹⁷⁴ This is a secularised version of a classic theological lesson in redemption, but this disengagement from the cult traditions reinforces the Christological pattern in Henry's life.

searching for can never be found in the implied political redemption in humiliation, although the idea that Henry gains supernatural powers after his capture is thematically rich.¹⁷⁵ But this event is only a low-key political crisis; Henry never becomes a soft target like Edward II - his amorality and selfishness have been adequately explored.

At any rate, it does not replicate the neat morality-tale narrative progression of *Richard III*. The momentum Henry's moral and psychological struggle had given the narrative is now withdrawn, but not until we see the nasty turn a more cruelly irresponsible monarch might, and will, give the story later. It is not merely a coincidence that Richard hobbles onto the stage immediately after Henry is sent to the Tower. Henry's 'Would I were dead!' does not require any interpretation - it is an existential statement, not a practical one.¹⁷⁶ Macbeth's similarly disenchanted 'Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player' is complaining of life's vacuousness— neither is necessarily a symbol of melancholia. Political achievements fade away fast in almost all of Shakespeare's tragedies, therefore neither Henry's defeat nor Edward's victory have any inherent significance save as a political backdrop for Richard's humiliating defeat at the hands of Henry Tudor. Henry's perturbation has more in common with King Lear's conflicting emotions on the heath:

You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!
You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age; wretched in both!
If it be you that stir these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
And let not women's weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man's cheeks! No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both,
That all the world shall--I will do such things,--
What they are, yet I know not: but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep
No, I'll not weep:

¹⁷⁵ It is a possible way to explain Henry's prophetic powers when he blesses Henry Tudor for being the saviour of England.

¹⁷⁶ Shakespeare, 3 *Henry VI*, 2.5. 19.

I have full cause of weeping; but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,
Or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad!¹⁷⁷

Lear's suffering and realisation are of a far grander dimension than Henry's, and the price paid for the quietness of his mind is greater. Yet both realise it was folly that led to their helplessness; Henry and Lear dream of an impossible revenge at the point of a nervous breakdown. Lear's tragedy is centred on the complete disintegration of his identity in the next act. Through seven carefully constructed scenes, Lear loses his mind. His wild frenzy robs every individual object of its identity: the joint stool becomes Goneril, Poor Tom's rags are a Persian fashion, the bench in an outhouse is a curtained royal bed.¹⁷⁸ Henry's self-identity is not thus closely linked to his monarchical entitlements and he does not suffer the self-destructive fragmentation of Lear: consequently there is no healing in Henry either. Perhaps we can argue that Henry's pious lament is its own remedy, or that even Lear's near-baptismal drenching in the storm and bleak outcome offer a restorative spirit denied to the irreconcilable issues of the chronicles.

Henry VI's experience on the clearing near the battlefield is Shakespeare's first rendering of the kind of spiritual revelation he would repeatedly return to in his more popular plays: *Winter's Tale*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *As You Like It*, *The Tempest*, and *King Lear*. The epiphany of Henry VI is not relegated to its climax; it occurs throughout the play. Henry's spiritual self-awareness is evident from the outset, he rises to the occasion whenever justice is asked of him (during the duchess's trial, the Simpkins episode, the Cade rebellion, and while he watches civil war destroy his country), and it achieves its fullest impact in his self-defence when he is being taken to the victorious king. Once the hunchback Richard III ascends the throne, these instances of mercy would have greater significance. Henry cultivated cordial relations with all his courtiers (including the Yorkist nobles) whilst Richard antagonised his followers increasingly. In that sense Henry's epiphany is of lesser import than Lear's or Leontes's (since the quality

¹⁷⁷ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2.4. 299-314.

¹⁷⁸ In *King Lear: The Transference of the Kingdom*, Jeffrey Stern looks at this scene as madness reinvesting Lear with the power he had lost. The storm responds to his exhortation to rage, and, at his word, the joint-stool becomes Goneril.

of what is revealed depends on how blind the seer had previously been); in terms of narrative the revelatory experience concludes Henry's spiritual journey.

Its dramatic impact is also debatable: Henry's foreknowledge of the powerful impact of self-abnegation reduces the pathos his humiliation would have triggered. Resurrection is what gives epiphany meaning. This renewal may be portrayed in the form of an upheaval of remorse (like King Alonso or Othello)¹⁷⁹, a complete change in character (in Katharina's fashion), or attainment of previously-withheld wisdom (like Posthumus or Leontes).¹⁸⁰ In *3 Henry VI* we can argue that the main reversal of tragedy begins with the king's epiphany, unlike all other tragedies (that employ deep reversals of fortune).

Shakespearean transformations derive their strength from the realisation that all monarchs are sturdy beggars in a royal outfit:

'But now a king, now thus.'

(*King John*, 5.7.66)

'The king's a beggar, now the play is done.'

(*All's Well that Ends Well*, Epilogue)

In contrast, we are not even sure Henry is the legitimate monarch well into the second play. He is already a model for patience and humility, and has little to gain from a divinely granted disclosure, except a more complete understanding of how the civil war is tearing families asunder. We began this discussion trying to explore thematic similarities between Henry's and Lear's spiritual journey towards becoming nothing, but 'nothing' could have a variety of implications. Considering the way Henry's epiphany functions, his exile may be viewed as a metaphor for his otherness throughout the trilogy, but certainly not as a symbol of grief for the lost throne.¹⁸¹ He hovers around the peripheries of the court, a monarch who adopts the persona of the exile to cope with the

¹⁷⁹ 'And the Elizabethans knew their ascetic theology: Othello shows no signs of penitence, only of remorse, which is another thing,' says S. L. Bethel in *The Diabolic Images in Othello*.

¹⁸⁰ Though one can argue that Lear meeting Cordelia is also a revelation, the scene itself acts more as a recognition scene than a revelation. It does, however, become an important reference for all future recognition scenes like those between Leontes and Hermione/Perdita or Posthumus and Imogen.

¹⁸¹ Lear and Edgar look for patience during key moments in the play, but it is a virtue Henry VI does not need to find. He is already a Job-prototype.

alienation within. Self-imposed or voluntary exile is neither passive nor tragic: it is a heroic act of self-constitution. Shakespeare employs similar plot devices throughout the two depositions: their pathetic attempts to hold onto their authority, the mindless wandering around while the country copes with changing governments, approaching insanity, and the final realisation of their utter futility on an unnamed, forest-like space before being recaptured and taken prisoner. To that end, all deposed monarchs share their experience of nothingness: separate from the body politic, the body natural is divested of meaning.¹⁸² However, unlike Lear or Othello, Henry's separation from his position of authority resolves his moral struggle without killing him. Henry's trauma and impending madness give the civil war its true weight.

From any other perspective, the tragedy does not appear as all-encompassing and complex as it actually is.

In the normal pattern of tragedies, anagnorisis is followed by spiritual peace and deeper understanding of the tragedy endured, even if the protagonist is incapable of regeneration.¹⁸³ Here we have political hope replacing penance or self-knowledge; unnoticed, save perhaps, for a handful of history-enthusiasts who attended theatres regularly, Henry mentions Queen Margaret escaping to France to discuss the deposition with Louis, the French king. His entire conception of authority has undergone a sea-change since two minutes ago, when he was mourning his deposition:

Go where you will, the King shall be commanded;
And be you kings: command, and I'll obey.

First Keeper: We are true subjects to the King, King Edward.

King Henry: So would you be again to Henry,
If he were seated as King Edward is.

First Keeper: We charge you, in God's name and the King's,
To go with us unto the officers.

King Henry: In God's name, lead; your King's name be obey'd;

¹⁸² There is another way of looking at this. Commenting on the deposition of Richard II, Kantorowicz says, 'The fiction of the oneness of the double body breaks apart. Godhead and manhood of the King's Two Bodies, both clearly outlined with a few strokes, stand in contrast to each other.' (Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 31).

¹⁸³ Compare and contrast with the anagnorisis that provides resolution in the comic plot of Claudio or Leontes; or the knowledge/revelation in *Othello*.

And what God will, that let your King perform;
And what he will, I humbly yield unto.¹⁸⁴

Two years later Marlowe's Edward II says words to the same effect:

Nay, then lay violent hands upon your king,
Here Mortimer, sit thou in Edwards throne,
Warwicke and Lancaster, weare you my crowne,¹⁸⁵

Late sixteenth-century spectators would have been profoundly uncomfortable with Henry's indiscriminate bestowal of kingship on the deer hunters and a person he believed had deposed him unlawfully. Anyone who believed in the heroic Protestant ideal of kingship would dismiss Henry's fanciful Catholicised theories. Spiritual authority rested in the sovereign ruler of the land; it was certainly not up for grabs. Early modern philosophers squabbled over which of the cardinal virtues were most important for the smooth administration of a Protestant kingdom, and while Henrician changes might not have been immediate, there was a definite shift. Sherman Hawkins suggests that Tillyard's providential conception implies that it is virtue which truly makes a king: 'Origins to the Elizabethans implied essences, and a tradition going back to Cicero and Herodotus held that virtue is the source of kingship.'¹⁸⁶ In '*The Practicalities of the Absolute: Justice and Kingship in Shakespeare's Richard II*', James Phillips states that it is justice, rather than virtue, that is the *causa finalis* of kingship and the criterion by which it can be judged. 'The king is subject not to law but to justice. The Magna Carta forbade English kings from denying justice, and coronation oaths reiterated justice as a duty of the monarch,' writes Phillips.¹⁸⁷ Primogeniture does not ensure righteous Christian kingship. An ideal medieval king was one who could uphold martial values on the battlefield and socio-political values in court and in everyday life. The Reformation altered these paradigms considerably without establishing what an ideal Protestant monarch would be like.

¹⁸⁴ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 3.3. 93-102.

¹⁸⁵ Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, ed. Mathew R. Martin (Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2010), 1.4. 34-36, p.59.

¹⁸⁶ Hawkins, *Virtue and Kingship*, 314.

¹⁸⁷ James Phillips, *The Practicalities of the Absolute: Justice and Kingship in Shakespeare's Richard II*, in *ELH*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (Spring 2012), 161.

Shakespeare's Henry VI is virtuous, a devout believer in justice, and not unintelligent. His only political flaw is being unable to align his subjects' interests with his own, and his only flaw of character is his lack of assertiveness. His deposition balances his shifting sense of self-identity, and with his re-ascension, the ineffective king is given one last chance to define what his political identity means to him. Even though it is no more than a mere illusion, one coherent identity (Yorkist/Lancastrian/Tudor/Protestant/Catholic) helps maintain a semblance of order for viewers watching a cast of over forty actors, and justifies cruel, but unavoidable executions. We have explored how an oscillating sense of self may have been an oblique glance at Henry's mental illness - but it also functions as a powerful foil against those who keep reinforcing their own sturdily fixed identities: York, Edward IV, Margaret of Anjou, and Richard III. One may buttress one's initial political role and identity as Yorkists do, or act against their identity as Henry VI does multiple times throughout the series. Often the true test of political expertise is being able to adapt your self-identity to changing political circumstances. When Edward IV embarrasses Warwick in the court of the French king by sending an emissary detailing his plans to wed the widow Jane Grey Warwick reiterates the long list of reasons he already had for opposing the Yorkists:

No more my king, for he dishonours me,
But most himself, if he could see his shame.
Did I forget that by the house of York

My father came untimely to his death?
Did I let pass th' abuse done to my niece?
Did I impale him with the regal crown?
Did I put Henry from his native right?¹⁸⁸

The Kingmaker's change in loyalties is rewarded by Margaret's swift decision to forget Warwick's initial treason. Players in the high plot behave exactly like Cade's 'common feathers blowing in the direction of the wind.'

¹⁸⁸ Shakespeare, 3 *Henry VI*, 3.3. 193-199.

Warwick, these words have turn'd my hate to love;
And I forgive and quite forget old faults,
And joy that thou becom'st King Henry's friend.¹⁸⁹

Henry's Molehill and 'crown of content' speeches make sense in light of King Edward's plight. After years of bloody civil war, Edward wins the throne only to engage in a dangerous international conflict to retain it, and ultimately lose it again. Years of Warwick's strategising and Margaret's spirited defence of her husband's cause end in disaster. Polydore Vergil almost writes the Yorkist victory in the Battle of Tewkesbury off to Edward IV's good fortune before blaming the original Lancastrian sin of deposing Richard II:

Yet it may be peradventure that this came to pass by reason of the infortunacy of the House of Lancaster, which wise men thought even then was to be ascribed to the righteousness of God, because the sovereignty extorted forcibly by Henry IV, grandfather to King Henry VI, could not be long enjoyed of that family. And so the grandfather's offence redounded unto the grandson's.¹⁹⁰

'It shows the justice of God punishing and working out the effects of a crime, till prosperity is re-established in the Tudor monarchy,' Tillyard writes of the Vergilian interpretation of events.¹⁹¹ Henry V respectfully re-interred Richard II's remains to expiate the ancestral curse. Superficially the narrative corresponds well with Tillyard's understanding of it: 'Behind disorder there is some sort of order or "degree", and that order has its counterpart in heaven. This assertion has nothing to do with the question of Shakespeare's personal piety: it merely means that Shakespeare used the thought-idiom of his age.'¹⁹² Tillyard's providential conception has not aged well, but Germaine Greer returns to his basic philosophy in her own (very short) chapter on the chronicle plays. 'By the time he wrote *Henry V*, Shakespeare must have been aware that the illusion of unity in English society could no longer be sustained. It was no longer in the power of

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 208-210.

¹⁹⁰ Quoted by Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, 37.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁹² Ibid., 8.

the dramatist to hold the imagination of all, literate and illiterate, powerful and powerless.¹⁹³

The England that used to be ‘This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England’ does not exist anymore, as Gaunt recognises in *Richard II*:

That England, that was wont to conquer others,
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.¹⁹⁴

Political disintegration is the mainstay of the society we see onstage, and the state itself - the body politic - needs redemption. The body natural of the monarch reflects the trauma of a state at war with itself. “I from myself am banished,” cries Edward II when Gaveston is banished from England.¹⁹⁵

In spite of a Lear-like enforced experience of the horrors of living beyond city walls, Henry’s state of nothingness is not a response to his deposition or a search for a new role to play. There is no stigma attached to this humiliation in Henry’s eyes, thus we have no tale of revenge. We often find later Shakespearean exiles reimagining their journey as one of pleasure, or a taste of liberty, or survival. The most popular exile of all stages a shipwreck, arranges a royal wedding, and wins his dukedom back from his usurper within twenty four hours.¹⁹⁶ Unlike Lear, Coriolanus or even Romeo, Henry survives his ordeal and becomes king of England again. Kingsley-Smith thinks Shakespearean depictions of banishment exist in a state of fluidity:

Perhaps the central characteristic of Shakespearean banishment, however, is that it is always on its way to becoming some other state. As such it reflects the rewriting of banishment in many other kinds of English Renaissance literature, not only fiction but biography, private letters, religious and anti-theatrical polemic, hagiography, consolation literature and travel narratives.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ Greer, *Shakespeare*, 83.

¹⁹⁴ Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 2.1. 68-69.

¹⁹⁵ Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, 1.4. 118.

¹⁹⁶ Admittedly Prospero’s drama of exile is far more complex and layered than Henry’s. *The Tempest* shares some Christian themes with the Henry VI trilogy: deposition and exile being the more important ones among them. Prospero is a more mature rendition of Henry VI (remember their shared love of books and resultant negligence of their political duties) who can manipulate his own magic and knowledge to have his enemies undergo the same loss of self as he had in his past.

¹⁹⁷ Kingsley-Smith, *Banishment*, 5.

Since Henry was a devout Catholic lifelong, his wanderings may be compared with the predicament of Elizabethan academics from Oxford and Cambridge or church bishops forced to remain under house arrest or even the ‘Marian exiles’ who famously left England to avoid inevitable banishment and execution.¹⁹⁸ Exile may also be used as a narrative peg on which Henry pivots from moral ambiguity to righteous heroism. Since society itself is characterised by dialogue amongst its members, exile means the loss of this privilege. Henry was already excluded from the political language employed by aristocrats. He is already a symbol of opposition to the linguistic ingenuity associated with diplomacy and political intrigue. David Williams calls the exile’s plight ‘the anti-type of such (Germanic gift-giving) harmony, ‘barred from the assembly of kinsmen, and prevented from sharing gifts with his brothers.’¹⁹⁹ This image is more poignant in a time teeming with ‘self-fashioning’ poets; the lone wanderer becomes ‘a kind of anti-poet, the opposite of the figure of the poet at the feet of his lord, the centre of society, who binds words and weaves sounds to make language. The exile is an unbinder, an undoer, and an uncreator.’²⁰⁰

Returning to Silences: Is Shakespeare’s Henry VI insane?

Henry’s ‘uncreation’ – a valiant state of nothingness – may not imply redemption for England, but the wisdom of the fugitive brings doctrine and truth to the audience. We may apply one of Williams’s ideas to Henry’s self-destructive existence: ‘While the present discussion of the exile has concentrated on the image of exile as outcast and anti-poet, it is well to remember that a characteristic of medieval aesthetics is the employment of a single image in opposite ways.’²⁰¹ The opposing way of examining the ‘loss of speech’ in Henry’s case is to understand how similar it is to the silent king’s catatonic stupor. Between the theory of the king’s two bodies and the ancient theory of apotheosis stands the concept of the *rex inutilis*, a ruler disabled mentally. Irina Metzler’s explanation of Henry’s insanity expresses how closely his silence was connected with self-imposed exile:

¹⁹⁸ 42 exiles in total returned to Elizabethan parliament between 1563 to 1601.

¹⁹⁹ David Williams, ‘The Exile as Uncreator,’

²⁰⁰ Quoted by Kingsley-Smith, *Shakespeare’s Drama of Exile* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 56.

²⁰¹ Williams, *The Exile as Uncreator*, 14.

Henry's illness manifested itself in silence to the world around him, and he suffered the treatments his physicians imposed on him in silence – in a sense he took gravitas to the extreme...the devout Henry displays too much of (gravitas) to the point of statuesque inertia, although, it seems, more of reasons of childlike simplicity than deliberate statesmanship.²⁰²

Unfortunately it is too tempting to read glimpses of Henry's condition into every unusual thing that befalls him – his shifting moral perspective may appear frenzied; his silence on the periphery looks directly influenced by his torpor. His ancestor Bolingbroke had organised a rebellion during his exile and returned to England (without a pardon) to dethrone Richard II:

Will you permit that I shall stand condemned
A wandering vagabond, my rights and royalties
Plucked from my arms perforce and given away
To upstart unthrifths?²⁰³

It is not altogether ironic that Henry is a fugitive in Scotland and returns to England without any assurance of his life. Even though Henry does not self-dramatise his status as the wronged outcast or the fallen ruler (as Richard II does so often) his wife exploits the pathos of his condition to win political aid for him:

Now, therefore, be it known to noble Louis
That Henry, sole possessor of my love,
Is of a king become a banished man,
And forced to live in Scotland a forlorn,
While proud ambitious Edward, Duke of York,
Usurps the regal title and the seat
Of England's true-anointed lawful King.²⁰⁴

'This movement from the polarity of king and exile to their identification is one of the defining features of the medieval *De casibus* tradition upon which the tragic narratives of *Mirror for Magistrates*, including the fall of Richard II, were modelled,' writes

²⁰² Irina Metzler, 'Afterword,' in *Madness in Medieval Law and Custom*, ed. Wendy J. Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 214.

²⁰³ Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 2.3.118-121.

²⁰⁴ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 3.3.23-29.

Kingsley-Smith.²⁰⁵ Shame, guilt, and an amorphousness to which death seems preferable are requisites for this tradition. The scenes on the molehill and with the deer-hunters do not suggest a sense of dishonour, guilt, or shame, though it may be argued that this would depend entirely on the actor interpreting the lines.²⁰⁶ The truth is we do not know enough about Henry's innermost moments and the trilogy warns us against accepting Yorkist, Lancastrian and (at times) even Tudor versions of the story. There are an unending number of paradigms by which we can measure Henry's deposition and escape; the ones presented here are drawn from the language Henry uses.

Recognising the way church-court intrigue fundamentally shaped the Wars of the Roses and medieval kingship is central to decoding the trilogy's interconnected themes of state and mob violence, the rise of a Protestant state, and the importance of Henry Tudor as the Christlike saviour of a decaying nation. Shakespeare's Henry VI is an important corrective to depictions of the fifteenth century that treat the king's political power as if it existed outside of every other political institution.²⁰⁷ Shakespeare posits his pathological piety and pacifism as responses to an impractical inheritance pattern and Henry V's administrative failures, rather than causes of the Cade rebellion or the civil insurrection. It would not have been out of place to use Henry's rule as an example of the political dangers of depending on courtiers to veto war strategy or conduct sensitive diplomatic missions, but Shakespeare uses the *Henry IV* plays to foreground the way court favourites damage a prince's education. Both *Richard II* and Marlowe's *Edward II* use morally corrupt noblemen to 'contaminate' the sacred leader of the nation. Yet Henry's decency challenges the concept of absolutism embodied by Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VIII. This also ties in with our earlier examination of the pragmatism of Henry's proposed war strategies. Henry IV suggests that being available for the commons to gaze at gradually strips away political power; this is the sort of false glorification of

²⁰⁵ Kingsley-Smith, *Shakespeare's Drama of Exile*, 74.

²⁰⁶ One can also argue that guilt is more associated with a regret in Othello's manner. Othello and Leontes need to be repentant – to that end, guilt and shame are necessary to them.

²⁰⁷ Medieval monarchies all over Western Europe worked within checks and balances; monarchs exercised their power but councils, important ministers, back channels, and favouritism held as much sway as they do today. Monarchy cannot escape being personal but ruling a country is always a bureaucratic process. Not only were many European monarchs too young to rule, even adult rulers spent considerable time with their councillors. See Michael Hicks, 'What was Personal about Personal Monarchy in the Fifteenth Century?' in *The Image and Perception of Monarchy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sean McGlynn and Elena Woodacre (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 8-22.

the monarch's divinity that Henry VI seems to abhor. It is not difficult to see why exile is liberating to a ruler beset by the paranoia of courtly conspiracies. The reality of Arden is brutal and unfriendly, but Duke Senior's perception of his exile is that of sweet freedom.

But *Henry VI* is also a study of political personages under tremendous diplomatic pressure, from Talbot's intense rescue mission in France to Gloucester's watching his wife perform an extreme penance to Lord Saye's tense interaction with the rebels and his horrific death. All these arcs are effectively underplayed, with speeches pointing to muted performances, and none of the rousing celebration of patriotism of the second tetralogy. There is another point of differentiation: the trilogy is about man's capacity to suffer and endure. For heroic tales, we turn to Bolingbroke's usurpation and Henry V. The king's exile is a symbol of unambiguous defeat, silent resistance, and a portent of the horrors to come in the reign of Richard III. It is ultimately paradoxical that Shakespeare's imagination of the Wars is defined not by bloodshed, international diplomacy or internecine conflict, but by quieter visions – of a man hopelessly walking out of a battlefield and staring into a lost horizon.

The 'noble death' of Henry VI

Martyrdom was a deeply divisive issue in the society Shakespeare was writing for. What constituted martyrdom was an important Reformation-era question.²⁰⁸ But after two reigns of intense religious persecution under Henry VIII and Mary I, there was an attempt to distinguish between Catholic and Protestant martyrologies firmly. More than fifty books were written on Catholic persecution between 1566 and 1660 and there were nine editions of Foxe in 1684; issues centred on the nature of church authority, sacrament, and divine justification - in many ways extensions of late medieval arguments of the same subjects. All demarcation between Catholic/Protestant martyrology served a political purpose. A Protestant minister trying to reason with the Catholic saint Margaret Clitherow wrote, 'In the tyme of Queene Marie were many put to death, and now also in

²⁰⁸ For an extensive coverage of this subject, see David K. Anderson, *Martyrs and Players in Early Modern England: Tragedy, Religion and Violence on Stage* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2016).

(Elizabeth's) tyme, of two severall opinions; both these cannot bee martyrs.'²⁰⁹ Certain kinds of deaths were politically significant – public executions, dying on battlefields, unnatural deaths – and their meaning became points of disputation. As we have seen in the first chapter, martyrdom stories are never stable. Each martyrological tradition reforms itself to suit political needs of the hour and the wider needs of a community. Gruesome tales of violence were popular throughout Europe; Dutch, German, and Frenchmen regularly appropriated stories of violent deaths in England.²¹⁰ These texts were widely circulated, and these narratives establish conversations with one another. Henry VI's assassination concludes a three-part tale of meditative suffering, yet at the heart of this terrifying act must have been a deep understanding of legal procedure.

John Foxe's nine-volume *Book of Martyrs* was one of the most influential sixteenth-century texts, informing the Protestant understanding of martyrdom. The book that purportedly recorded every single martyrdom since the death of Christ was made up of two volumes running to around 2,300 pages, and contained more than 150 illustrations of the killings (enabling the unlettered to look at the spectacle of suffering).²¹¹ During a time when the death penalty was a common response to most crimes, a stabbing or a blow to the head was leniency itself. Protestant suspicion of the use of iconography to promote religious ends does not seem to have obstructed their sale of these illustrations.²¹² Despite Foxe's silence on Henry's murder, the original book included a beautiful, vivid line sketch of Henry VI's tomb, although he was no believer in the saintliness of Henry.

It is really George, Duke of Clarence (as vulnerable and fragile as Henry VI) whose unusual method of execution should introduce any work on death in

²⁰⁹ John Mush, *The life and Death of Mistris Margarit Clitherow*, Bar Convent (York) MS, 97. Quoted by Susannah Brietz Monta, *Martyrdom and Literature in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

²¹⁰ All murders were punishable by hanging in medieval and early modern England, except in cases of self-defense, insanity, or accidents. "Killing Kings: Patterns of Regicide in Europe, AD 600–1800," a study by the *British Journal of Criminology* mentions that 15% of all the regicides in Europe during 600–1800 were murder. Assassination was the quickest way to power, but it was also a route to ensure devotional adoration of the wrongfully killed monarch.

²¹¹ John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs, Or A History of the Lives, Sufferings, and Triumphant Deaths of the Primitive Protestant Martyrs* (John C. Winston Co., 2007). Accessed on Project Gutenberg.

²¹² Shakespeare borrows the drama of Simpcox and the miracle of sight from Foxe for *2 Henry VI*.

Shakespeare's first tetralogy. In 1483, a gentleman named Dominic Mancini first referred to George (brother to Edward IV and Richard III) having been drowned in a barrel of *mollissimi paterni* (sweet wine).²¹³ Several writers abroad and Polydore Vergil agreed with Mancini's version of the story, although there is virtually no evidence of Richard III having a hand in George's execution.²¹⁴ Portents of grisly deaths abound in the early history plays; Clarence dreams of Richard III pushing him to his death moments into the play.

Shakespeare transforms the bizarre legend into a vernacular narrative of sorts, and the presage became an element that could stand free of the story. Snippets such as these possibly drew people into theatres since the execution of Clarence remained in living memory. These are also political claims, although expressed through dramatic narrative. Little historical evidence exists of Henry ever having met Henry Tudor but the very political message of *Richard III* is determined by the sentimental introduction of the two.

My Lord of Somerset, what youth is that,
Of whom you seem to have so tender care?

Somerset: My liege, it is young Henry, Earl of Richmond.

King Henry: Come hither, England's hope.

[Lays his hand on his head]

If secret powers
Suggest but truth to my divining thoughts,
This pretty lad will prove our country's bliss.
His looks are full of peaceful majesty;
His head by nature fram'd to wear a crown,
His hand to wield a sceptre; and himself
Likely in time to bless a regal throne.

²¹³ Robert Easton, *Royal Dates with Destiny* (Gloucestershire: Amber Publishing, 2013). Kindle.

²¹⁴ George's execution on a charge of treason was possibly ordered by Edward IV. The drowning in wine is also a myth; the Croyland Chronicle claims whatever the method of execution, it was secretly performed in the Tower on Edward's orders.

Make much of him, my lords; for this is he
Must help you more than you are hurt by me.²¹⁵

There is a sense of Lancastrian family values being organised around a recognisable solidarity, where children learn political strategy from kings and nobles. Blessed with Henry's quasi-miraculous divinations, the pretty lad departs for Bourbon.

Since we have discussed the political implications of Henry's miraculous powers at length in the preceding chapter, we shall not repeat it here. What we may take notice of is the self-assured quietness in Henry's lines. As his death comes nearer the tone becomes less tragic.

Ay, such a pleasure as incaged birds
Conceive when after many moody thoughts
At last by notes of household harmony
They quite forget their loss of liberty.²¹⁶

Here, as before, we have a foregrounding of one of Lear's most well-known speeches.

No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.²¹⁷

Richard Courtney calls Shakespeare's early heroes 'prototypes of humanity' combined with the medieval notion of the 'Fall of the Princes' ('a phrase of Boccaccio used by Chaucer and Lydgate').²¹⁸ In his sheer political powerlessness, Shakespeare's Henry VI fits the more postmodern paradigms of the failed hero – a noticeably 'outsider' figure – instead. The stories of Talbot, Gloucester, and Henry's son all align with this pattern, though Henry himself is transformed into a royal martyr. Shakespeare places the blame for the war on the bloated political power of the court nobles (with their strange allies in the church), enabling him to situate the death of the king within those specific religious circumstances. The tortured mind of the king is finally at peace with its deepest desires.

²¹⁵ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 4.6. 65-78.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12-16.

²¹⁷ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 5.3. 10-13.

²¹⁸ Richard Courtney, *Shakespeare's World of Death: The Early Tragedies* (Canada: Simon & Pierre, 1995), 21.

Therefore, that I may conquer Fortune's spite
By living low where Fortune cannot hurt me,
And that the people of this blessed land
May not be punished with my thwarting stars,
Warwick, although my head still wear the crown,
I here resign my government to thee,
For thou art fortunate in all thy deeds.²¹⁹

Royal retirement had many historical precedents, the most famous one being the public abdication of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. He handed over the thrones of Sicily, Naples (both fiefs of the Papacy) and the duchy of Milan to his son Philip in 1554. On 25 October, 1555, he publicly announced to the States General of Netherlands his abdication of those territories along with the county of Charolais.²²⁰ In January 1556 he abdicated as the ruler of the Spanish empire. His brother Ferdinand had been elected successor of the Holy Roman Empire, and Charles resigned his position on 27 August, 1556. He retired to a secluded monastery to live out the rest of his peaceful days.²²¹

The tranquillity of holy retirement is enhanced by our foreknowledge of Henry's quietude and fortitude (a cardinal virtue). It supports the picture of a fearless martyrdom. The quality of Henry's fearlessness is very different from York or Edward. We might even call the Yorkists oddly passive compared to him. They do their duty to their house sigil without really questioning their beliefs. Henry is conscious of the existential risks of his situation; he has the self-possession that accompanies self-knowledge.²²² He is aware of the place of his death in the scheme of the War of the Roses, while Margaret and the Yorkists are in thrall of warfare. Gloucester and Talbot represented violence tempered by ration, by insight into battle strategy. Henry finds no reason – honour, glory, or even birthright – strong enough to wage war. Even if it is only the temporary peace of a truce or a humiliating delegitimising of his heir, it is always better to end war because

²¹⁹ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 4.6. 19-25.

²²⁰ Anthony D. Wright, *The Counter-Reformation: Catholic Europe and the Non-Christian World* (Routledge, 2017). Kindle.

²²¹ Two comparisons – Prospero and King Lear – come to mind. Like Henry VI, retirement takes a tragic turn for both of them.

²²² Self-knowledge is a Christian virtue. As late as 2015, Pope Francis said that judging yourself was a necessary Christian virtue. 'Not hiding from the roots of sin that are in all of us, the many things we are capable of doing, even if we cannot see them,' is what self-judgement entails.

it saves lives. The cause may be righteous, but it is neither noble nor rational. None of the soldiers are as noble in death as Henry, who dies not only pious and humble, but also like a well-trained soldier on the battlefield.

King Henry: So flies the reckless shepherd from the wolf;
So first the harmless sheep doth yield his fleece,
And next his throat unto the butcher's knife.
What scene of death hath Roscius now to act?

Gloucester: Suspicion always haunts the guilty mind:
The thief doth fear each bush an officer.

King Henry: The bird that hath been limed in a bush
With trembling wings misdoubteth every bush;
And I, the hapless male to one sweet bird,
Have now the fatal object in my eye
Where my poor young was lim'd, was caught, and kill'd.²²³

Henry's responses surprisingly reflect his military training, which included mental training: he has supreme self-control in the face of death, there is no trace of panic, and he dies prophesying the turmoil England will face in Richard III's reign:

And thus I prophesy, that many a thousand
Which now mistrust no parcel of my fear,
And many an old man's sigh, and many a widow's,
And many an orphan's water-standing eye-
Men for their sons, wives for their husbands,
Orphans for their parents' timeless death-
Shall rue the hour that ever thou wast born.²²⁴

Henry's fall obviously conforms to the deeply Christian roots of the idea of suffering for a cause - his death is similar to John the Baptist's political murder. It is possible that Shakespeare consciously reached for an image of Catholic faith. The leader of the Lancastrian house has fallen but it is clear that the war has not been lost. Henry accepts his death while resisting his murderer. And for Shakespeare, Henry's murder is part of

²²³ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 5.6. 7-17.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 38-44.

the pattern the chronicles are trying to establish. It is the tragedy that enables the establishment of Christ's new kingdom. Henry's protégé had been safely removed to France, and was preparing to avenge his uncle's death. Our knowledge of Richard III's humiliating defeat gives Henry's murder additional meaning. Fact or fiction, this snippet is duly added to the repository of sacred memories cherished by the languishing cult. Yet Henry is not killed by Edward because his death wasn't a political circumstance. Henry dies in full possession of his wits, philosophising like Socrates – not to serve any partisan political cause.²²⁵ Because the silent king was also a symbol of reason amidst brutality, it is the death of a noble mind.

Unwittingly Richard serves the Lancastrians by giving Henry Tudor a cause to return to England: the pursuit of divine justice. But the incident itself is not purely theatrical; it is an adaptation of a real-life crime.²²⁶ It functioned as a snide warning to all monarchs not to create too many martyrs.

Richard III begins in the manner of *1 Henry VI* – with a lament for the deceased monarch.

Set down, set down your honourable load-
If honour may be shrouded in a hearse;
Whilst I awhile obsequiously lament
Th' untimely fall of virtuous Lancaster.
Poor key-cold figure of a holy king!
Pale ashes of the house of Lancaster!
Thou bloodless remnant of that royal blood!²²⁷

By the end of the scene, the virtuous Lady Anne has been seduced by Richard's obsequies instead, bringing to untimely fulfilment Henry's dying prophecy. His words continue to torture Richard III (much like the weird sisters' promises to Macbeth) even after he has

²²⁵ The death of Socrates, in reality, is a completely political process exactly like the murder of Henry VI. It's only Shakespeare's representation of Henry's death that is in question here.

²²⁶ As explained in the first chapter, it is difficult to ascertain if Edward IV or Richard III was responsible for the murder of Henry VI, but the exhumation of the body did reveal a blow at the back of Henry's head. The crime was a cruel and bloody one.

²²⁷ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 1.2. 1-7.

begun ruling England. Prophecy in *Richard III* does not play out in the rich, complex way it does in *Macbeth*, but each of the holy king's predictions comes true.

I do remember me: Henry the Sixth
Did prophesy that Richmond should be King,
When Richmond was a little peevish boy.
A king!-perhaps-²²⁸

Henry Tudor sets sail from France to recover the throne from York's heir much like Bolingbroke had left Ireland to dethrone Richard II a century ago. Cornered by Henry's army at Bosworth, Richard awaits his fate. In the manner of Shakespeare's more illustrious tragic heroes, Richard's overwrought brain conjures ghosts seeking his destruction.

GHOST. [To RICHARD]
When I was mortal, my anointed body
By thee was punched full of deadly holes.
Think on the Tower and me. Despair, and die.
Harry the Sixth bids thee despair and die.
[To RICHMOND] Virtuous and holy, be thou conqueror!
Harry, that prophesied thou shouldst be King,
Doth comfort thee in thy sleep. Live and flourish!²²⁹

The union of the white rose with the red may not signify a Lancastrian triumph, but it stands for Henry Tudor's espousal of his ancestor's dream of a bloodless return to peace. Only four 'men of name' die in the Battle of Bosworth and every soldier who submits to Richmond is pardoned.²³⁰ In spite of Shakespeare's poetic idealism, he refuses to sentimentalise Henry's death. His personal faith (which is at this point a curious amalgam of Catholic and Protestant beliefs) is tested and the outcome is reminiscent of famous Christian stories for survival - Noah, Job, or Abraham.²³¹ Henry's story has been dominated by his rejection of rationalism; Henry is himself godly in a way that has no

²²⁸ Ibid., 4.2. 99-102.

²²⁹ Ibid., 5.3. 130-137.

²³⁰ John Duke of Norfolk, Walter, Lord Ferrers, Sir Robert Brakenbury, and Sir William Brandon die in the Battle of Bosworth, as reported by Lord Stanley to Richmond (5.5. 14-15).

²³¹ Noah, Job, and Abraham prefigure Christ's own narrative of survival, which in turn prefigures all post-Resurrection narratives of survival.

doctrinal limits. Shakespeare treats Henry's piety with respectful wit (without taking it quite seriously) till the deposition.²³² Part of the appeal of this Henry is that the audience is free to question which version of the narrative is real. Shakespeare's use of the Hundred Years' War, the Cade rebellion, and the civil war as narrative framework complicates Henry's sweetness and gentle patience, as does the constant presence of unbelievable cruelty.

This may be intentional, but insisting that Shakespeare was devoted to the Tudor myth is inaccurate.²³³ The trilogy (both the tetralogies) invites you to believe in a number of political truths - Henry V's excellent kingship, Henry VI's political flaws, and Henry Tudor's act of divine revenge - before subverting each of these ideas completely. Henry's manner of death argues against the reductive conceptualisation of his indecisive behaviour during his early political career as impious and cowardly. His later performance of silence is especially powerful because he is not a marginal character retreating to the private realm to function as a voiceless individual for the rest of the narrative. This has to be understood within the political context that conditions its enactment; neither is it a mute show of resistance nor does it signify acquiescence. It occupies a complex middle ground: they reflect the impossibility of being a morally just ruler. It derives its power from its ambiguity. The resurgence of the 'politics of piety' (used by multiple feminist theorists to explore the rather curious implications of 'political silence') has made it easy to demonstrate that all silences are not negative.²³⁴ But the silence enjoined on its followers by Catholicism is also not an empowering one, albeit its

²³² Recall the humorous episode of the false miracle being discovered and the miscreant and his wife being beaten through town.

²³³ The words 'must have been' deserve extreme suspicion. This is a view advanced by many modern scholars, but this is a good place to quote Philip Schwyzer, who points out the numerous sources available to Shakespeare, apart from the chronicles, Hall, Holinshed, Froissart, or Vergil. 'The sources available to the playwright included popular songs and sayings, major buildings, minor heirlooms, and even ways of navigating the streets of the Bishopsgate neighbourhood where Shakespeare and Richard of Gloucester lived side by side (in space if not in time). The marks left on the dramatic text by this wider panoply of sources are not accessible to modern scholarship (we cannot, by definition, demonstrate Shakespeare's reliance on an otherwise unrecorded oral tradition). (Philip Schwyzer, *Shakespeare and the Remains of Richard III* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.)

²³⁴ A negative silence is one where language does not correspond with the reality of the world anymore (a definition borrowed from Graham Ward's 'Is the daylight forever? language and silence'). If language no longer has any authority, civilisation is likely to perish. 'Politics of Piety' is not a Christian concept; it's an Islamic one. But 'piety' has always had an important role to play in the running of kingdoms - friars, especially, believed in a Christian body politic that could oppose the ruler, if needed. Clerics had access to the most powerful people in the kingdom and that had considerable influence in most European kingdoms.

tremendous significance during the Reformation. It is important for us to meaningfully engage with Henry VI's early silences in the context of his martyrdom.

A 2nd century Roman marble relief of an elderly Trojan warrior from the temple of Aphaia shows some elegantly classical features: the warrior's face is almost expressionless, his full beard is a symbol of his advanced years, his pose is that of thoughtful restraint even as he falls in battle.²³⁵



Fig. 1. "Dying Warrior." Pediment Sculpture from the Temple of Aphaia from about 505–500 BC.

We do not know if the Fallen Warrior is a specific mythological or historical character.²³⁶ From the way he sinks into the ground it looks like he has received a mortal blow to his head. His anonymity is not our concern: it is his clearly Stoic way of accepting death and resisting his opponent that counts. In his calm dignity yet abject defeat he comes very close to the murdered Henry VI. To a Stoic death is an indifferent issue. It is only virtue associated with these events that makes them meaningful. Shakespeare's Henry dies a Stoic warrior's death, certain that his fall would be avenged by the Christlike Henry Tudor and that the battle was not lost. How much Shakespeare owes Henry's depiction to his readings of Marcus Aurelius or Seneca it is impossible to assess. But, as Tillyard says, 'it matters little whence he got the strain, but much more that it should be

²³⁵ This ancient Greek pediment sculpture is interchangeably called Fallen Warrior and Dying Warrior. There is a second dying warrior sculpture from the same temple, and both are at the Glyptothek Museum in Munich.

²³⁶ It is thought to be the Trojan king Laomedon, the father of Priam. He refused to give the Gods Apollo and Poseidon their reward after building the walls of Troy, and later refused to give his divine horses to the hero Heracles for saving his city. Heracles brought back an army, killed Laomedon, and captured his city. But it is impossible to ascertain if this warrior is Laomedon. He has also been interpreted as one of a number of different Greek mythological subjects who suffered a similar fate, particularly Capaneus, the mythical Greek king who was struck down by Zeus after boasting that the supreme god could not prevent him from invading the city of Thebes.

there.²³⁷ In almost all cultures and all points of history (except our own) dying nobly has been understood to be one of the most crucial ways of ensuring salvation for our soul:

What a soul that is which is ready, if at any moment it must be separated from the body, and ready either to be extinguished or dispersed or continue to exist; but so that this readiness comes from a man's own judgment, not from mere obstinacy, as with the Christians, but considerately and with dignity and in a way to persuade another, without tragic show.²³⁸

(Meditations, 11.3)

If we are to believe Aristotle then the noblest deaths were possible only on a battlefield because traditional warfare was a virtuous enterprise. Men who engaged in battle had what Thomas Mann called 'nobility of spirit'.²³⁹ They may not have been noble by birth but they had noble attitudes towards life:

Now death is the most terrible of all things; for it is the end, and nothing is thought to be any longer either good or bad for the dead. But the brave man would not seem to be concerned even with death in all circumstances, e.g., at sea or in disease. In what circumstances then? Surely in the noblest. Now such deaths are those in battle; for these take place in the greatest and noblest danger. And these are correspondingly honoured in city-states and in the courts of monarchs. Properly, then, he will be called brave who is fearless in face of a noble death.²⁴⁰

(Nicomachean Ethics, III, 6:24-33)

Conclusion

Summed up reasonably we may view Henry's noble death as allowing him to transcend his quietly pious individuality and merge into the broader, redemptive *wholeness* of the tetralogy. Shakespeare's age held very high regard for heroic, extraordinary lives: the hero owned tremendous fortunes, made for a gigantic presence on the stage, and demonstrated unique martial valour. The achievements of Bolingbroke, Henry V, and Henry Tudor were dazzling and (in in their own way) humiliating for the majority that

²³⁷ Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, 158.

²³⁸ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (Holland: Dreamscape Media, 2018), 11.3, Perlego.

²³⁹ Thomas Mann's 1945 collection of essays was titled *Nobility of Spirit: Sixteen Essays on the Problem of Humanity*.

²⁴⁰ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thompson from *Briefly: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. David Mills Daniel (London: SCM Press, 2007), Perlego.

could never replicate what they were seeing on stage.²⁴¹ Henry VI's approachability as a saint had given the first impetus to the unformed cult right after his death. Shakespeare's Henry VI is a silent but revolutionary picture with an impact that challenges our assumptions of heroism even now. In fact, every earlier depiction of the royal saint emphasises the enormous merits of his religious life. Blacman and Tudor historians (like Polydore Vergil) write of a life full of extraordinary piety and magnificent visions of angels. His founding of Eton College and Cambridge was constantly celebrated as examples of his dedication to learning.

Shakespeare shows nothing more spectacular than a fatherless leader preyed on by numerous self-seekers. The unimposing monarch reads the scriptures, and attempts to reason with his 'brainsick' counsellors. He trusts fraudsters; the only battle strategy that appeals to him is pacifism. This is a very different picture of kingship – one that takes into account aspects of ruling that can be considered rather troublesome. When the monarch isn't a cruel tyrant like Tamburlaine or Richard III or a Christlike dispenser of divine justice, it becomes necessary to explain to us that the everyday life of the greatest landowner in England consists of perfectly ordinary jobs.²⁴² Prudent statecraft was doomed to be quiet and boring even during the Hundred Years' War. But highlighting this aspect of ruling seems undramatic and defeatist, to say the least. It would have been pitiable for anyone writing for late sixteenth century audiences to stray from a conventional understanding of the proper conduct for a prince. Even from the point of view of contemporary thought, the popular notion of a king (as we have explored throughout the chapter) was that of a mortal god. 'A king is a mortal God on earth, unto whom the living God hath lent his own name as a great honour,' wrote Francis Bacon in his essay 'Of a King'.²⁴³ This ancient notion justified the intense nature of kingly passions, and more importantly made blind obedience a political and religious duty. No

²⁴¹ 'In the elder English dramatists, and mainly in the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher, there is a constant recognition of gentility, as if a noble behavior were as easily marked in the society of their age, as color is in our American population. When any Rodrigo, Pedro, or Valerio enters, though he be a stranger, the duke or governor exclaims, This is a gentleman,—and proffers civilities without end; but all the rest are slag and refuse. In harmony with this delight in personal advantages, there is in their plays a certain heroic cast of character and dialogue...' wrote Emerson in the introduction to his essay Heroism.

²⁴² Christine de Pizan wrote a charming account of the ideal life of monarchs in the early fifteenth century. This account, titled *Livre des faits et bonnes mœurs du sage roy Charles V*, contained a section on the daily life of Charles V. Prayer and listening to supplications occupied his day.

²⁴³ Francis Bacon, "Of a King", *The Works of Francis Bacon Volume 1*, https://en.m.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Works_of_Francis_Bacon/Volume_1/Essays/Of_a_King.

matter the origins of authority, all comprehensive theories of kingship sought to promote obedience and demonise rebellion. Calvin, Luther, and Tyndale insist that armed rebellion was an act against God; the most that could be condoned was flight. Neither Elizabeth nor James I conceded the right to resistance:

As the discourse and direction flowes from the head, and the execution according thereunto belongs to the rest of the members, everyone according to their office: so it is betwixt a wise Prince, and his people. As the judgment coming from the head may not onely imploy the members, every one in their owne office, as long as they are able for it; but likewise in case any of them be affected with any infirmities must care and provide for their remedies, in-case it be curable, and if otherwise, cut them off for feare of inflicting of the rest; even so it is betwixt the Prince and his people. And as there is ever hope of curing any diseased member by the direction of the head as long as it is whole; but by the contrary, if it be troubled, all the members are partakers of the paine, so is it betwixt the Prince and the people.²⁴⁴

James I's views on the unlimited nature of monarchical power reflects the early modern philosophy of government.²⁴⁵ It was acceptable for the king to execute his nobles if he wanted to and courtiers were not to reason why. Preservation of order was dependent on religious theories of obedience. The divine right theory of kings was particularly useful in resolving all the controversies created by legal discourses about possible limitations on a king's power. Shakespeare explores this in *Henry V*, coming to the conclusion that obedience across all degrees of power saves the political world from anarchy:

Exeter: It follows then the cat must stay at home:
Yet that is but a crush'd necessity,
Since we have locks to safeguard necessities,
And pretty traps to catch the petty thieves.
While that the armed hand doth fight abroad,
The advised head defends itself at home;
For government, though high and low and lower,
Put into parts, doth keep in one consent,

²⁴⁴ James I, *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, from *The Workes Of The Most High And Mightie Prince, James, By The Grace Of God, King Of Great Britaine, France And Ireland, Defender Of The Faith, &c* (Maryland: Miscellany Press, 2008). Accessed on Internet Archive.

²⁴⁵ To a large extent the political issues are results of Henry VIII's Reformation. The Act in Restraint of Appeals (1533) established England as an 'empire', and had final jurisdiction over its own church and state. This was the bedrock of sovereignty.

Congreeing in a full and natural close,
Like music.

Canterbury: Therefore doth heaven divide
The state of man in divers functions,
Setting endeavour in continual motion;
To which is fixed, as an aim or butt,
Obedience: for so work the honey-bees,
Creatures that by a rule in nature teach
The act of order to a peopled kingdom.
They have a king and officers of sorts;
Where some, like magistrates, correct at home,
Others, like merchants, venture trade abroad,
Others, like soldiers, armed in their stings,
Make boot upon the summer's velvet buds,
Which pillage they with merry march bring home
To the tent-royal of their emperor.²⁴⁶

On the opposing side, Henry V insists that he 'is a Christian king' while trying to coax the French ambassador into telling him the truth about the Dauphin.

We are no tyrant, but a Christian king;
Unto whose grace our passion is as subject
As are our wretches fetter'd in our prisons:
Therefore with frank and with uncurbed plainness
Tell us the Dauphin's mind.²⁴⁷

But no courtier actually believes obedience is a religious duty, and the chronicles are awash with wars, riots, rebellions, conspiracies, betrayals, coups, terrorism and mass slaughter. There is no Christian reassurance of deliverance for those continually warning others of the horrors of political chaos. *Henry VI* offers people in Elizabethan London sterner political counsel: instead of painfully jumping from hope to despair, it was perhaps better to make oneself at home with political catastrophes because no form of kingship can truly guarantee justice or peace. We sense a natural desire in the monarch to end battles quickly and victoriously. There is an equal longing to give up and hide

²⁴⁶ Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 1.2. 176-199.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 244-248.

from his political identity. Henry VI neither endures nor fights.²⁴⁸ Spiritually and politically, Henry VI commits himself to years of careful strategising to bring about a renewal of a forgotten dream: a land governed by a truly Christian king.

Every dynasty after the Lancastrians searched for effective ways to derive a moral from the mysterious circumstances of Henry's death-story. They had confronted an incontrovertible problem while writing about his political principles: Henry's wise pacifism, however noble, did not work. Like Machiavelli pointed out in *The Prince*, most well-natured princes and statesmen throughout the history of Florence and other Italian states somehow ended up suffering greatly. And this may be why the first tetralogy (exactly like *The Prince*) is 'haunted by examples of the impotence of the pure.'²⁴⁹ This corresponds well with Greenblatt's understanding of the history tales having an element of the cautionary fable.²⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Shakespeare's *Henry VI* opens up a vital space in our understanding by distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary submission to destiny. As we have argued throughout the chapter, Henry's pacifism often seems like an intelligent ruler's free choice based on a practical estimation of pros and cons. Properly evaluated, Henry's constant attempts to avoid war and reconcile feuding factions were examples of active kingship.²⁵¹ There was intellectual pressure on the early modern audience to think of the monarch as a prototype of Christ sitting on the right hand of God (and Henry VII is just such a saviour). Shakespeare's reimagining of Henry VI – shorn of all hagiography – allows us to realise that there is much to venerate in this wise man's political principles if we look more truthfully into the everyday realities of medieval kingship.

²⁴⁸ Recall Margaret's frustrated and bewildered remonstrance to her husband: that he would neither fight nor fly.

²⁴⁹ This is a phrase used by the modern thinker Alain de Botton to describe *The Prince* in his (very serious) essay Machiavelli's Advice for Nice Guys. It can be accessed on <https://www.theschooloflife.com/article/machiavellis-advice-for-nice-guys/>.

²⁵⁰ Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 38.

²⁵¹ We tend to overlook the fact that Henry ruled longer than his father and grandfather. As far as authority is concerned, public authority has to be sought constantly in any age and under any form of government. The accord gave York tremendous authority during Henry's polity, and still Lancastrian loyalists refused to give up on their house. As one of Henry's biographers (John Watts) points out in *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, medieval kingship consisted of listening to counsel and exercising will. Henry was incapable of exercising his will. But ineffective kingship is more difficult to analyse than tyranny; effective kingship depends also on the effectiveness of the ruled.

CHAPTER THREE

'Is God Speaking to Him?'

Henry's Sacred Silences in Pope's *Windsor Forest* and Philippa Gregory's *The Cousins' War*

The theatre critic J. C. Trewin famously wrote that Shakespeare's *Henry VI* trilogy has never been particularly popular either in London or in the suburbs ('the provinces in general never took to Henry VI, any part, any battle') in his 1978 book *Going to Shakespeare*¹. Trewin's assertion is not borne out either by Nashe (who was sure 'ten thousand spectators at least shed tears over Talbot's death')² or by the diary of Philip Henslowe.³ Henslowe owned and ran the Rose Theatre in 1592, the year in which *harej the vi* was acted fifteen times for huge audiences and the play was supposedly revived the next year.⁴ But over the next three centuries the play saw less than fifteen productions and many amongst those were adaptations. Shakespeare scholar Stuart Hampton-Reeves commented on this anomaly in his doctoral thesis on the history of performing Shakespeare's *Henry VI* trilogy: 'In the latter half of the twentieth century, the *Henry VI* plays have been reassessed both in performance and in critical studies: to use a word which has been used a lot in association with the plays, they have been 'rediscovered' by the twentieth century.'⁵ Many of the productions were popular and influential (particularly notable are Sir Barry Jackson's productions, Peter Hall's 1963 *Wars of the Roses*, the 1977 RSC revival of the original plays directed by Terry Hands, the *Henry VI-Richard III* season filmed for the 1983 BBC Shakespeare Series, and the 1987 English Shakespeare Company revival of Hall's and Barton's productions). Far more successful than all of these adaptations was BBC's 2016 TV series *The Hollow Crown* (with

¹ This quote is from Trewin's *Going to Shakespeare* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978), 23.

² Quoted by Michael Hattaway in his introduction to *The First Part of King Henry VI*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 34.

³ Philip Henslowe, *The Diary of Philip Henslowe, from 1591 to 1609*, (London: The Shakespeare Society, 1845). Accessed on https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=gne_jHo3StIC&hl=en&pg=GBS.PR3

⁴ Hattaway, *The First Part of Henry VI*, 36.

⁵ Stuart Hampton-Reeves, 'Henry VI in Performance: History, Culture, and Shakespeare Reproduced', doctoral thesis (The University of Warwick, 1997), 8.

Benedict Cumberbatch as Richard III and Tom Sturridge as Henry VI).⁶ Ralph Fiennes played Henry VI in the 1983 series and Michael Boyd became the first director to cast a black actor (David Oyelowo) to play the title role in RSC's 2000 production of the *Henry VI* trilogy⁷. Yet the 2001 collection of critical essays on Shakespeare's first historical trilogy⁸ (edited by Thomas A. Pendleton) asks questions about authorship, discusses Queen Margaret's role from feminist perspectives, examines Shakespeare's understanding of Joan la Pucelle from feminist perspectives, engages with Shakespeare's depiction of late medieval England, analyses the character of York, and winds up with a short history of *Henry VI* productions for television. In fact, we can ask ourselves if any other Shakespearean hero has gone similarly unnoticed in an anthology of academic works about a play narrating his life. Unfortunately, the twentieth century 'rediscovery' of Shakespeare's earliest plays hasn't instigated much scholarly interest in a role that nevertheless remains very interesting to TV and theater audiences. We can ask why, despite the strong affinities between Henry VI's model of virtuous kingship and Christian theology's renewed interest in practices of silence, scholarly research on the historical Henry VI or his literary representations remains surprisingly rare. Christianity has reshaped and rediscovered several truths about human and divine silence during the last century, returning repeatedly to intersections between silence and *theosis*, Augustine's fascination with speech and memory, the Schwenkfelders' and Quakers' thoughts on silent worship, and God's silence during the crucifixion and Holocaust. In the words of the famous historian Diarmaid McCulloch, "Word has overwhelmed silence."⁹ In the twentieth century, we can safely say that word on silence has also overwhelmed silence. The much-awaited turn that contemporary philosophy has taken by regularly addressing issues common to medieval theology has also become a fresh resource for students of the religious history of silence. Why, then, has no theologian or philosopher thematised the behaviour of the martyred, saintly royal who was silent for years during his reign? One explanation might be that the historical Henry VI has recently

⁶ This was released in the same year as Dan Jones' bestselling *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses and the Rise of the Tudors*, which was a retelling of Shakespeare's first tetralogy, but the show itself is based on Shakespeare's plays.

⁷ Fiachra Gibbons, RSC casts black actor as English king for first time, *The Guardian* 19 Sep 2000. Accessed on <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/sep/19/fiachragibbons>.

⁸ Thomas A. Pendleton, *Henry VI: Critical Essays* (Taylor and Francis, 2013). Kindle.

⁹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (Viking: New York, 2013), 7.

been diagnosed with a range of mental illnesses, schizophrenic catatonia being the most common among them, but this theory holds very little ground because good madness, holy silence, and holy listening have always been dangerously close to demonic possession, communication with the Devil, and witchcraft. We have no explanation for the silence that theologians, philosophers and researchers have preserved on this subject, especially since the downfall of the Third Reich was welcomed with discussion on the silence of those that witnessed the grotesque horrors perpetrated by the Nazis and the silence of the God who allowed the Final Solution to happen.

Henry's inaction during the Wars of the Roses mirrors the silence of Christian scholars and ecclesiastes on the various religious and political upheavals of the past century. The Anglican New Testament scholar Canon John Fenton famously remarked that silence was God's preferred mode of communication. The most obvious characteristic of God is his silence," he said. "He does not cough or mutter or shuffle his feet to reassure us that he is there."¹⁰ Canon W. H. Vanstone saw the Church as "a swimming pool in which all the noise comes from the shallow end."¹¹ These were theologians who came of age during the Holocaust - how were they to defend Jesus' bitter complaints against the Jews in the Gospel of John: "you are of your father the Devil and your will is to do your father's desires (John 8:44)"¹²? Pope Pius XII remained silent during the systematic obliteration of six million Jews, as his predecessor Pope Benedict XV had during the first world war¹³. Themes of silence had been probed by mystics, ascetics, reclusives, and contemplatives over centuries but now it gained a practical urgency it had never had before. Eliezer Berkowitz refused to listen to anything Christian theology had to say about the Holocaust; reacting to the

¹⁰ Quoted by R. Eyre in his obituary in *The Guardian*, 26 Jan 2009. Also quoted by MacCulloch in *Silence*, 224.

¹¹ MacCulloch expresses some doubt over this quotation because Gordon Rupp also called a few ordained Methodist ministers 'a swimming bath where all the noise, the shouting and the splashing is coming from the shallow end'.

¹² The English Standard Version quotes Jesus as saying 'your will is to do your father's desires', while the King James version has Jesus saying 'Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do.' His denunciation of Jews is even more forceful in the Orthodox Jewish version, where he says, 'You are from the *Av* of you, Hasatan, and the *ta'avot* of your *Av* you want to do, for that one was a *rotze'ach* from *Bereshis*, and he has not taken a stand in *HaEmes*, because *HaEmes* is not in him. When he speaks the *sheker* (lie), he speaks naturally, because he is a *shakran* (liar) and the *av* of it.'

¹³ MacCulloch, *Silence*, 211.

starkly anti-Semitic *Passion of the Christ*, Rabbi Michael Lerner said Christianity hadn't tackled anti-Judaism effectively because "doing so requires them to question the historical truth of their own scriptures."¹⁴ Every major French and American publisher rejected Elie Wiesel's pioneering work on his experiences in Birkenau titled '*Night*' - although the manuscript was first written in Yiddish and called '*And the World Remained Silent*'.¹⁵ D. F. Ford quotes George Steiner's *Errata: An Examined Life in 'Apophysis and Shoah: Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz?'*: 'Primarily this (internalizing the torments of the Holocaust) signified coming to terms with the horror of Golgotha, a horror unredeemed - this was Donald's compulsive instinct - by the putative wonder of resurrection or by any promise of celestial reparation.'¹⁶ Steiner is here talking about Donald McKinnon, the Scottish Episcopalian theologian (1913-94), another witness to the horrors of Hitler.

Our earlier experiences of Henry's peculiar behaviour may have predisposed us to view all political silences as a wilful avoidance of historical truths, an evasion of actual fact (akin to Henry's withdrawal, the cult's glossing over his catatonia, and Shakespeare's exclusion of these episodes from his plays). Yet with Alexander Pope's *Windsor Forest* we are taught to recognise the richness and complexities of an edifying silence.¹⁷ Whether or not we believe that Henry was engaged in devotional meditations, it is unintelligent not to treat with seriousness Pope's assertion that peace (and especially Henrician pacifism) can make an Arcadia of a Golgotha while war in any form (military and economic) encourages human cruelty and is capable of meaningless destruction, and it is the bounden duty of theologians to sympathetically decode the patterns of faith Pope presents us with. If Shakespeare's trilogy was a deliberate attempt at a national epic, *Windsor Forest* also speaks to a nation about its boundaries, wars, representations of those wars, historiography, and culture. Victory in war is a convenient way to commemorate earlier heroes, only in *Windsor Forest* (as in real life) heroes frequently

¹⁴ MacCulloch, *Silence*, 208. MacCulloch quotes M.J Salmon, *Preaching Without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 132.

¹⁵ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (Hill & Wang: New York, 1958), 13.

¹⁶ D. F. Ford, 'Apophysis and the Shoah: Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz?', in O. Davies and D. Turner ed. *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 185.

¹⁷ Alexander Pope, 'Windsor Forest', in *The Works of Alexander Pope*, Vol. 1 (London: Bradbury, Evans and Co., 1871), 339. Accessed on www.gutenberg.org.

turn into psychopaths and order dissolves into anarchy. The returns of battle are always transitory - Henry's pacifism and quietude cast a significant shadow over Queen Anne's search for an elusive peace.

We next encounter Henry in Philippa Gregory's compelling trilogy called *The Cousins' War*¹⁸, written roughly three centuries after *Windsor Forest*. As Gregory has made it clear in the books about her process of writing, she is attempting to give a voice to powerful women in the Plantagenet, Lancastrian, and Tudor courts whom historians and authors have sidestepped in favour of their fathers and husbands. The active feminist has repeatedly said (in '*The Women of the Cousins' War*' and multiple interviews) that she is drawn to women with untold stories: "It's not that I keep falling over exceptional women, it's simply that most of the women were exceptional. Normal women lived their lives struggling for power, struggling for survival, and in the course of that, they experience heroic endeavour. It just so happens that their stories aren't very much recorded, or selected by historians. None of the women I write about have legal, or political, rights and very few financial rights, or rights of safety. They are in an extraordinarily oppressive society and, despite this, they still manage to run a household, run a land, run industries, and sometimes run the country."¹⁹

She was even more forthright in her 2017 interview with *The Guardian*. "The more research I do, the more I think there is an untold history of women," she said. "In the medieval world, patriarchy is naked. Nobody pretends to respect women. Women are criticised as sexually uncontrollable or stupid. In our society, you'll sometimes get a remnant of this – you know, when a man wants to help park your car. It is an absolute insult."²⁰ For Gregory's focus on silence alone it is tempting to read *The Cousins' War* alongside the work of various feminist theologians who focus on the silencing of women in Christian history and examine silence as a tool of subjugation, and this is an interesting project in its own right. It will, no doubt, be attempted in time, but our study of her

¹⁸ Philippa Gregory, *The Cousins' War: The Lady of the Rivers, The Red Queen, The White Queen* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

¹⁹ Philippa Gregory, Interview with Hannah Stephenson in *Belfast Telegraph*, August 12, 2017. Accessed <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/life/features/its-not-that-i-keep-falling-over-exceptional-women-its-that-most-of-the-women-were-exceptional-36013157.html>

²⁰ Gregory, Interview with Kete Kellaway in *The Guardian*, July 28, 2013. Accessed on <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/28/philippa-gregory-unearthing-history-s-forgotten-women>

bestselling trilogy is coloured by her memories of a darker, more dangerous past. Gregory's parents met in uniform near an air force base when Hitler invaded Poland. Her father joined the RAF. *The Cousins' War* is also about how individual lives are shaped by national events, and she admits this is her favourite way of looking at history.²¹ "Geographically they had been apart, socially they were incredibly apart. If Hitler hadn't invaded Poland, they would never have met or married and I would never have been born," she told the noted theatre critic Kate Kellaway.²² Perhaps it is no accident that the trilogy is as much a long meditation on death, sorrow (as distinct from 'grief'), and suffering as it is about love and longing. Love, sorrow, ambition, and devotion are all different forms of madness in *The Cousins' War*, one of the first major works of fiction to confront Henry VI's 'insanity'.

With such long gaps in our chronology (*Windsor Forest* was published in 1813, two centuries after Shakespeare's trilogy was staged; Gregory wrote *The Cousins' War* in 2009), our picture of Henry may not seem completely in focus, especially since we are looking to draw together two works that appear to be completely unrelated to each other and even less relevant to mysticism and modern European philosophy. But because both work around themes that have already found expression in Shakespeare, readers can savour in both works the reappearance of earlier images drawn from literature inspired by the cult: Pope's haunting image of a martyr's grave, his skilful etching of a space that is both Eden and a graveyard, Gregory's reimagination of Henry's death and 'insanity', and in both the picture of a nation and a people forsaken by God.

Henry's 'sleep' in *The Cousins' War*, this discussion proposes, is a true mystical encounter that stands beyond the reaches of ordinary human language and understanding. With references to Kierkegaard's reading of the horrifying sacrifice in the *Akedah*²³ (Genesis 22:9 / Bereshis 22) in *Fear and Trembling*, the chapter highlights how Gregory opens us up to the darkness inherent in the theory of a silent divinity (a relatively under-examined tradition in Christian theology). Thinking alongside Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and the Spanish Carmelites (St Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross), Henry VI's

²¹ Gregory, Interview with *Guardian*.

²² Ibid.

²³ 2 Chronicles 3-1 refers to Mount Moriah as the site for Solomon's temple as well while Psalms 24:3; Isaiah 2:3 & 30:29; and Zechariah 8:3 use the term "the mount of the LORD".

theological status as a silent sufferer and a practising mystic is also examined. The central contention of this chapter is that Henry's mystical silence - often interpreted in wholly negative terms - is not a space of conflict or confusion. It is an affirmation of the inalienable right of every individual to be in secrecy and in silence before God, and as such, can be read as a subversion of the brutalising effects of war. Gregory's treatment of Henry's silence is far from an acknowledgement of 'Godforsakenness'²⁴ or the death of God²⁵ - Henry is a manifestation of inner peace within a world of unbelievable human cruelty. His wordless presence is what allows the survivors of the Wars (and the reader) to begin their own meditations on their personal experiences of abject grief. This interiorised healing space is the beginning of a dissolution of the boundaries between self and other, ultimately allowing all restless selves to discover sanctuary in God's infinite grace.

By the time Alexander Pope resurrected Henry VI in '*Windsor Forest*', the ordinary Englishman must have forgotten all about him. The cult of Henry VI (which flourished around the king's palace in Windsor) had all but disappeared during the early eighteenth century. Still, prayers and hymns to Henry might have lingered on in Windsor chapels, and it is possible that Pope grew up listening to fascinating anecdotes about Windsor's favourite 'saint.' Storytelling was one of the most important parts of kingmaking during the Tudor period. Henry VII, Henry VIII, and Elizabeth I had to negotiate strategies to manipulate their identities as leaders of the nation because Henry VII was not a genuine successor of Henry VI.²⁶ Although Henry Tudor's attempts to divinise his great uncle had no lasting political impact, over the course of one hundred and fifty years, Henry VI's personality and kingship became a complex discourse mainly due to Polydore Vergil's history of England. The poem itself is oddly reminiscent of

²⁴ 'Godforsakenness' is a theological concept borrowed from the celebrated Christian theologian Simon D. Podmore, who first refers to it in 'My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me: Between Consolation and Desolation', an essay on *Fear and Trembling*.

²⁵ A strand of Christian theology which hovers around the possibility of God having ceased to matter in a post-Secularist world. Some of the influential writers belonging to this school of thought are Nietzsche, Blake, Schelling, Rubenstein and Slavoj Žižek.

²⁶ The Beaufort line had been banned from inheriting the throne by John of Gaunt.

Henry's devotion to pacifism, written as it was to celebrate the Peace Treaty of 1713.²⁷ It is not an encomium of Henry VI, because he was far too distant a figure for eighteenth century readers. Nor does any other martyr king suit Pope's purpose. Edward the Confessor and Edward II were even more ancient; Charles I was still a deeply divisive subject. Yet the fact that Henry's martyrdom seems to consecrate the groves and shades of the forest is remarkable; it allows the reader to think of the forgotten dim-witted king as an admirable though somewhat flawed figure. Pope's imaginative reconstruction of Henry VI is not unlike Shakespeare's: a Lancastrian royal (almost sainted) martyr who had ruled England and France two centuries ago suits Pope's purpose perfectly.

I seem thro' consecrated Walks to rove,
And hear soft Musick dye along the Grove;
Led by the Sound I roam from Shade to Shade,
By God-like Poets Venerable made:
... Oh wou'dst thou sing what Heroes *Windsor* bore,
What Kings first breath'd upon her winding Shore,

Or raise old Warriors whose ador'd Remains
In weeping Vaults her hallow'd Earth contains!
Let softer Strains Ill-fated *Henry* mourn,
And Palms Eternal flourish round his Urn.
Here o'er the Martyr-King the Marble weeps,
And fast beside him, once-fear'd *Edward* sleeps:
Whom not th' extended *Albion* could contain,
From old *Belerium* to the *German* Main,
The Grave unites; where ev'n the Great find Rest,
And blended lie th' Oppressor and th' Opprest!²⁸

It is not difficult to understand why Pope's sympathies ostensibly lie in favour of the 'opprest.' Pope was brought up by a devout Catholic household near Windsor.²⁹ However, to fully understand the political context of this panegyric we have to turn to another representative of 'peace', Queen Anne. The peace treaty of Utrecht was not very dissimilar to the peace Henry VI sought with France. The Utrecht Treaty was a Tory achievement, negotiated behind the backs of the Whigs (who wanted a military victory instead). Pope was ostentatiously beyond political strife, and certainly above the Whig

²⁷ Juan Christian Pellicer, "'Corkscrew or Cathedral? The Politics of Alexander Pope's *Windsor-Forest* and the Dynamics of Literary Kind'", *Huntington Library Quarterly* Vol. 71, No. 3 (September 2008), 456. doi:10.1525/hlq.2008.71.3.453.

²⁸ Pope, *Windsor Forest*, 356.

²⁹ Leslie Stephen, *Alexander Pope* (Frankfurt: Outlook, 2020), 4.

vs Tory situation, but he did lean towards Tory humanism³⁰. What does this have to do with a three hundred-year-old civil war and the monarch who caused it? Both connect the ancient theme of the most effective method of exercising authority over subjects. Peace is a spectacular political achievement in *Windsor Forest*. Britain had ceded territory for a monopoly of the slave routes in the West Indies and parts of the New World.³¹ This eventually translated to vast profits which in turn gave an impetus to the glorious Industrial Revolution. The treaty settled all previous discord with France and withdrew Britain's participation in the War for the Spanish Succession. Peace is better than military victory – this is the claim that Pope makes while confronting several grave lessons from English history.

Windsor is marked by death, loss, and the longing to experience a better world. Because the forest itself is equated with a sense of loss, Pope not only places death and dying at the centre of history, he also seems to suggest that nostalgia for a lost Golden Age is futile because the past has been checkered with war and extensive damage. Valour and heroism are exposed as hollow, empty ideals that vanish once the hero himself is laid to rest in weeping vaults. Like he is in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Henry VI is again a ghost among the living. Like Henry himself, Pope is profoundly uncomfortable with the idea of military justice, and, at times, with the idea of monarchical rule:

A dreary desart and a gloomy waste,
To savage beasts and savage laws a prey,
And kings more furious and severe than they;
Who claim'd the skies, dispeopled air and floods,
The lonely lords of empty wilds and woods:
Cities laid waste, they storm'd the dens and caves,
(For wiser brutes were backward to be slaves)
What could be free, when lawless beasts obey'd,
And ev'n the elements a Tyrant sway'd? ...
Th' Oppressor rul'd tyrannic where he durst,
Stretch'd o'er the Poor and Church his iron rod,
And serv'd alike his Vassals and his God.
Whom ev'n the Saxon spar'd, and bloody Dane,
The wanton victims of his sport remain.³²

³⁰ Howard Erskine-Hill, 'Alexander Pope: The Political Poet in His Time' in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* Vol. 15, No. 2 (Winter, 1981-1982), 125.

³¹ Erskine-Hill, *Alexander Pope*, 126.

³² Pope, *Windsor Forest*, 342.

This narrative continually recalls the ill-fated king murdered for his absolute dedication to bloodless settlement of diplomatic disputes. His afflictions continue to mock the Whigs' uncompromising insistence on going to battle:

When Albion sends her eager sons to war,
Some thoughtless Town, with ease and plenty blest,
Near, and more near, the closing lines invest;
Sudden they seize th' amaz'd, defenceless prize,
And high in air Britannia's standard flies.³³

An interesting element is the setting of the forest, which unsettles accepted notions of virtuous leadership, and towards which the grief of loss is directed. Windsor Castle is where Henry of Windsor was born; Windsor Forest is where he trained for battle. Images of a young Henry are summoned by the poignant image of Pope strolling through the green glades. Following memories of this pious prince is the more recent martyr Charles I, who was executed in 1649 and already had six dedicated churches in England. Many histories of many martyrdoms come home to Pope in the hallowed groves of the Forest.

Make sacred Charles's tomb for ever known,
(Obscure the place, and uninscrib'd the stone)
Oh fact accurst! what tears has Albion shed,
Heav'ns, what new wounds! and how her old have bled?
She saw her sons with purple deaths expire,
Her sacred domes involv'd in rolling fire,
A dreadful series of intestine wars,
Inglorious triumphs, and dishonest scars.³⁴

Windsor Forest is not about the impossibility of virtuous kingship in the way that Shakespeare's Henry VI trilogy is, but Pope's martyr kings also engage in a dialogue about bloodshed and blood libel, and are in a constant search for peace (which his editor Rev. Whitwell Elwin finds can be quite exaggerated).³⁵

At length great ANNA said — "Let discord cease!"
She said, the world obey'd, and all was Peace!³⁶

³³ Ibid., 347.

³⁴ Pope, *Windsor Forest*, 354.

³⁵ Ibid., 320.

³⁶ Ibid., 361.

‘Pope did not stop with applauding the Peace; he denounced the Revolution,’ writes Elwin. ‘A young and sanguine poet may well have shared a conviction in which both sides concurred,—the ministerialists by their hopes, and the opposition by their fears. No sooner was the treaty concluded than it became apparent that the hopes and fears were exaggerated. The ministry was torn to pieces by intestine divisions; its supporters—a heterogeneous body, who had been loosely held together by a common enmity—were rapidly throwing off their allegiance; the good will, which had been founded upon large and vague expectations, was converted into hostility under total disappointment; and the failing health of the Queen rendered it probable that the accession of a whig sovereign would shortly complete the discomfiture of the faction. After the conclusion of the Peace, says Bolingbroke, "we saw nothing but increase of mortification, and nearer approaches to ruin".’³⁷ This is uncomfortably similar to the peace Warwick concluded on behalf of Henry and brought England to brink of devastation.

Recollections of past wars and disappointments override the tide of optimism the closing lines generate. Henry VI’s history is only one of the numerous stories that Windsor forest contains. There are many others - Pope begins his account with William the Conqueror. The forest, tranquil in its autumnal beauty, is at first a gentle reminder of forgotten stories. It represents a horrific past that cannot be forgiven, replete with the harrowing tales of murdered monarchs and innocent soldiers sent to their deaths by cunning politicians. And then it gradually becomes a site of desperate hope.

Thy trees, fair Windsor! now shall leave their woods,
And half thy forests rush into thy floods,
Bear Britain's thunder, and her Cross display,
To the bright regions of the rising day;
...The time shall come, when free as seas or wind
Unbounded Thames shall flow for all mankind,
Whole nations enter with each swelling tide,
And seas but join the regions they divide...³⁸

It is uncertain if this will ever come to pass, but the forest is invested with a sense of retrieval of what was lost (yet it is clear that there is nothing of value to be gained from

³⁷ Elwin, Notes to Windsor Forest, 326.

³⁸ Ibid., 364.

history). If it is, indeed, the martyrs' blood that England has lost, it can only be depicted as the ghost of a peace-loving king whose oppressed soul has been buried near its oppressor. The forest that Pope walks in is described in lofty terms: it is at once the muses' and monarchs' seat, a 'green retreat' where sylvan maids unlock their springs. But Pope also 'harmoniously confuses'³⁹ the chaotic (past) and the orderly (future), so this space is always in a state of becoming:

As some coy nymph her lover's warm address
Nor quite indulges, nor can quite repress.⁴⁰

This, perhaps, is because Pope refuses to reduce centuries of complex political events to one meaningless platitude - that peace is preferable to war. Earl Wasserman's famous analysis of *Windsor Forest* claims that the poem is consistently Jacobite in its political orientation, and Felicity Rosslyn argues that it is not even a poem in the strictest sense of the term - it is merely a collection of historical facts.⁴¹ This is not surprising. *Windsor Forest* is a pastoral, panegyric, and prophecy written over ten years, and perhaps more. Pope's own accounts of the composition of the poem are inconsistent and often contradictory, so there is almost no evidence of when he actually wrote the poem.⁴² The most influential assessments of the poem address its unstable format, question Pope's political purpose behind dedicating it to Lord Granville (a wealthy politician and Pope's friend), or search for some kind of moral/ethical pattern in its 'harmonious confusion'. And *Windsor Forest* is sophisticated enough to yield no easy answer, not least because his vision sweeps us from the times of the Norman conquest to Queen Anne's reign but it does provoke us to inquire whether there is a lesson to be learnt from the loss and longing, or if the ghosts the forest conjures up are ends in themselves. This is very different from Shakespeare's imagination (where Henry VI denounces his murderer as he dies and his ghost prophesies Richard's downfall). Pope's Henry VI is a celebrated martyr: his urn is lined with flourishing palms. This is standard Catholic symbolism: palm fronds symbolise the victory of spirit over flesh, and pictures of palm leaves on graves signify that a martyr is buried there. Yet his murderer, the 'once-feared Edward'

³⁹ Pellican, *Corkscrew or Cathedral*, 462.

⁴⁰ Pope, *Windsor Forest*, 363.

⁴¹ Felicity Rosslyn, *Alexander Pope: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 56.

⁴² Pellican, *Corkscrew or Cathedral*, 471.

sleeps beside him. The grave unites martyr and murderer - this does not seem to suggest any divine punishment for warmongers. It is strangely inconsistent with the optimism he expresses a few lines later.

The shady empire shall retain no trace
Of war or blood, but in the sylvan chace;
The trumpet sleep, while chearful horns are blown,
And arms employ'd on birds and beasts alone.
Behold! th' ascending Villa's on my side,
Project long shadows o'er the crystal tide.
Behold! Augusta's glitt'ring spires increase,
And temples rise, the beauteous works of Peace.⁴³

Henry VI would gladly extol Pope's vision of Godly Peace. Yet events and images from the past continuously interrupt Pope's Arcadian ecstasies. *Windsor Forest* is ultimately torn between this longing for quiet amity and the realisation of its sheer improbability. Perhaps it is heartening to discover that Henry's death-story has new relevance under Stuart rule, and that in both Shakespeare and Pope, aggressive war is a result of weak administrative decisions: 'It was a commonplace of sixteenth century Realpolitik that an aggressive war was a reliable way to rally an uncertain and divisive state around a fresh young prince. The returns of engagement are questionable and transitory, though, for the act of engagement is also an intense moment of scrutiny. The nation's identity, made conscious, is also brought forth, revealed, put on show and contrasted with the actual, very anti-social horrors of the battlefield. On the battlefield, the body - the sacrosanct metaphor of western society - is mutilated, destroyed, its identity broken and discarded, its normal right to burial and remembrance put in severe jeopardy. So, the moment of extreme representation provokes a counter reaction, an inspection of that identity, made possible by the grim realities of the battlefield, the personal losses, the mechanisation and depersonalisation of the human body, and the disruption of normal social order.'

It is truly impossible to build national identity by putting innocent subjects' lives in peril and dismantling the very fabric of social order. Pope shares this anxiety with Shakespeare; their idylls are in constant peril of being rudely destroyed. Henry Richmond is equated to Christ because he does not only defeat the enemy, he restores peace in England after five decades of internecine strife. The golden age begins with Queen Anne

⁴³ Pope, *Windsor Forest*, 367.

for Pope, ‘whose poetic association with Diana also evokes her avowed model Elizabeth.’⁴⁴ Anne herself traced her descent back to Henry VII (the happy prince / Of Tudor’s Race), so Pope’s choice of Henry VI may have been a political one as well. Henry VI’s remarkable pacifism therefore anticipates the divine revenge of Henry VII, the golden age of Elizabeth and the peaceful reign of Queen Anne. It may not, in fact, be overstating our case to say that Henry’s martyrdom inaugurated a race of quasi-divine monarchs to whom peace is essential to political order. This method (and strategy) of sharing in the aura of divinity through emulation and worship of the king is quite distinctive. And, as Pellicer writes, ‘Given that anyone, regardless of dynastic loyalties, might safely predict that Britain’s economic ascent would continue under the Hanoverians, Pope invites posterity to consider this enduring prosperity a legacy of the last Stuart reign. A shrewder tribute to Anne and her ministers seems hard to imagine.’⁴⁵

‘Pope accomplishes this political balancing act by cultivating paradox as a figure of inclusiveness throughout the poem,’ he adds⁴⁶. And although the sharp dichotomy between the active and contemplative lives is a theme present in Henry’s hagiography and the trilogy, Pope’s usage of the trope is particularly successful:

Happy the Man who to the Shades retires,
But double happy, if the Muse inspires!
Blest whom the Sweets of home-felt Quiet please,
But far more blest who Study joins with Ease!⁴⁷

This must be a deliberate recycling of Shakespeare’s molehill speech but Pope revises this 1712 version in the published poem:

Happy the man whom this bright Court approves,
His Sov’reign favours, and his Country loves:
Happy next him, who to these shades retires,
Whom Nature charms, and whom the Muse inspires:
Whom humbler joys of home-felt quiet please,
Successive study, exercise, and ease.
He gathers health from herbs the forest yields,
And of their fragrant physic spoils the fields:

⁴⁴ Pellicer, *Corkscrew or Cathedral*, 472.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 474.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 474.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 474.

...Of ancient writ unlocks the learned store,
Consults the dead, and lives past ages o'er:
Or wand'ring thoughtful in the silent wood,
Attends the duties of the wise and good...⁴⁸

Pellicer suggests he might be imitating the *Georgics*, because the revision sharpens the dichotomy between the court and the country. They are complementary alternatives, and neither is necessarily preferable to the other, but it is the “second best” alternative that receives a longer and a more thorough exploration from Pope. The end result is actually very different from the *Georgics*:

‘What Pope realised on revising his own passage, however, is that Virgil’s juxtaposition insists on the distinctiveness of each alternative. In the 1712 manuscript version of lines 241-58, Pope’s retired philosopher-poet watches his “Kindred Stars” in the skies, “And looks on Heav’n with more than Mortal Eyes” (240-41). Virgil, by contrast, sharply distinguishes between the ambition of the Lucretian philosopher-poet and the inglorious life of the pious countryman. The distinct alternatives are poised in mutual tension.’⁴⁹ He goes on to compare Pope’s active courtier with Granville and the retired philosopher with Trumbull, and because Pope suspends all political stereotyping, there is no tension between the life active and the life contemplative, because Pope selects Scipio as the best example of a life spent in the pursuit of both military glory and quiet tranquility.⁵⁰

Yet Henry VI’s ghost lingers in this narrative tension so cleverly sustained by Pope. He was a king meant for the cloister, and a possible model for a life balancing politics and piety. ‘Handily’ (as Pellicer puts it), the only monarchs buried in St George’s Chapel were Henry VI, Edward IV, Henry VIII, and Charles I, and both Henry VI and Charles I were very famous political saints. Pellicer does not focus on Tudor references in *Windsor Forest*, but he does point out Henry VI’s importance in the pattern Pope imposes on British history (he refers to the ‘Henry VI-Edward IV’ duo as the ‘most mordant version of *discordia concors*’⁵¹). One of the “new Wounds” Albion has endured

⁴⁸ Pope, *Windsor Forest*, 354-355.

⁴⁹ Pellicer, *Corkscrew or Cathedral*, 476.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 477-478.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 477.

is Henry VI's martyrdom: 'While the Twickenham editors cite Denham's *The Destruction of Troy* ('you make our old wounds bleed anew'⁵²), one may also think of the dead Henry VI's wounds in *Richard III*, which are said to "Open their congeal'd mouths and bleed afresh" in the presence of his murderer (I.II.56).'⁵³ Henry's death-story shapeshifts because his ghost emanates from and corresponds with very specific cultural/political fears and anxieties, which is why Shakespeare's representation of his ghost prophesied Henry VII's revenge, clamouring for redress, while Pope's Henry VI creates political tension simply by lying next to his oppressor. Shakespeare's Henry VI bled in front of his murderer; Pope's 'Martyr-King' is blessed by eternal palms flourishing around his urn. This early eighteenth century memory haunts the edges of Windsor Forest (at once a grave and a green retreat), his relationship with his oppressor rendered meaningless by death unless his murder is sinful and innocent at the same time. Henry VI's ghost, therefore, is far from obsolescence. Pope transforms it into a very handy vessel of collective terrors and fantasies. Despite being on the periphery and constantly marginalised, the king is never actually silent. He insists on voicing his dangerous ideals and does keep speaking even when it is clearly better for him to be silent.⁵⁴ This representation collides with reality because Henry had fallen silent for over two years after the second battle of Albans. If Pope's technique of confusion is harmonious, Shakespeare's is enriching: the paradox is that we only see how mistaken and immoral these real characters are in fiction. Henry's wise perspectivism allows us to share his lofty, saintlike position from where mortals can be judged. Thus the trilogy seems to be both a critique of the silence imposed on Shakespeare as well as a defense of it; a criticism of the political forces shaping authorial voices, and a celebration of the clever methods playwrights had of escaping these restraints. In *Richard III*, Shakespeare leaves Henry's ideals behind, but he cannot leave behind the shadow of Henry's presence as the evil ruler destroys his country. Trailing behind is the weary, muddy war, silent in its omnipresence. The quietude at the heart of this narrative helps this extraordinary picture of a tired anarchy. At this point, Henry's exhortations to peace seem so perfectly contrasted with Richard's vileness that it would be irrelevant for us if a historian were to

⁵² This reference strikes a completely new sacral/supernatural note unlike anything in Denham and Pope, it has to be noted, avoids direct mention of sacrilegious blood-spilling.

⁵³ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. Project Shakespeare by Gutenberg. Accessed at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1103>

⁵⁴ Shakespeare, *Henry VI*, parts 1-2, ed. Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

state that Henry was suffering from a severe bout of catatonia that rendered him unable to speak. Despite the miraculous tales in the literature produced by the cult, tracing Henry's footsteps across British literature is a grim exercise - an exploration of war melded with unyielding faith and the resultant trauma.

Over and over again, we find Henry in the woods (be it his explorations in the gardens adjacent to the monastery where he was hidden during the reign of Edward IV, or the clearing near the St Albans battlefield, or the Windsor Forest itself) seeking God, and finding horror instead. The nation is constantly threatened by being left without a legitimate monarch: on the eve of the publication of the poem Queen Anne had been left heirless after seventeen pregnancies, and she was already too ill to be pregnant once again. After her death, Stuart rule was over, and Hanoverians succeeded to the British throne. It would be reductive to suggest that the nation's social and political anxieties are reflected in Henry's trauma, and that's how this extraordinary character finds a reusability among clerics, authors, and historians. But we do find an image of a man trying to overcome his political shortcomings with piety. War haunts the edges of all these narratives, and in worlds where characters do not interact without the pretext of violence, his presence is the only whiff of interiority such stories require. *Windsor Forest* tries to explain why Henry's narrative always comes clothed in Catholic fervour. Pope would explore standard Christian themes lifelong⁵⁵, but his later works were more intensely personal, and bound up with his own awareness of his sin and his longing for redemption. In *Windsor Forest* the possibility of peace overwhelms him. Shortly after, Pope had to rush to appease injured Whig parties. But however pacific our monarchs are, sometimes their search for salvation sends them to an early grave, where they lie blended with their oppressor. No matter how pious the king or pacific his intentions, his end result is to lie blended with his murderer in an untimely grave.

'Touch not the Lord's Anointed' - The Desacralisation of Monarchy in the Seventeenth Century

Discussions of how the concept of sacral kingship evolved and influenced depictions of Henry VI are bound to be open-ended theoretical considerations, but the link between monarchy and religion is an enduring one. The British monarch is still 'Defender of the Faith', and the accession of Charles III hasn't changed that. A number of modern

⁵⁵ Rosslyn, *Pope*, 116.

sociologists and historians have explored the desacralisation of modern European monarchy, marking the French Revolution as the watershed event that set forth ‘the transition of monarchy as a divine investiture to a monarchy legitimized by the nation.’⁵⁶ Needless to say, divinity never was a key element in the legitimisation of a monarch anywhere in Europe. It could bolster a candidate’s chances of success, but never ensure it (unlike a well-fought war or a hard-won business deal with another nation). Additionally, it endures because kings and kingmakers have found it a peculiarly malleable theory. For example, Wyclif believed that the ideal king served God by administering the laws of the realm but theorists in favour of divine right would argue that the monarch embodied law, and, as such, what he did and said *was* law.⁵⁷ The office of the king was political and sacerdotal, but primarily sacerdotal. In spite of this, medieval and renaissance mirrors for princes laid down strict boundaries for the kind of power a king had. The cessation of intradynastic rivalries may have improved the ways in which modern monarchies function, but so many monarchies have simply disappeared due to colonialism, wars, or internal political pressures. ‘Yet it continues to persist, forming a focus for popular culture, nationalism and tourism,’ writes Elena Woodacre in her exceptional introduction to Routledge’s history of monarchies. ‘The majority of today’s sovereigns are constitutional monarchs who reign instead of rule - the abrupt or gradual loss of their power and prerogatives has been a central development of monarchy into the modern era. But those monarchies which remain have endured or emerged, it could be argued, because modern monarchy is about much more than the ruler themselves. Monarchy is a system, a societal mechanism, where a ruler can be more than a father or a figurehead - they can become the face of the nation, or even of an age as the British queens Elizabeth I and Victoria have demonstrated.’⁵⁸

Kantorowicz’s idea, therefore, is still relevant; we still can discuss how much modern monarchy owes to the cult of personality and the office of the king. Woodacre asserts that monarchy must strike a balance to survive: ‘Monarchy must strike a delicate balance between continuity and change, preserving the traditions which underpin the

⁵⁶ Elena Woodacre, Lucinda H.S. Dean, Chris Jones, Zita Rohr, Russell Martin, *The Routledge History of Monarchy* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2019). Kindle.

⁵⁷ Sir William Searle Holdsworth, *A History of English Law, Volume 2* (London: Methuen, 1909), 109. Accessed on Perlego.

⁵⁸ Woodacre, *History of Monarchy*, Perlego.

framework while adapting to stay in step with modern society and meet the expectations of their subjects as to what appropriate behaviour for today's ruler should be.⁵⁹ Perhaps this initial shift may begin to explain why twentieth century versions of Henry VI are at odds with his model of rulership. Monarchical power has continued its search for legitimacy in the face of continual socio-political change, and the face of this search, too, has evolved. The modern face of medieval kingship has had to reformat itself:

‘The intellectual framework in which medieval and Early Modern Europeans considered models of secular rule, monarchical or otherwise, was not a promising one. It was, in essence, a key legacy of the Early Church Fathers, a loose grouping of Christian intellectuals who succeeded to the leadership of the Christian community after the death of Christ's first followers. In its earliest days, there had been a sense of ‘immediacy’ to Christianity: Christ's return, and the subsequent end of the world, were imminent. Consequently, the Fathers did not devote a lot of time to worldly politics. Early Christians came to two basic views of government: government was simply a punishment from God, or, at best, it might have some small, remedial value in that it enabled the spread of the Christian message by maintaining peace... An intrinsic tension governed the relationship between society, and the Western church in particular, and the rulers who emerged in the polities that replaced the Roman empires across the west. Yet a point of agreement was that if worldly government was a necessity, the best form for that government was monarchy.’⁶⁰

The medieval church tried to diminish the sacerdotal function of monarchies, but could not replace the act of consecration itself. The power it had received from Constantine -- to be consecrated as a vessel of God's grace -- could not be lessened even in it being redelegated to leaders who considered themselves to be no more than servants of the Pope. Even as Protestant apologists strove to separate the concepts of ‘consecration’ from ‘empowerment’, the cult of royalty still held much sway over people. Bloch refers to James I being uncomfortable with the idea of possessing healing powers, but regarding himself as a man sent by God to protect England. Charles I's unnecessary squandering of the opportunities he got and introduction of court masses convinced his parliament that he had fully ‘apostasized’. This jousting between the divine rights

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

apologists and Protestants pushed forward the idea that consecrated or not, a monarch was supposed to be “a godly man, a holy man, a righteous man...” Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist and the apostle Stephen were examples ‘the good monarch’ should follow.⁶¹ This idea was not wholly original -- the Biblical concept of the ‘wise king’ was a popular Ottonian/Carolingian model of leadership⁶², although it was a late medieval staple and very useful to new dynasties trying to establish themselves.⁶³ It was a remarkably prescient guess at what would truly legitimise uncertainly positioned dynasties. It’s not impossible for the idea to have originated in the Bible (which Cecilia Gaposchkin called the first *Mirrors for Princes*) but it took fruit in ‘the atmosphere fostered by the Twelfth Century Renaissance.’⁶⁴ That a king should be an advocate for learning had been a hallmark of medieval and early modern kingship. Henry VI’s fondness for education and his lifelong support for Cambridge and Eton may not have been purely coincidental. Yet it was not unheard of for patrons of knowledge to stray from the righteous path and become most ungodly (like Solomon, the Bible’s most famous example of the wise king who rejected God and turned to magic).⁶⁵ That’s why Shakespeare introduces the king as a pious, wise youth, seeming at first to be the weakest link, until we realise that his ethical problems are the spiritual and philosophical heart of the trilogy. The wisdom that comes from him sets the foundation for a notable legacy that is passed on to Henry VII and Elizabeth. But there is no question that Shakespeare’s Henry also wavers - he loses his mind on the molehill beside the battlefield.

Thea Mania

There is no quarrel between piety and madness, and *thea mania* is a popular Christian concept⁶⁶: ‘Christianity nurtures in its heart a moment of irreducible ‘madness’ - polarised according to modern rationalism as unintegrated ‘unreason’. Pastoral concern

⁶¹ Woodacre, *History of Monarchy*. Perlego.

⁶² Manuel Alejandro Rodríguez de la Peña, “Royal literacy and political theology in medieval western Europe (c.1000–1200)” in *History of Monarchy*, ed. Woodacre, 16.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Israel Finkelstein, Neil Asher Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of The Western Tradition* (Israel: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 7.

⁶⁶ In Foucault’s understanding of the crucifixion, Christ himself taken upon ‘the very nature of madness’, sanctifies even blasphemous madness, and makes it an object of respect and passion, and in that sense all mania is *thea mania*.

with mental health does therefore occupy a privileged position within Christianity, particularly in reflection of Jesus' own ministry towards the sick, but also, and perhaps more scandalously, because Christianity itself holds, in tension, a moment of divine madness within its cruciform centre: namely the madness of the cross, the scandal of the incarnation, the unreason of God become human, which Søren Kierkegaard identifies as the irreducible *paradox*, the *offence to reason* of the incarnation.⁶⁷ In Foucault's vision of the incarnation, Christ takes upon himself 'the very stigmata of fallen nature ... and of madness.'⁶⁸ Christ's madness therefore serves to *sanctify* blasphemous madness, as well as the profanity of death itself - the sanctification of non-being within being. Foucault's description still resonates as a challenge to Christianity 'because it was one of the forms of the Passion - the ultimate form, in a sense, before death - madness would now become, for those who suffered it, an object of respect and compassion'.⁶⁹

However, as we examined in the first chapter, good madness is made manifest in torture, suffering, and humiliation - not the Nebuchadnezzar-like beastliness that we also encounter in the scriptures.⁷⁰ But even divine madness can be profoundly problematic, as Paul complained about in his epistles: 'if the entire church comes together and all speak in tongues, and if strangers or unbelievers should enter, will they not say that you are in a frenzy?' (1 Corinthians: 14-23) And if this madness (however divine) exists in an office that embodies law and justice, how is the state to function? Needless to say, there is no easy answer to this question. The legal procedures to limit the powers of a mad king like Ivan the Terrible or George III are clear⁷¹, but when the manner of unreason is undefined (like Henry's silence or Rudolf II's alternating bouts of enthusiasm and melancholy), is a Protectorate necessary? What we can only know is that Henry's condition is not irredeemable because of the severe humiliation he undergoes. In fact, his failure and despair are validated by his abject Christological suffering. In Simon

⁶⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Different Spirits*, quoted by Simon D. Podmore in "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Between Consolation and Desolation" in *Spirituality, Theology and Mental Health*, ed. Christopher C. H. Cook (London: SCM Press, 2013). Accessed on Perlego.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ M. H. Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

⁷¹ Jeremy Black, *George III: Madness and Majesty* (London: Penguin, 2020).

Podmore's words, 'In the madness of the cross, however, it is abasement rather than inspiration that is made manifest - the abyss of despair itself is recognized, shared, and made sacred. In this most degraded form, it is not the effusive ecstatic spirit of mania or frenzy, but the gloomy spirit of *melancholia* (depression) or even *desperatio* (despair), that is sanctified.'⁷²

Minus suffering, mere silence is too ineffable to make any theological meaning. It is entirely possible for this silence to be used in fiction as a sympathetic human space to create political meaning like Shakespeare does in the trilogy. Henry's wisdom might suggest that such a juxtaposition -- of meaning and meaninglessness -- can coexist in the same character and generate a compelling tension. Other writers hover round this territory. While hagiographers gloss over his catatonia to focus on his deposition, fifteenth century biographers reduce his silence to 'foolishness' (there is in Christian theology a rich tradition of holy fools) although he was famous for being extremely well-versed in the scriptures. In fiction, as in historiography and theology, the boundaries between silence, suffering, insanity (good and bad), and divinity are blurred. This is not to mean that there is little separating the sufferings of Job from the sufferings of Nebuchadnezzar⁷³: the two conditions are different but inextricably linked. But to stories of Nebuchadnezzar's insanity is added the grace of royal power, the tragedy of losing God's grace, and the ecstasy of gaining it back. There is no historical evidence of any sort to back theories of Nebuchadnezzar's madness⁷⁴, but Daniel's writings have withstood the test of time. Nebuchadnezzar never went to the wild to live with beasts; never did he lose his kingdom because of his inability to function as a normal human being. So why should this blatantly false remark be circulated by Daniel about the monarch who had single-handedly led Babylon to the top of the Eastern empires?

In the case of ordinary kings of little mark this negative evidence might be worth little against a positive statement, made even by a writer of small credit. But as to Nebuchadnezzar the case is widely different. He was the first king that raised Babylon to be the leading empire of the East; he drove the Egyptians within their own boundaries, and conquered their tributaries in Palestine and Syria. He it was that put an end to the kingdom of Judah and made the imagined perpetual tenure of royal power by the line of David a falsehood. In everything that befell him,

⁷² Podmore, *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*, Perlego.

⁷³ Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar*, 38.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 279.

therefore, the Jews were deeply interested; Jeremiah constantly speaks of him as the greatest living king, and consequently a prominent instrument in the hands of Jehovah for effecting His purposes and His judgments upon Nations; and even calls him the servant of Jehovah. A seven years' insanity of the king, and consequent interregnum, could not, therefore, but have been mentioned by Jeremiah, even if no anarchy had resulted thence; and it is imposing too much upon our credulity to ask us to believe that such an interregnum would raise no revolutionary aspirations in the subjects, and no efforts at emancipation in the captives, of Babylon. The silence of Jeremiah and the Historian, therefore, is negative evidence of a kind which may fairly be called conclusive.⁷⁵

The example of Nebuchadnezzar is especially poignant because it inhabits the intersection of religion, insanity, and war. For Nebuchadnezzar himself, the absolute brokenness of his condition is one side of a dialogue that points to hope and the restoration of his kingdom.⁷⁶ Ultimately his story is about faith in the face of hopelessness, but also a powerful indicator of how closely insanity and divinity are linked with political turbulence. To begin with, Nebuchadnezzar's plight resembles the 'mythic lore of the ancient Near East, the notion of a wild man.'⁷⁷ 'The longevity of this ubiquitous trope,' writes M. H. Henze, 'is truly astounding.' 'It is filled with metaphoric richness and laden with multiple significances. The notion of the wild man ... is not based on the actual encounter with the other, but to the contrary exists quite independently from the knowledge of others.'⁷⁸ Instead of immediately medicalising the condition, we should perhaps try to understand where it springs from in historical legend, and what it might – in its own confused way – be trying to tell us. It is, for instance, very similar to stories like that of the early Christian solitary St. Anthony (St Anthony of Egypt, not the far more popular St Anthony of Padua, the fascinating mystic who was

⁷⁵ In Daniel 4, both his madness and the restoration of his kingdom are by divine decree and hence irrevocable.

Rev. E. B. Pusey, "Daniel the Prophet: Nine Lectures delivered in the Divinity School of the University of Oxford, with copious Notes", in *The Book of Daniel, The Theological Review: Volume 2* (London: Whitfield, Green & Son), 188-189.

⁷⁶ Jeremiah's silence may be fairly conclusive as far as Nebuchadnezzar's madness is concerned, but most theologians point out that he may have undertaken a solitary journey, and instead of calling him insane, most of them refer to him as a royal solitary.

⁷⁷ Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar*, 98.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

also called the wonder-worker and is one of Catholicism's favourite figures)⁷⁹, who is remembered for his successive stages of flight into the Egyptian hinterlands beyond the Nile valley.

On this subject, two points are important to highlight. First, the decision by certain late Roman Egyptians and Syrians to set themselves apart within town settlements was itself a form of physical withdrawal and social renunciation, a departure from the centres of power and associated mores of civic society. Second, a close reading of St. Anthony's famous *Life* actually gives us glimpses of how the earliest Christian monastics negotiated a subtle (and sometimes precarious) balance between isolation and self-deprivation on the one hand, and social contact on the other.⁸⁰

Another important Christian solitary is Simeon Stylites, who engaged in increasingly brutal acts of renunciation and withdrawal: 'The last thirty six years of his life he spent on a 2.5-metre square platform perched atop a 21-metre-tall pillar in northern Syria, the base of which still survives. All along, he practiced extreme forms of renunciation that would turn modern stomachs: he stood for so long the skin of his feet and belly burst open; his joints became dislocated from prostration; open sores became infected with maggots; his body reeked with a foul stench due to these ulcers and his refusal to bathe. For early Christian monks, such harsh forms of renunciation were not the norm, but in the story, his physical ailments and sufferings are meant to be visible signs of his separation from standard social expectations.'⁸¹

The more Nebuchadnezzar, Anthony, or Simeon try to withdraw to the wild, the more they remain embedded in social networks that try to explain their practice; from a rational perspective, it is difficult to distinguish between extreme asceticism and mental instability. But all three of them have redrawn the scale of otherness. By being seen as substantially 'stranger', they seem to (but only seem to) reposition Henry's silence squarely back into the realm of the average. His existence during the war is just one of the circumstances of which historians are peripherally aware. But Henry is neither an ascetic nor wild - his silence (like his humiliation, piety, and political aspirations) is also

⁷⁹ St Anthony's life was recounted by the fourth century bishop Athanasius of Alexandria around 357 AD. The Eastern Orthodox Church publishes Athanasius' *Life* annually.

⁸⁰ Stephen J. Davies, *Monasticism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 18-19.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

modelled on a trope we find in early Christian devotional patterns, and images of silence in the pages of the Bible converse with Franciscan or Cistercian meditations. But there is an inconvenient detail that interferes with placing Henry in this rather sentimental perspective in a tradition of quietude: Henry was a monarch with the responsibility of two kingdoms in his hands, one of which he lost and the other he plunged into disaster. Outside of any divine assistance or sacred humiliation, he was a failure while Nebuchadnezzar was a strong king; Anthony and Simeon weren't burdened with worldly worries.

Another famous Biblical king who suffered from a far more serious form of mental illness, Saul⁸², seems to have struggled with several behavioural symptoms - alternating between ecstasy and depths of despair. After being decisively defeated by Philistines, he asked his servant to kill him. Because deliberate suicide is a grave sin according to most Jewish religious texts, his servant refused⁸³. Saul fell on his sword and killed himself. Naturally researchers are still intent on diagnosing him, but what concerns us is an expression called *anuss K'Shaul*, meaning 'as distressed as Saul.' Saul, Nebuchadnezzar, and Henry are kings, and therefore sacralised; there is something scandalous about the very possibility that a divine figure has lost reason and is in such a condition of *desolation*. Simeon and Anthony are on this list only because of what their penance 'looks like,' and their extreme austerity resembles insanity (like Henry's behaviour resembles meditative silence). This is an argument we will return to shortly. If we concentrate solely on the kings, we observe that political turbulence influences representations of their madness — the battlefield is never too far away from the mad monarch. Nebuchadnezzar was a successful warrior; Saul was driven to suicide by his defeat on the battlefield.⁸⁴ Henry's reign is notorious for instigating the Wars of the Roses, and cruel Yorkist ballads often depicted him as dancing and singing during the battle of St Albans. And although cultural depictions of madness have evolved over time, a cruel king waging war seems to be an enduring image of madness. From biblical tales to the latest recounting of the fifteenth century wars, we encounter images of

⁸² John R. Levison, "Prophecy in Ancient Israel: The Case of the Ecstatic Elders," in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol. 65, No. 4 (October 2003).

⁸³ Ibid., 508.

⁸⁴ This trope is not as ubiquitous as the 'wild man' but is metaphorically just as rich and significant.

unreason surrounded by political turbulence. There is no lack of historical precedent for a kingdom dealing with political turbulence and a mentally unstable king, although the blueprint for these trying situations tend to be redrawn soon, and often. Henry's own grandfather, the formidable Charles VI of France also suffered from severe bouts of mental illness, prompting historians to consider Henry's own afflictions as an inheritance. Yet a prolonged spell of absolute silence defies explanation and representation: does Henry's silence validate the myriad sufferings of his subjects or merely further mystify his sacred office?

The Silent Sufferer: Extending Isaiah's concept of the Suffering Servant⁸⁵

He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that
we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with
suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we
esteemed him not.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him
stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the
punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are
healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and
the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a
lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not
open his mouth.

(Isaiah 53: 2-7)

This is a reflection of the 'irreducible madness' (Kierkegaard's 'offence to reason of the incarnation'⁸⁶) within Christianity: if the phenomenon of God-become-human is an example of unreason, it is also no less scandalous for a divinely anointed person to suffer in complete silence. It is unthinkable for a quasi-divine being to lose a divinely granted gift. 'In struggling to make the consoling divine light of reason transfigure such ineffable

⁸⁵ Robert Ellis, "The Remarkable Suffering Servant of Isaiah 40-55," in *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, Vol. 34 (1991). Accessed on preachingsource.com.

⁸⁶ Quoted by Podmore in 'My God, My God, Why have You forsaken me?' Accessed on Perlego.

desolation, mystics, theologians and philosophers have resorted to speaking - perhaps maddeningly - of an abyss within God-in-Godself,' writes Podmore.⁸⁷ This is a philosophical conundrum brilliantly represented by twentieth-century reimaginings of the Wars⁸⁸. Henry's complete silence symbolises one of the darkest moments in the meeting of the human and the divine - 'an abyssal moment in which human and divine suffering meet, and in which absence (desolation) reaches out to presence (consolation).'⁸⁹ Podmore's central argument — that the abyss within God-in-Godself is ultimately consolation for experiences of the ostensible absence of God— can be fruitfully extended to the Christological image of the silent, insane sufferer. He references Lubich in his essay: 'Jesus forsaken is the image of darkness, melancholy, conflict... the image of all that is indefinable, strange, because he is a God who cries for help! He is non-sense.'⁹⁰ Foucault calls Christ's 'madness' 'the lowest point of humanity to which God has submitted in His incarnation, thereby showing that there was nothing in man that could not be redeemed.'⁹¹ Does Henry's nonresponsive state imply Godforsakenness? Does that reduce him from divine to human? Is it possible for an anointed person to lose God's grace? To quote Podmore again, 'before the God-forsaken God, must we, as God appears to have done, finally fall silent? And might such a silence become a means for honouring irreducible mystery? Or does silence serve merely to mystify, to mute the cry for protest? Does silence surrender to the abyss of despair? Or can silence itself become a protest against suffering, a form of struggling with God?'⁹² Podmore's analysis of Christological suffering problematises silence, despair, and humiliation. On one hand, it is certainly possible that the mad king is a reflection of the holy madness of the 'King of Kings'. But does the insanity which symbolises degradation of the worst kind itself redeem the sufferer, or is a bigger sacrifice necessary to sacralise insanity? It is possible to find meaning in this absence of sense: since the cry triggers the return of light (the Crucifixion is shrouded in darkness and light returns in the ninth hour

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Apart from Philippa Gregory and Conn Iggulden, Susan Higginbotham, Anne Easter Smith and Rosemary Jawley Harman have written novels based on the Wars of the Roses.

⁸⁹ Podmore, 'My God, My God, Why have You forsaken me?' Accessed on Perlego.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

as Jesus cries out) we might take it to mean that ‘both light and shade can co-exist, generating meaning and meaninglessness in the twilight of light bleeding into darkness, a perennial struggle between hope and despair.’⁹³ While this is an acceptable proposition for the hour of Crucifixion, not all representations of divine madness lend themselves to this explanation. Godforsakenness would simply render the saint and the king human, but redeemable. The central question here is the feasibility of this state of fallen-ness. We return, in a sense, to Richard II’s exquisite sorrow:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king.⁹⁴

Is it in the nature of divinity to forsake that which it inhabits? The silence (or unreason) of a single king casts doubts on the divine rights theory. Just like Christ’s intense anguish, Henry’s silence makes theological sense only after his violent murder. The state of silence itself is still deeply problematic, enmeshed as it is with insanity and humiliation. Jenkins and Reid⁹⁵ have a particularly optimistic way of explaining the ‘abyssal moment’: ‘God breaks the boundaries of possibility... and takes into God’s inner life the Godforsakenness we experience.’⁹⁶ Podmore calls this ‘the most demanding sublimation.’ How, indeed, does God’s suffering heal and sanctify one’s own suffering? Henry’s frailties and public humiliation made him a more approachable royal saint than the likes of St Louis or Edward the Confessor, but his sorrows do not sanctify all human sorrows. Godforsakenness may at best act as a consolatory space between the divine and the human - a ‘between interpreted as an unresolved and unsublimated dialectic between both that does not seek to finally negate either at the expense of the other.’⁹⁷ If Christ’s state of Godforsakenness symbolises the presence of an absence, Henry’s silence inhabits the consolatory space between the two, and it is forever in a state of becoming.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Richard III*, ed. Andrew Gurr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 156.

⁹⁵ M. Jenkins and S.B. Reid, “God’s forsakenness: The cry of dereliction as an utterance within the Trinity” in *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, Vol 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 34.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 53.

In ‘*Gospel of Sufferings*’, Kierkegaard claims that the agony of Jesus brings relief to one of the two thieves crucified alongside him but there remains an abyss between the human sufferings of the thief and the superhuman suffering of Christ: ‘And while the Saviour of the world is sighing: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me! - the penitent thief is humiliated by the knowledge - and yet it is some relief of his suffering too - that it is not God who has forsaken him, but he who has forsaken God...Heavy is that suffering of a mortal man who in the agony of death, facing death’s terror, with late repentance reaches out to the mercy of God but even in this the penitent thief finds some relief of suffering, when he compares his own with the superhuman suffering that it is to be forsaken of God. For to be forsaken of God - ah that is indeed to be without a task, that is the ultimate deprivation of what each man always has, the task of patience, grounded in the truth that God has not forsaken the sufferer.’⁹⁸ This juxtaposition of relief/repentance with superhuman suffering is especially important to our consideration of Henry’s condition.

Because Henry suffers without reason, there is no reason for repentance either (although Kierkegaard makes it quite clear that everyone needs to repent before God, since God is understandably always morally superior). However, his human nature prevents him from undergoing superhuman suffering. This is a theological grey zone. The clearest way to present Henry is to position him between Christ’s agonized “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*” and Job’s “The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21)⁹⁹. It is possible to balance the state of Godforsakenness with a solid psychologically consolatory appeal, and as readers, we may expect to find this tension in works that represent Henry as ‘insane.’ After Blacman, Hall, Fabyan, Vergil, and Shakespeare glossing over the periods of Henry’s mental illness, we find ourselves trying to ascertain how large the gap between fiction and history actually is. Centuries after Gregory of Nazianzus¹⁰⁰ and John of the Cross¹⁰¹ wrote about the

⁹⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Gospel of Sufferings*, transl. by A. S. Aldworth and W. S. Ferrie (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015). Perlego.

⁹⁹ The English Standard Version: And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

¹⁰⁰ Wessel, Susan. 2015. “The suffering of Christ, humanity and the lepers in Gregory Nazianzen” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68 (4): 381–397. doi:10.1017/S0036930615000204.

¹⁰¹ St John of the Cross, *The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross of the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, transl. by David Lewis (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1864).

sufferings of the flesh and the spirit, the anxiety of *desolatio* resurfaces in the work of authors like Philippa Gregory, Conn Iggulden, and George R. R. Martin, all of whom create dazzlingly opulent period pieces throughout their retelling of fifteenth century internecine strife in England. The heady whiff of propaganda blows consistently through Iggulden and Martin, but that is not a weakness. The story of the Lancaster vs York struggle is palpably an allegory for the issues that divide a post-9/11 western Europe. They take full advantage of the symbolic possibilities afforded by the history of a Catholic English king married to a French strategist in a land torn apart by what are basically a series of family squabbles over lands, titles, and other political advantages. But the central political themes don't distract us from the actual tale, because the dominant concerns of a post-Holocaust and post-9/11 world map well onto the court of the silent king Henry. Henry represents both belief in material miracles and more Puritan traditions of salvation. He is both flesh and spirit, mirroring his twice-anointed yet Godforsaken state as an insane Christian king. While Blacman, Shakespeare, and the majority of Tudor propagandists defy suggestions of madness, Gregory and Iggulden's readings of the character defy all the consolation Henry's saintliness affords us. Even when he is depicted as a basically good character, his obsessive piety is unconvincing, and the ambivalence of his maturity is reinforced by an early marriage to a lusty young Margaret, forcing him into a sexual relationship he is clearly not ready for. Gregory borrows heavily from Shakespeare's reimagining of what a fifteenth-century English court might have been like: not the intellectual and religious capital of Western Europe but a site of political hustle and bustle, violence, and petty selfishness. This is fertile territory for post-Holocaust theology.¹⁰²

Elie Wiesel's account of the SS hanging two men during the Holocaust in his memoir *Night* is probably the most quoted passage in contemporary theological studies of divine silence.

The three condemned prisoners together stepped onto the chairs. In unison, the nooses were placed around their necks.

"Long live liberty!" shouted the two men.

But the boy was silent.

"Where is merciful God, where is He?" someone behind me was asking.

¹⁰² Very few Jewish or Christian theologians actually refer to their works as 'holocaust theology'. In this discussion the phrase has been used more as a term of convenience to describe a diverse group of thinkers working in and around the same area.

At the signal, the three chairs were tipped over. Total silence in the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.

"Caps off!" screamed the Lagerälteste. His voice quivered. As for the rest of us, we were weeping.

"Cover your heads!"

Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues were hanging out, swollen and bluish.

But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing... And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

"For God's sake, where is God?"

And from within me, I heard a voice answer:

"Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows ... "¹⁰³

The distinguished German theologian Jurgen Moltmann calls this the 'definitive Christian answer to the question of ... torment'. The death of God has become an anguished cry into the wilderness instead of a joyful kenosis.¹⁰⁴ Moltmann interprets Wiesel's answer sympathetically, suggesting that God is here 'the great companion - the fellow sufferer who understands'¹⁰⁵, but for most readers his Christological recreation of Jesus' death on the gallows in Auschwitz is unconvincing. Wiesel's answer speaks about an all-encompassing, unaccounted for desolation, an absence that Christian theology cannot comprehend. The consolation we find in the writings of early medieval mystics has been lost forever. Yet the question (where is God now) lingers in images of death and dying decades later. Let us compare Wiesel's description of the execution of the child to Philippa Gregory's retelling of Joan of Arc's execution in 'The Red Queen'¹⁰⁶:

There is no saviour among the jostling crowd. The noise swells to a deafening shriek: a mixture of shouted blessings and curses, prayers and obscenities. I look upwards to the blue sky for my angels descending, and a log shifts in the pyre below me, and my stake rocks, and the first sparks fly up and scorch my jacket. I see them land and glow like fireflies on my sleeve and I feel a dry scratching

¹⁰³ Wiesel, *Night*, 23.

¹⁰⁴ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, transl. R. A. Wilsen and J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Philippa Gregory, *The Red Queen* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 2.

in my throat and I cough from the smoke and whisper like a little girl: 'Dear God, save me, Your daughter! Dear God, put down Your hand for me. Dear God, save me, Your maid...' ¹⁰⁷

Joan's speech offers us the possibility of a consolation; she speaks directly to God, so there is a possibility of God being present. She is the perfect foil to Henry, whose silence opens up another possibility: that God is himself silent, in which case theological consolation is impossible. Podmore cannily references Boulton's proposition that human forsaking of God 'responds to an ostensibly prior forsaking of the innocent by God.' ¹⁰⁸ This specific form of desolation subsumes all other kinds of anxiety within itself because this is humanity at its lowest and darkest: 'It is not a matter of being forsaken by a God whom we have already forsaken in our guilt, but rather a protest against the experience of the absence of God in the absurdity of suffering.' ¹⁰⁹ Does Henry's desolation necessarily mirror the image of a cruciform God dying in despair? And to extend this argument, might the possibility that Jesus himself experienced a moment of utter despair potentially give 'powerful voice' to those who suffer in silence?

The Cousins' War

Gregory's world may be conceptually and emotionally bleak, but it is striking and layered. The plight of men suffering from the tensions of sustained warfare (a bequest of the two world wars) finds its way into their literary works about the Wars of the Roses:

What I do when I'm preparing a book is basically academic research. For each book, the work is probably the equivalent of a BA. I read everything. I go to museums, I visit the places involved, I even know about the weather. A lot of people write to me to say that they got interested in history after reading one of my books, so I put a bibliography at the back of them now, because I think it's important that people are directed to read good history... Accuracy is very important to me because I have a total commitment to history. It answered my deepest questions, of which, I suppose, the most profound is: "Why am I here?" Understanding your history can tell you that. It's how I understand who I am and where I came from. I would never lie to anyone about history. ¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Podmore, 'My God, My God, Why have You forsaken me?' Accessed on Perlego.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Philippa Gregory, Interview by Alice Wignall, published by *The Guardian* Feb 3, 2004. Accessed on <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/feb/03/schools.historyandhistoryofart>.

Margaret Beaufort and her mother are disempowered but central figures in their Lancastrian family not only because they have male children but also because they are significant political power players in the court. While, of course, Shakespeare's 'she-wolf of France' and the Duchess of Gloucester are also in clear contrast to the traditional narrative of depicting medieval women as completely under the power of their male protectors and uninterested in socio-political developments, each female character in *The Red Queen* challenges long-held notions of what a fifteenth century English woman can and cannot do. Telling the whole story from Margaret's perspective allows her to undermine the more adult aspects of existence, and helps us process the bitterness and disappointment we find in political literature of that period. At one level *The Red Queen* is a fiction about fatherless children, a story about children forced into political responsibilities far beyond their understanding. Margery herself is unaware of her future, in contrast with the reader's knowledge of her destiny. The reader is reminded of her centrality to the story at every point, especially when she asks her mother an innocent question about why there is a war at all because 'they are family.' We are trapped inside the mind of this dubious child who imagines she is Joan of Arc.

'But why does it matter so much?' I ask, half-running to keep up with her down the long passageway. 'We are all royal. Why do we have to be rivals? We are all Plantagenets, we are all descended from Edward III. We are all cousins. Richard, Duke of York, is cousin to the king just as I am.'

She rounds on me, her gown releasing the scent of lavender as it sweeps the strewing herbs on the floor. 'We may be of the same family but that is the very reason we are not friends, for we are rivals for the throne. What quarrels are worse than family quarrels?'¹¹¹

Clearly Margaret is speaking to a twentieth century crowd because the historical wife of Edmund Tudor would not have asked why the Plantagenets were infighting, or even be aware that the Duke of York could be called family. Gregory adds a very arresting feminine anxiety to what has hitherto been a largely masculine world, and the story benefits from it. It glides fluidly between past and present, and in its etching of a tortured king whose sanity gets eaten away during his reign, it is particularly sharp and effective.

The king is on his great throne with his cloth of estate suspended over the chair and a throne almost the same size beside him for the queen. She is fair-haired and brown-eyed, with a round pudding face and a straight nose. I think

¹¹¹ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 63.

she looks beautiful and spoilt, and the king beside her looks fair and pale. I can't say I see any great light of holiness at this first inspection. He looks quite normal. He smiles at me as I come in and curtsy ...¹¹²

Silence is a natural vehicle for confronting an unanswerable question about religiopolitical identity, of course. In a chapter titled 'August, 1453' Gregory broaches the difficult topic of the monarch's stupor:

Nothing changes at all until one evening, at family prayers, my mother cites the name of the king with more than her usual devotion, and we all have to stay on our knees for an extra half-hour to pray for the health of the king, Henry VI, in this, his time of trouble; and beg Our Lady that the new baby, now in the royal womb of the queen, will prove to be a boy and a prince for Lancaster... I ask my mother why we are praying so earnestly for the king's health, and what does she mean by a 'time of trouble'? Her face is quite strained with worry. 'I have had a letter from your new guardian, Edmund Tudor, today,' she says. 'He tells me that the king has fallen into some sort of a trance. He says nothing, and he does nothing, he sits still with his eyes on the ground and nothing wakens him.'

'Is God speaking to him?'¹¹³

This isn't a layer of interpretation on Shakespeare's Henry VI: Henry here has a granular eccentricity that he hasn't had before. His *thea mania* is a malleable, ever-changing space resting at the heart of this feminine perspective that's still shaped by male predicaments and choices. Gregory recreates the Wars of the Roses as a tale of what happens when familial ties that bind end up gagging one, or in Henry's case, bludgeoning one to death. And she keeps returning to how shared histories, blood relations, and familial upheaval scar the young and the old alike. Let us look at the introduction of Edward IV in the next book of the series, *The White Queen*¹¹⁴:

He makes a gesture with his hand to the older man at his side and the man barks out a command and the soldiers turn their horses off the road and go into the shade of the trees. But the king jumps down from his great horse, drops the reins and walks towards me and my boys. I am a tall woman but he overtops me by a head; he must be far more than six feet tall. My boys crane their necks up to see him; he is a giant to them. He is blond-haired, grey-eyed, with a tanned, open, smiling face, rich with charm, easy with grace. This is a king we have never seen before in England: this is a man that the people will love on

¹¹² Ibid., 15.

¹¹³ Ibid., 20.

¹¹⁴ Philippa Gregory, *The White Queen* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), Kindle.

sight. And his eyes are fixed on my face as if I know a secret that he has to have, as if we have known each other for ever, and I can feel my cheeks are burning but I cannot look away from him... "I remember your father and mother," the king says equably. "I have known them since I was a boy in good times and bad. I am only surprised that they never introduced me to you."

I have to stifle a giggle. This is a king notorious for seduction. Nobody with any sense would let their daughter meet him.¹¹⁵

Both introductions are suggestive of the elements that lead to the eventual demise of their subjects: Henry's excessive piety and Edward's vices. The White Queen is actually Elizabeth Woodville, daughter of the famous nobleman Sir Richard Woodville. That both Beaufort and Woodville were Lancastrian apologists certainly complicates matters: one might even go as far as to say that the Yorkists aren't given a chance to defend themselves. Gregory is sure of *The White Queen's* affiliations. While comparing the Battle of St Albans with 'a harvest of Lancastrians', Elizabeth says that 'the *rightful* King Henry and his wife, Queen Margaret of Anjou, fled to Scotland, devastated by the deaths'. While it is certainly true that the two books (*The Red Queen* and *The White Queen*) weave in and out of each other, Henry and Edward aren't foils to one another, although there is considerable tension between the potent, seductive witch Elizabeth and the fiercely Catholic Margaret, though it can easily be narrative tension between socially acceptable housewifery and their unending plots to put their sons on the throne. This is part of Gregory's ploy, as she declares in her note to *The White Queen*: 'Given my own interest in the medieval view of magic, or what it tells us about women's power, and of the prejudice that powerful women meet, I knew this was going to be a rich terrain for me as a researcher and writer - and so it has been.'¹¹⁶ The terrain is rich and complex, but also very well-trodden and hardly in need of further examination. Gregory's feminism can be quite heavy-handed, but she keenly understands how war trauma and deep wells of grief can lead to nights of sleepless silence. Decades of sustained warfare seep into individual psyches and leave behind only ruin. In many ways Shakespeare's influence on Gregory is clearly discernible. She acknowledges her debt in a cheeky, backhanded way:

'What would happen if everyone could read and everyone could buy these (a book printed on Thomas Caxton's press)? Would they give up on teachers and kings

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Gregory, *The Guardian*, Feb 3, 2004.

altogether? Would they care nothing for the Houses of Lancaster and York? And study their own loyalties? Would they cry a plague on both your houses? It is amusing to speculate, is it not?'¹¹⁷

In Shakespeare, the effects of this familial trauma are mitigated with the promise of salvation for the martyr and divine revenge for the true Christian but in Gregory's trilogy the effects of trauma and grief are impervious to reason and logic, and ultimately inescapable. We see each cousin (except Henry VI) succumb to the psychological terrors that their greed engenders. As Gregory admits, its allegiance is to feeling, not fact.

It also might hit a nerve in a cultural moment where people have experienced complete powerlessness in the face of political nightmares for over a century. In the series, the search for order and peace (so often simply an excuse to seize power for oneself) are no match for the pain of warfare. There is a brief re-enactment of Shakespeare's tableau early on in *The Red Queen*:

'Peace,' the man said in a voice drained of emotion. 'Peace, friend. It's over.'
'Who's won?' Stafford asked. Beside them the river was rolling corpses over and over in the flood. In the field all around them men were getting to their feet or crawling to their lines. Most of them were not moving at all.
'Who cares?' the man said. 'I know I have lost all my troop.'
'You're for Lancaster?'
Stafford staggered under his weight. 'Aren't you?'
'York. You are my enemy.'
Embracing each other like brothers the two men glared at each other for a moment and then both brokenly laughed.¹¹⁸

If the battle is sometimes personified as a monster feeding on the land, Gregory also personifies the Plantagenet family as an organism that feeds on the suffering of its members. At the centre of the series is the concept that family life is the hell these characters keep willingly returning to. It's the reason why after many years of rebellion and treason, Edward IV refuses to sanction the execution of his favourite brother George, and explains it to his wife with a simple "I love him."¹¹⁹ It might be wiser for this family to disband and deliberately abandon their dreams for the throne. Elizabeth Woodville

¹¹⁷ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 324.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.,

¹¹⁹ Gregory, *The White Queen*, Kindle.

longs to return to her childhood home where she was a simple, joyful girl but the characters are unable to walk away from the struggle for kingship (whether for oneself, or one's offspring, or kin). Throughout the series characters like Elizabeth, Margaret Beaufort, Edward IV, Henry Tudor, and Richard III make the argument that it's better to remain in the terrifying chase for the throne than to live a lowly life. Perhaps this struggle is an inevitable part of Gregory's nightmarish vision of what ultimately happens when we cannot stop fighting a war. Family is a traditional symbol of protection but Plantagenet mothers routinely send their children to their deaths unflinchingly (Margaret's mother orders that the baby's life be saved over Margaret's when she is brought to bed; Edward's mother sends Edward to the battlefield instead of her favourite child George; Margaret herself sends the young Henry Tudor to battle against the huge Yorkist army of Richard III¹²⁰). The circle of fears and anxieties have no end.

'How would I know?' the man said. 'Good God, my own brother is on the other side. I just assumed you were for York, but how could any man tell?'
Stafford shook his head. 'God knows what I am, or what will happen, or what I will have to be,' he said. 'And God knows that a battle like this is no way to resolve it.'
'Have you fought before in these wars?'
'Never, and if I can, I never will again.'¹²¹

With Henry Tudor's epochal victory on the Bosworth Field, there is a sinister insistence that the Plantagenet family is primed to repeat the same pattern they are trying to resist. This sense of the inevitable might explain the multiple visions (of saints, of victory, of defeat) the characters have often. There are also many images of domestic bliss. Edward IV is a very loving father to his five daughters, Elizabeth is loved and surrounded by a good family, Margaret has a surprisingly successful marriage with Sir Henry Stafford -- images that seem as unreal as any of the visions that haunt Margaret and Elizabeth, a fantasy of togetherness that wilfully rejects the fact that the ongoing war is tearing their families to shreds. Gregory seems to suggest that devotion to one's family is also a psychosocial problem in the fifteenth century English court — a form of madness that exists on the other side of mourning the dead.

¹²⁰ The Battle of Bosworth, 22 August 1485. Richard III's army, at around 15,000 men, was approximately three times the size of Henry Tudor's army at just 5,000 men.

¹²¹ Gregory, *The White Queen*, Kindle.

The biggest challenge for a 1600-page historical story in the age of TV shows might be pacing, a challenge Gregory overcomes by omitting many important factual details. Unease sets in slowly, but surely. Margaret sees glimpses of angels in her 'visions' and wishes to 'follow her voices to her death', a rapt admirer of the virgin St Joan. Elizabeth creates delicate talismans and casts quiet spells not to achieve anything particular but out of a fear of what might happen if she doesn't. They are like cracks that appear on the Plantagenet tapestry out of nowhere. Gregory's feminist agenda is a refreshing lens through which we get sly glimpses of the contradictions inherent in medieval Christian philosophy:

If it were lawful for a woman to hate her husband I would hate him as a rapist. But hatred would make the baby malformed, so I make sure that I do not hate him, not even in secret. Instead, I slide from the bed the minute he has gone and kneel at the foot of it, still smelling his rancid sweat, still feeling the burning pain between my legs, and I pray to Our Lady who had the good fortune to be spared all this by the kindly visit of the bodiless Holy Ghost. I pray to Her to forgive Edmund Tudor for being such a torturer to me, her child, especially favoured by God. I, who am without sin; and certainly without lust.¹²²

The Cousins' War itself is ambitious only in scope, not its scale. Because it is scrupulously domestic, it is also very modestly imagined. Many pivotal scenes are in retrospect; Gregory is not afraid of emptying a scene of its dramatic possibilities before it has begun. This is another trick she borrows from Shakespeare's tetralogy - to avoid the central events and focus on individuals whose lives are affected by the tragedy. Gregory creates parallel narratives that end happily, giving readers some sentimental reason to find consolation. But it does not pretend to provide catharsis for the many bloody battles that comprise the Wars of the Roses. Part of that is because this series is a deeply Christian meditation on death, childbirth, the role of a mother in a child's life (and death), filial loyalty, and vengeance. But it is also because *The Cousins' War* is beset with theological doubt: the God in this world is omnipotent and unknowable. We do not know if he is there at all, and often it reads like a personal moment of soul-searching for Gregory. This theme is never stated quite as directly (and she certainly never mentions it in her interviews), but we understand this from her Introduction to *The Women of the Cousins' War*, a non-fiction book she wrote in collaboration with David Baldwin (whose

¹²² Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 33.

biography of Elizabeth Woodville is her primary reference for the series) and Michael Jones, an expert in late medieval history: ‘The writing of a history book is a personal process, a creative process, undertaken inside the strict innate rules of the craft form. Historians only rarely explain their process and their prejudices; these are rightly concealed under the smooth narrative of the story they have chosen to tell ... As readers we are accustomed to accepting information from a concealed narrator... In short, the concealed narrator is the one who reassures the reader that he is an authority to be trusted, or whose commands should be obeyed... History is a created narrative that tells a story stepping from one agreed fact to another, with gulfs of unknown between each step, bridged only by speculation and imagination.’¹²³

Without Gregory's masterful manipulation of the events and characters, the series becomes a story about unrelatable sociopaths playing a long, tedious political game. She is trying to address the exclusion of strong female characters throughout medieval historiography, and she uses hitherto silent female voices to bridge the inevitable gaps in the story. Her most interesting portraits are those of women isolated from their peers, ‘without income, without space, without equipment, and without training,’ much like her own assessment of Virginia Woolf¹²⁴. The silence preserved by women for centuries is unsurprisingly loaded with horrors perceived and real. Coupled with this is Gregory's insistence on not deviating from fact wherever it is possible: ‘But however vivid and powerful the historical novel, I believe it should be based on the recorded facts and never deviate from them when they are available. How few facts are available for some periods and lives, and how much the historian has to speculate to tell a coherent story is perhaps demonstrated in this collection ...’¹²⁵ This half-reality gives occasional scenes qualities of a surrealist dream sequence, where various members of this cursed family have disruptive, interlocking dreams. Nothing explains the heady ungroundedness of these nightmares.

I cannot believe that it was like this for Joan of Arc. I thought of her always on a white horse with a banner of lilies and angels above her head, clean. I never thought of her riding through carnage, though she must have done so, as

¹²³ Philippa Gregory, David Baldwin and Michael Jones, *The Women of the Cousins' War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 32-40.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 29, 40.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 36.

I am doing. If this is the will of God it takes a strange and terrible shape. I did not know that the God of Battles was vile like this. I never knew that a saint could summon torment like this. It is like riding through the valley of the shadow of death, and we go like harbingers of death ourselves, for we give away no water though men imploringly reach towards me, pointing to their bloodstained mouths, where their teeth are all knocked out.¹²⁶

Or The White Queen Elizabeth Woodville herself who swings between dangerous seductress and dangerous witch depending on who is winning the Wars at any given moment. Her core quality is still that she's an enigma. This isn't exactly empty characterisation, but she does seem like an apparatus built around a religio-political thought the series does not wish to reveal.

When the sun is setting and my boys are saying their evening prayers...my mother leads the way out of the front door of the house and down the winding footpath to where the bridge, a couple of wooden planks, spans the River Tove. She walks across, her conical headdress brushing the overhanging trees, and beckons me to follow her. At the other side, she puts her hand on a great ash tree and I see there is a dark thread of silk wound around the rough-grained wood of the thick trunk.

'What is this?'

'Reel it in,' is all she says. 'Reel it in, a foot or so, everyday...'

'Magic,' I say flatly...

'Magic,' she agrees, untroubled. 'Powerful magic, for a good cause. Well worth the risk. Come every day and reel it in, a foot at a time.'¹²⁷

There is a dark beauty in this narrative style - Elizabeth and Margaret aren't only trapped in a patriarchal world, but they're caught in harsh circumstances that lead to crushing resentment. Their oscillation between righteous vengeance and fear is the result of a crippling self-doubt, a phenomenon that brings us back to the Book of Job¹²⁸ where the divine exists for the reader, and he doesn't question its existence till Job is tormented physically. So with these two women, narrative anxieties creep in when their families begin clawing at each other's throats. It is almost a fantasy of woman empowerment; it

¹²⁶ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 257.

¹²⁷ Gregory, *The White Queen*, Kindle.

¹²⁸ Dominant readings of the book emphasise that God's presence in the Book of Job is amoral, and in a fascinating essay called *The Meanings of the Book of Job*, Michael V. Fox argues that God's retribution is present but incomplete. Justice is immensely important to God, but frequently in the Old Testament other concerns override it. Loyalty, for example, is more important than divine justice and God wants loyalty to prevail even when divine justice does not.

takes months for the English courtiers to suspect them of witchcraft, though it eventually does happen. Note the thin boundary between the descriptors for Henry's dreams and feminine 'magic': 'I don't claim to be a witch,' I say quietly. 'But I have Melusina's inheritance. I am her heir. You know what I mean: I have her gift, just as Mother did. Just as my daughter Elizabeth has. The world sings to me and I hear the song. Things come to me. My wishes come true. Dreams speak to me; I see signs and portents. And sometimes I know what will happen in the future. I have the Sight.'¹²⁹

Elizabeth's Sight is something the book doesn't take any great pains to explain - to its credit. There's a curious vacuum of information about its protagonists. And for this, too, Gregory is indebted to Shakespeare, whose memorable 'she-wolf of Anjou' speech she mistakes for a historian's perspective (it isn't; Shakespeare is also filling the gaps in history with speculation and imagination) and finds it quite offensive. But the tetralogy is what gives the primary players in the game the range to be two characters at once: both the genuinely ill-treated wife and the woman who didn't want to be wife at all; the ambitious duchess of Gloucester who uses witchcraft only to help her husband; the duke of York who is torn between his duty to his king and his patriotism; the king who wishes to set an example of pacifism and ends up igniting a five-decade-long feud. If anyone can negate these differences and collapse them into one space, it's Shakespeare. But we find echoes of this throughout Gregory. The Plantagenets endure tortures without redemption in sight - in this sense, it is an anti-parable.

Despite Margaret's initial dismissal of Henry, she warms towards his mild-mannered politeness, more so because she is obsessed with the concepts of sin and redemption, and anguishes about the state of her soul. There is a sly suggestion that the horrors to come are perversely invited by these intense religious anxieties. While this strange childish piety blends with matrimonial horrors (including utter emotional neglect and rape) to create this sense of foreboding in *The Red Queen*, the bereaved, homesick White Queen personifies a familiar derangement that feeds on grief. Scenes of war straddle the line between fantasy and reality as both emerge from their religious guilt with dreams of the throne on their mind: 'At the battle of Mortimer's Cross there were three suns in the sky, I saw them myself, three suns: everyone said that was a sign from God for me and for George and for Richard, the three sons of York. How can one son

¹²⁹ Gregory, *The White Queen*, Kindle.

leave the others? And who else betrays me with him?’¹³⁰ But even during these drifts into flights of folklorish fantasies, we have to remember that what we are reading about may be strange tricks of the memory, a hallucination rooted in the trauma of the ongoing war. This is, of course, a coda that many might take literally but even this is prefigured by passages and events meant to make us question its ‘reality’. That is also the greatest strength of Gregory’s Henry VI - readers can see in him what they want to see. Just as easily, however, given Gregory’s assurance of historical accuracy, one can read this as a disturbing, escalated response to the gothic themes in Pope’s *Windsor Forest*: presenting a revisionist nationalist history in which the correct way to react to a government crisis is religious hysteria:

‘I have had a letter from your new guardian, Edward Tudor today,’ she says.
‘He tells me that the king has fallen into some sort of a trance. He says nothing, and he does nothing, he sits still with his eyes on the ground and nothing wakens him.’

‘Is God speaking to him?’

She gives a little irritated sniff. ‘Well, who knows? Who knows? I am sure your piety does you great credit, Margaret. But certainly, if God is speaking to the king then He has not chosen the best time for this conversation... Pray God the king wakes soon.’¹³¹

The king’s silence invites serious engagement here: without quite implying the danger isn’t real, Gregory augments her religious material by placing an old trope - the silent sufferer - in an even older world - the Godforsaken land. It does not need any substantial mental leap to connect its imagined terrors to the very real terrors inflicted on groups of marginalised victims six centuries later. But the familiar seems chillingly strange.

The king dreams on, smiling in his waking sleep. In my room, alone, I try sitting, as they say he does, and staring at the floorboards, in case God will come to me as He has come to the king... I try to let my soul drift to God, and feel the absorbing peace that must wash the soul of the king so that he does not see the worried faces of his counsellors, and is even blind to his wife when she puts his new-born baby son in his arms and tells him to wake up and greet the little prince Edward, heir to the throne of England... The great mystery for England is that the king does not wake, and while he sits, hearing only the

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 19-20.

words of angels, the man who has made himself Regent of England, Richard, Duke of York, takes the reins of government into his own hands...¹³²

Is the picture of the silent king a symbol for theological paranoia, showing an entire community torn apart by its own illogical anxieties? Is it a cautionary anti-parable about a royal family that drives God from His promised land? Intriguingly, as mediator between God and man, a king's silence may mean a complete breakdown of communication between the two. From afar a silent king may resemble a St Anthony or a St Benedict prototype, but closer up its fraught with menace: 'And it made no real difference when the king recovered, though the common people were told to rejoice, for now he has fallen ill again, and some people are saying that this is how it will always be: we will live with a king who cannot be relied on to stay awake. This is obviously a disadvantage. Even I can see that.'¹³³

The words 'sleeping king' recur. Warwick and York are described as 'men of too vast an ambition to obey a sleeping king.'¹³⁴ England can't wait for Henry to wake up: 'we cannot be governed by a sleeping king.'¹³⁵ Both concepts (of holy listening and of being inaccessible by the material world) dovetail beautifully with Margaret's exaggerated notions of piety, her obsessive reliance on Our Lady, and her pride in having saints' knees due to constant prayer. Even her neurotic insistence on founding an order in a nunnery she hopes her brother-in-law Jasper will give her finds a perfect corollary in Henry VI's own monkish behaviour and foundation of Cambridge. Our foreknowledge of her future becomes a source of unease: 'I cannot be tempted by vanity,' I warn him. 'I am going to be an abbess and nothing will divert me. You shall see. You will all see.'¹³⁶

Margaret Beaufort is not Henry VI's feminist double. She doesn't as much mirror Henry's profoundly complex 'silence' as throw it into wincing relief, in spite of (and sometimes because of) her own victimhood and marginalisation. 'A king who slips away into dreams without warning', like any historic character, is both real and imaginary. As

¹³² Ibid., 23.

¹³³ Ibid., 56-57.

¹³⁴ Gregory uses 'sleeping king' to refer to Henry in both *The Red Queen* and *The White Queen*. Even though Elizabeth calls him a halfwit or an old fool, courtiers frequently refer to Henry as the old king or the sleeping king.

¹³⁵ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 43,62.

¹³⁶ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 66-68.

the final Lancastrian king, he shouldered more political responsibility than most of his ancestors and descendants, and after Henry Tudor put an end to the Lancaster vs York conflict, his literal and figurative roles remained, but their relationships changed. While it is finally possible to discuss his mental illness without provoking ire, trying to comprehend the significance of a 'mad king' in a world that has experienced real life examples of this biblical trope can be overwhelming. This 'silence' has increasingly been represented through a range of complex symbolic formations¹³⁷, a few of which we encounter in *The Cousins' War*. The Wars of the Roses, for example, is at once a symbolic space - places where the battles were actually fought and the continuing effect of those battles - and a fifteenth-century political event, unrecognisable and unrecoverable. While Gregory wishes to remain true to the calamity itself, the presence of a silent king overseeing a battle obstructs this desire. No historian wishes to co-opt or distort the role of the king, but the nature of his personality makes it difficult not to do just this. This is not a literary issue, but the tensions between the symbolic suggestiveness of a divinely ordained figure in a stupor and the fact that he was worshipped as a saint are central to the way Gregory recreates him and these tensions are enacted quite starkly. On the one hand, Gregory insists on the space between the real and the imagined, between the 'facts of what happened' and the text's visual representation of lived experience, between image and trope.¹³⁸ She impels us to recognise these spaces as she forces them together. While the king's silence itself is an unrepresentable absence, its implications compensate for the vacuum this creates. The only disadvantage of allowing such tensions to rise to the surface of the narrative is that it reveals the instability of such a representational strategy: offering a generalised body of meaning for the silence, or refusing to interpret the silence either as a mental illness or a holy gift complicates the theological message Gregory clearly has in mind for her readers. Shakespeare squarely sides with Tudor propaganda as far as Henry VII's birthrights are concerned; the saintly king takes one look at the young Duke of Richmond, the Christ-prototype, and decides that he is the promised one England has been waiting for. In *The Red Queen*, it is Margaret Beaufort who decides

¹³⁷ Henry's silence invades three spheres: the battlefield, the courtroom, and the bedroom. In the battlefield it takes the form of a series of violent fights (since the king is not claiming the crown with his speech); in the courtroom there is mayhem because the right to land and titles is contested by Yorkists, and in the private sphere, ambitions run roughshod over legal requirements.

¹³⁸ Henry, especially, is both image *and* trope in the world Gregory has put him in.

that her son would be called Henry, in case the sleeping king wakes up for another heir to the house of Lancaster.

'I am going to call him Henry,' I say, thinking of the sleeping king who might wake for a boy of the House of Lancaster called Henry, though he slept through the birth of the prince called Edward. 'Henry is a royal name for England, some of our best and bravest kings have been called Henry. This boy will be Henry Tudor.' I repeat the name proudly: 'Henry Tudor.'¹³⁹

Not only does this go against Gregory's self-imposed diktat of never going against historical fact wherever fact is available, it rattles the already-problematic theological premise of the series for the doubtful reward of having a powerful woman utter the lines Shakespeare gave to Henry VI:

Come hither, England's hope.
—If secret powers
Suggest but truth to my divining thoughts,
This pretty lad will prove our country's bliss.
His looks are full of peaceful majesty,
His head by nature fram'd to wear a crown,
His hand to wield a sceptre, and himself
Likely in time to bless a regal throne.
Make much of him, my lords; for this is he
Must help you more than you are hurt by me.¹⁴⁰

If anything, this draws attention to how utterly fabricated the entire episode is. The naming of a possible heir to the house of Lancaster could never have been entrusted to his mother; it was a more complex task. But more importantly, this small vignette raises questions about the aesthetics of representing Henry VI at all in the present era. What does it mean to recreate an incomprehensible, inaccessible event? Are these knowing throwback references Gregory's method of negotiating the literary status of *The Cousins' War* itself? Is it possible to speak in a voice that blends the real and the imaginary, exceed the personal sphere and still find an audience? It is not surprising to find Gregory injecting her own ironic commentary about the powerlessness of court women into her Shakespeare reference but she seems to miss that Shakespeare uses the prophesy as a dramatic background to a very Christian interpretation of the defeat of Richard III. Henry

¹³⁹ Philippa Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 48-49.

¹⁴⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Third Part of King Henry VI*, ed. Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 119.

Tudor avenges the martyrdom of his dead great uncle (also a saint) who had blessed him with the King's Touch. Henry Tudor's victory, by natural extension, is Henry VI's posthumous victory; both are Very Christian Kings. The theology underlying this narrative (just as fabricated as Gregory's) is ironclad. But Margaret Beaufort loses her voice at the end of *The Red Queen*, and the battles are all in third person omniscient - her sole comfort in her son's victory is being able to sign her name as Margaret Regina. In fact, she says quite as much: 'My life comes down to this: a court that has forgotten me, a husband who mocks me, a son who has no use for me, and a God who has gone silent. It is no comfort to me that I despise the court, that I never loved my husband, and that my son was born only to fulfil my destiny, and if he cannot do that, I don't know what use we are to each other. I go on praying. I don't know what to do but that, I go on praying.'¹⁴¹

The lack of proper motive trickles down into the BBC TV series inspired by *The Cousins' War*. Reviewer Julia Raeside picks up on the fact that the characters seem unreal: 'There is a lot of information to get in about which family stands to benefit from which course of action, but when this was billed as the story of the women wrangling for power behind the scenes I thought the emotional aspect of their struggle would be brought to the fore a bit more. Amanda Hale, as Lady Margaret Beaufort, does inject real power into her scenes but she's seldom given more to do than kvetch about her absent son or look cross when someone tries to touch her bible.'¹⁴² This proves to be problematic. Margaret Beaufort needs to be given explicit context for her overarching ambitions, and thwarted desires of forming an order of nuns isn't enough. Does her sexual subjugation instil these thoughts in her, and does the loss of two husbands quell them? How does one read the shift in the prophetic voice under these circumstances? It is difficult to tell if this is an intentional muddying of clear waters or just part of the inevitable gothic darkness Gregory conjures up. Margaret herself insists her life becomes meaningless but if her intercession is central to Henry Tudor's eventual victory then she has fulfilled her religious destiny. Gregory's reimagination of this world is highly

¹⁴¹ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 319.

¹⁴² Julia Raeside, "Have you been watching ... The White Queen?", in *The Guardian* Aug 7, 2013. Accessed on <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2013/aug/07/have-you-been-watching-white-queen>.

distinctive and full of friction, but it can also be weightless and whimsical. For all the appropriate socio-political allegory, it is difficult to escape the feeling that Henry's silence is wrapped around the edges of the narrative as a framing device and that his presence is still peripheral— in which case, this is a very conventional reading of the Wars. At no point in the literature on Wars of the Roses or Tudor propaganda was Henry supposed to seem like an oddball, in spite of his mental illness. Gregory's own research of the monarch led her to believe that he was a kindly, if ineffectual, saint who preferred the cloister to the court (this is also the image propagated by Henry VII). But Shakespeare gave Henry the hard-headed political sense a well-educated nobleman could justly be expected to have without entirely losing the core quality of mercy that Henry was famed for having. And in *The Cousins' War*, Henry VI is richer and more coherent than the story itself. But because he is almost never present in the scene, he is also curiously empty:

My father says there are more than twenty thousand turned out for the king. It seems that most men think that we will win, that York be captured and killed, though the king in his tender heart has said he will forgive them all if they will surrender... "

When I rise from my knees, I walk out from the chapel a little taller, knowing that my house is blessed by God, is led by a man as much a saint as a king, and that our cause is just and has been won without so much as an arrow being loosed.¹⁴³

The White Queen is more measured in its denouncement of the king.

'Mother - she was married to a husband who was out of his wits for half the time.'

'And whether he was saintly, sane, or raving mad she always went her own way... Edward cannot help but do better than a sainted half-wit.'¹⁴⁴

The exciting war disguises the more serious identity politics at play here. We have here three marginalised women commenting on the nature and mental illness of a king criticised for his pacifism and piety. The lonely, repressed Beaufort is sympathetic towards Henry's 'sleep'¹⁴⁵; Edward's feisty queen cannot find it in herself to admire a

¹⁴³ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 53.

¹⁴⁴ Gregory, *The White Queen*, Kindle.

¹⁴⁵ Divine sleep has special significance in Islamic and Jewish readings of the Old Testament centering on interpretations of YHWH's sleep; hymns to wake up the divine, and divine sleep during a crisis.

'sainted half-wit'¹⁴⁶. Even though Gregory projects standard women empowerment ideals onto the late fifteenth century, problems remain. Elizabeth is a traitor to begin with: she betrays her Lancastrian roots by marrying Edward IV. That she survived is not a victory when all she had loved died. Margaret is (still) inconsequential to the main narrative. Mediated by these unreliable, unrealised characters, Henry also has a peculiarly dreamy air around him: 'I close my eyes in horror at the thought of the king, all but a saint, being martyred by his own subject who has sworn loyalty to him.' Surely, the Duke of York cannot do it? Surely he cannot even consider it?"¹⁴⁷

Or the clever reference to Henry's monkish behaviour and his silent withdrawal in *The White Queen*: 'As the weather turns warmer and it starts to grow brighter and the birds start to sing in the garden of Westminster Palace, Edward's informers bring him reports from Lincolnshire of another uprising in favour of Henry, the king, as though he were not forgotten by everyone else in the world, living quietly in the Tower of London, more an anchorite than a prisoner.'¹⁴⁸

There is a lot of whittling going on in *The Cousins' War*; Henry's world seems to be closing in on him. He loses his kingdom, his palace, his home in Windsor, and all his personal space in his prison. His circle of friends and family shrinks simultaneously. After his courtiers desert him and Lancastrian nobles go into hiding, he is left with his wife and son. When he is imprisoned by Edward, he is reduced to a unit of one, bundled from hiding hole to hiding hole till he is murdered -- our heroines are witness to this tightening of the noose around the insane king's neck. Readers can sense that Henry took to his prayers early in his life, is aware of his own piety, and is aloof to the race for the crown. More than once he forgives people who plot against him; his mercy is not based on information or even optimism, but essentially his profound faith in adhering to a very orthodox form of Christianity¹⁴⁹. Gregory's version of events removes the possibilities of moral choice, thereby diluting the moral dilemmas that form the basis of Shakespeare's vision of the king. Henry is internal but not comfortable in his own skin.

¹⁴⁶ Gregory, *The White Queen*, Kindle

¹⁴⁷ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 101.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ We discussed in the first chapter that we believed in the Name of Christ, the Holy Blood of Christ, and other Catholic practices.

He maintains an off-kilter ethereal manner even when his house has been handed a resounding defeat on the battlefield.¹⁵⁰ His enigmatic soothsayer wisdom has been handed down to Margaret Beaufort, Elizabeth Woodville, and her mother. This leaves us only with Henry's legendary 'saintliness' and his silent 'raving insanity'.

The celebrated modern philosopher Mark C. Taylor finds that all silence begins with death.¹⁵¹ His outstanding '*Seeing Silence*' opens with a quote by Herman Melville ('Silence is a consecration of the universe'¹⁵²), and quickly introduces Taylor's area of expertise: the death of God.¹⁵³

Gods, like mortals, sometimes speak, sometimes do not; they sometimes remain silent by speaking, sometimes speak by remaining silent. "Whither is God?" screamed Nietzsche's madman. "I will tell you. We have killed him, you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this?" We have killed God by having forgotten how to hear silence. If, however, to hear silence is to silence silence, then the death of God is unavoidable. The question that remains is whether there is an other silence, a deeper silence, a silence beyond silence yet to be heard in the stillness that surpasses understanding.' Taylor's sentiment is echoed by Meister Eckhart in Sermon 1: In the middle of the night when all things were in a quiet silence, there was spoken to me a hidden word. It came like a thief by stealth...Where is the silence, and where is the place where the word is spoken?¹⁵⁴

Christ's anguished cry, 'my God, my God, why have You forsaken me?' is interpreted as definitive proof of the death of God. It is important for us to approach Taylor's next statement with this in mind: 'As everything else, this book began with death - first, the death of the mother, then the death of the father, then the death of everyone who once knew them.'¹⁵⁵ Silence - an absence of memory, an absence of eyewitness - is also focused on death, as Taylor continues reminiscing about his parents. 'Gradually I began to realize that in these baffling daily photographs, I was seeing silence - not only the silence of a forgotten past that once was recoverable, but a more profound silence beyond silence that is the origin and end of all that is and all that is not. In the gaze of these faces,

¹⁵⁰ Mark C. Taylor, *Seeing Silence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), Perlego.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

I saw the silence that would soon be my own. To hear silence is to listen to the world without you.’¹⁵⁶ Contemplating silence makes it possible to understand death, but the central question is still the same: is there an other silence, a deeper silence? Podmore answers this question: ‘This place is the desert, the abyss, the place where there is nothing, nothing but God beyond ‘God’.’¹⁵⁷

Taylor is often despairing; unable to find his answer in Heidegger and Kant, and having decided that the Hegelian attempt to understand the death of God as part of a ‘philosophical metanarrative of God’s kenotic (self-emptying) self-becoming’ was wrong¹⁵⁸ he wanders in a maze of questions that seems to accost him. Why is the place of origin always death and never birth? Why are serious writers (himself included) always obsessed with ‘death, mourning, melancholy, dread, and despair’¹⁵⁹? Why must profundity always be dark instead of ‘unbearably light’¹⁶⁰?

This is stark, indeed. After Wittgenstein prefaces his *Tractatus* with ‘There is indeed the inexpressible. Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent...’¹⁶¹, he abandoned Christian philosophy for more than a decade because he had reached the end of what logical expression could achieve. And as his colleague of many years, Frank Ramsey stated it, “What we can't say we can't say, and we can't whistle it either.”¹⁶² Following the same tradition, Taylor also asserts the boundaries that language cannot cross, and in which it is possible to say words fail to convey the (for the want of a better

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Simon D. Podmore, “Mysterium secretum et silentiosum: praying the apophatic self” in *Mystical Theology and Continental Philosophy: Interchange in the Wake of God*, ed. David Lewin, Simon D. Podmore and Duane Williams (New York: Routledge, 2017), Perlego.

¹⁵⁸ Jesus made Himself Nothing (Philippians 2:7) The idea is Jesus emptying himself out and becoming entirely receptive to God’s will/command. In *Mysterium Paschale*, the Swiss theologian Hans Urs Vons Balthasar argues that the crucifixion emphasises that God himself can defeat and conquer Godlessness, abandonment, and death. In the words of Balthasar himself: “At this point, where the subject undergoing the ‘hour’ is the Son speaking with the Father, the controversial ‘Theopaschist formula’ has its proper place: ‘One of the Trinity has suffered. The central theme is that the trinity consists of an eternal super-kenosis.

¹⁵⁹ Taylor, *Seeing Silence*, Perlego.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, transl. by C. K. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, & Co., Ltd, 1922), 25.

¹⁶² Quoted by Steven Gerrard, “One Wittgenstein?” in *From Frege to Wittgenstein: Perspectives on Early Analytic Philosophy*, ed. by Erich H. Rech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 54.

word) preciousness of the theological aspects intrinsic to joyful kenosis - in which case the inexpressible is invariably connected to the mystical. Jens Glebe Moller therefore believes that the *Tractatus* is a piece of apophatic theology: “That of which one cannot speak and thus thereof must be silent is the mystical - or it is God.”¹⁶³ Taylor’s own long sequence of questions trying to identify and isolate separate silences is also very important, albeit flawed.

Silence can be divine or demonic, loving or hateful, restorative or traumatic, comforting or cruel. It can unify or isolate, allow freedom or impose bondage and repression. Silence can be a form of resistance or submission, punishment or reward. It can express awe or horror, astonishment or bafflement, joy or sorrow. In addition to this, silence changes with place and time. The silence of the city is not the same as the silence of the country, and the silence of the forest is not the same as the silence of the desert. The silence of the monk's cell is not the same as the silence of a jail cell. Northern silence is not the same as Southern silence, and eastern silence is not the same as western silence. The silence of winter is not the same as the silence of summer, and the silence of autumn is not the same as the silence of spring. The silence of the past is not the same as the silence of the future, the silence of the beginning is not the same as the silence of the end, the silence of birth is not the same as the silence of death... How you hear silence determines the course and discourse of your life.¹⁶⁴

Silence is divine *and* demonic -- how we hear silence determines *and* is determined by the course and discourse of our lives. Since its earliest days Christian theologians have thought of silence as an indispensable element in their relationship with the divine. It is also held in high value by Christian ascetics of all monastic orders in all countries, as it is by Jain and Buddhist monastics. From the *Apophthegmata Patrum*¹⁶⁵ to the *Life* of St Anthony, and from Cistercians, Franciscans and Benedictines to the Quakers, silent worship is key to hearing the voice of God (holy listening). However perfunctorily expressed, Margaret's belief that Henry was hearing the voices of angels is routine in a

¹⁶³ Jens Glebe-Moller, “Whereof one Cannot Speak, Thereof one Must be Silent.”, *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology*, 1997 51:2, 156-167, DOI: 10.1080/00393389708600209

¹⁶⁴ Taylor, *Seeing Silence*, Perlego.

¹⁶⁵ A collection of wisdom stories about the earliest Christian hermits living in the deserts of Egypt, *Apophthegmata Patrum* contains a particularly intriguing story about silence. Abba Theophilus, the archbishop, came to Scetis one day. The brethren who were assembled said to Abba Pambo, 'Say something to the Archbishop, so that he may be edified.' The old man said to them, 'If he is not edified by my silence, he will not be edified by my speech.' (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*). Accessed on https://en.orthodoxwiki.org/Sayings_of_the_Desert_Fathers

pre-Reformation world that saw religious merit in meditative contemplation. Scriptural contemplation was also seen as a method to achieve blissful union with the divine; scriptural exegesis was also primarily a labour of love— a spiritual quest to purify the soul. Shakespeare’s picture of Henry may actually shed new light on medieval devotional exegesis, if studied by theologians.

But Gregory’s world is decidedly modern in its approach to divine silence. The modern poet Wendell Berry once captured the importance of silence to all human experience in his short untitled poem:

Best of any song
is bird song
in the quiet,
but first you must have the quiet.¹⁶⁶

More recently, historians and theologians like MacCulloch¹⁶⁷, Rachel Muers¹⁶⁸, and Maggie Ross¹⁶⁹ have advanced the argument that communication is impossible without silence. Silence must be created and used. This is a compelling early medieval idea; it was Meister Eckhart who first put forth the notion that after abstracting ‘this’ and ‘that’ and achieving *Gelassenheit*, the soul could achieve union with the divine in the ground (*grunt*) of all reality. Sacrificing common religious practices, Eckhart joined the Easterners in recommending silent worship to purify the spirit.¹⁷⁰

Henry’s England (a scorched realm without hope of redemption) is in desperate need of *Gelassenheit*. In truth, ‘it is beyond place, and beyond experience.’¹⁷¹ Sanctuary is desecrated multiple times; the wisest men smile at the slightest mention of God (and God is mentioned over and over again). Blessings in the name of the Lord ring hollow, and, worse, simply do not work: ‘It is beyond forgiveness. Richard’s men drag out screaming supplicants, and Richard and Edward watch their men knife prisoners who are

¹⁶⁶ Berry, *A Timbered Choir*, 207.

¹⁶⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (New York, New York: Viking, 2013).

¹⁶⁸ Rachel Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication, Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

¹⁶⁹ Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User’s Guide* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014).

¹⁷⁰ MacCulloch, *Silence*, 121-122.

¹⁷¹ Podmore, “Mysterium secretum et silentiosum”, Perlego.

begging to be ransomed in the churchyard, where they cling to gravestones, begging the dead to save them, till the abbey steps are slippery with blood and the sacred ground smells like a butcher's shop, as if nothing were sacred. For nothing is sacred in England anymore.¹⁷²

The violation of sanctuary is secondary here (although it is a grave sin); sanctuary has already been attained by Christ's sacrifice and it is theologically impossible to reject the principle of sanctuary. Sanctuary was fulfilled when Christ lived a blameless life and died an unblemished 'lamb of God'. The *primary* purpose of sanctuary is to allow God to dwell among men: "Let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them," God had commanded Moses in Exodus 25:8. The sanctuary was built according to the pattern given by God to Moses, and it replicated "the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man" (Hebrews 8:2-5). Christ's blood was the only acceptable offering that could be taken inside the sanctuary. The only visible blood in the temple was that of the slain goat of the Lord (symbolising the accumulated sins of the congregation). After the cleansing, the sins of the people were transferred to the scapegoat called Azazel who was thereby led to the wilderness to wander till it died¹⁷³.

'As the priest, in removing the sins from the sanctuary, confessed them upon the head of the scapegoat, so Christ will place all confessed sins upon Satan, the originator and instigator of sin.' The scapegoat, bearing the sins of Israel, was sent away "into a land not inhabited" (Leviticus 16:22); so Satan, bearing the guilt of all the sins which he has caused God's people to commit, will be for a thousand years confined to the earth, which will at that time be desolate, without inhabitant (Revelation 20:1-3).¹⁷⁴

It was not unnatural for the abbey steps to smell like a butcher's shop, but the bloodstained steps in *The White Queen* do not symbolise confession or an acceptance of the proffered confession— if the blood of a congregation claiming holy sanctuary is split, it is a desecration of Christ's sacrifice. This episode is doubtless meant to mirror the

¹⁷² Gregory, *The White Queen*, Perlego.

¹⁷³ Milian Lauritz Andreassen, *The Sanctuary Service* (Hagerstown: Herald Publishing Association, 2006), 209.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

martyrdom of Henry¹⁷⁵, who bled on the pavement of the chapel outside the Tower of London. The evil-doer is banished from God's presence into "a land not inhabited" - and if the instigator of evil is the king of the land (as Edward is) what implication does it have for the place over which he reigns? There are two aspects to this situation: the desecration of sanctuary equals banishing God from humanity; and the punishment for this is to roam the wilderness till death.¹⁷⁶ Edward's sins are visited on his land, which is the Godforsaken, uninhabited wilderness we see in *The Cousins' War*. As we see in *The Red Queen*, Edward's queen is no paragon of virtue. Margaret is not surprised when Elizabeth's daughter is receptive to her uncle's advances because "the mother is a whore; and it turns out that the daughter is no better". In a cruel twist of irony, "the whore's" son is sent out to his death by his mother in her pursuit for the throne:

"Godspeed," I say to him. He kneels to me and I put my hand on his head in blessing. "Where will you go?"
"To the safest place in London," he says with a rueful smile. 'A place that loved your husband and will never forgive Duke Richard for betraying him. The only honest business in London.'
'Where d'you mean?'
'The whorehouse,' he says with a grin.
Then he turns into the darkness and is gone.¹⁷⁷

Godforsakenness also takes on other forms in the narrative, most importantly the guise of battles and the fear of death (we may recall Shakespeare's 'So bad a death argues a monstrous life' and 'Ah, what a sign it is of evil life, Where death's approach is seen so terrible!'), especially a fear of death of the monarch. "You will remember me in your prayers, I hope," says the yet uncrowned Edward to his newlywed Elizabeth. "But it will be a secret between you and me and God. And two of us will be silent for sure, for one of us is God and the other is dead."¹⁷⁸ While God is dead for Holocaust theologians because he is silent during the crucifixion and afterwards, in Gregory he has been driven out of the land by incest, shedding the blood of kin, the violation of sanctuary, and

¹⁷⁵ Although we have no proof of the historicity of this episode, it is a staple in Tudor propaganda. Henry's double-bleeding was supposed to be proof of two things: one, that he had been murdered wrongly, and second, that it was Richard III (in whose presence his body bled a second time) who had murdered him (it was Edward IV).

¹⁷⁶ Andreasen, *The Sanctuary Service*, 210.

¹⁷⁷ Gregory, *The White Queen*, Perlego.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

regicide, a banishment without the hope of redemptive love or forgiveness. Gregory's portrait of the silent, smiling Henry in the midst of this desolation resembles the early medieval Christian mystic: one who has been initiated (*mystes*) into a secret (*secretus*, 'set apart, withdrawn, hidden'¹⁷⁹) away from the world, like one who is hermetically held within the ancient mystery religions, about which the mystic must keep silent. The grace of the *mysterium et secretum* makes this silence a privilege to experience: the divine gift of one who has been enlightened but who holds silent about the unspeakable content of their sacred wisdom. All devotional silence is a religious mystery; 'the inexpressible secret of the *mysterium*' is profoundly unknowable because it is beyond the reach of language. If, even in the absence of God, divine hearing can be made possible, and it can be proof of sacred presence, then how does one proceed to *speak* about it¹⁸⁰? In short, how can we find words to approach and explain Henry's wordlessness?

One simple explanation of this conundrum is prayer, the heart of mystical theology from its origin to the present day. Silent prayer is the only way of opening oneself to the Unspeakable God even if it means having to, in a Godforsaken wilderness, struggle with God. It is this apophatic, agonistic prayer that reaches from humanity's deepest despair to the divine. In Podmore's words, 'Out of these depths (*de profundis*), deep calls unto deep (*abyssus abyssum invocat*), and the self is emptied within the abyss of God...' ¹⁸¹ The quiet, praying figure of the anchorite Henry VI answers Jesus' call to "go into your room, close the door, and pray to Your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6:6)

In the history of silence as a Christian practice a word we encounter regularly is Hesychasm—the Eastern Orthodox eremitic practice of cultivating inner silence as a method of seeing and knowing God.¹⁸² Important texts written by hesychastic monks

¹⁷⁹ Podmore, "Mysterium secretum et silentiosum", Perlego.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Frank England, "Silence of God" in *Fictions of God* (Pickwick Publications, 2020), Perlego. Hesychastic practices have their roots in Platonic ascetic ideals. Saint John of Sinai writes: Hesychasm is the enclosing of the bodiless primary cognitive faculty of the soul (Orthodoxy teaches of two cognitive faculties, the nous and logos) in the bodily house of the body.

contain advice about the structuring of silent prayer to achieve their purposes¹⁸³. This method of prayer involves a retreating into one's body ('the cell for anyone seeking Christ in the silent depths of the heart') and 'withdrawing from the world of the senses in desire of *theoria* or contemplation: a visionary experiential intuition of God derived from the wisdom of love and faith.'¹⁸⁴ This is very different from what the Rule of St Benedict preached about silence (that it is mainly a form of expressing respect and obedience for the abbots¹⁸⁵) and St Benedict set the tradition for much of Western monasticism. But analogous practices of silent interiority is present throughout Western monastics as well. The prayer of recollection (*Recogimiento*) recognises and honours the desire of the soul for sacred solitude, an attempt to recover its wholeness by withdrawal from the material in order to unite with the divine.¹⁸⁶

Podmore compares *Recogimiento* with the Eckhartian concepts of detachment and releasement: 'This recollection involves an *active* withdrawal of the external senses (analogous to Eckhartian detachment: *Abgeschiedenheit*) in order to clear space for a *passive* centering on the interiority's attention on the Divine (somewhat akin to Eckhart's releasement: *Gelassenheit*). Such withdrawal goes deeper than practices of active mental *ascesis* in expressing a form of passive prayer as focussed receptivity to God -- as a resting or waiting upon God for a response to one's prayers of petition, as the silence of listening which follows the practice of speech and restless struggle.'¹⁸⁷ Henry's silence takes the reader deeper into the heart of the tensions generated by the horrors of the war, and the theology of this silence perhaps exhibits these horrors more than the narrative itself. Henry's inability to 'wake up' at once evokes the *mysterium tremendum* of contact with the divine and emphasises the distance between the scorched realm and His Presence - confirmed only by His Absence¹⁸⁸.

¹⁸³ Western theologians roundly reject hesychasm because of its quietism, although tenets of the 17th-century Western quietists are not characteristic of Greek hesychasm.

¹⁸⁴ Podmore, "Mysterium secretum et silentiosum", Perlego.

¹⁸⁵ England, *Silence of God*, Perlego.

¹⁸⁶ The See of Rome has often condemned theories posited by Pseudo Dionysius as absurd. Pope Innocent XI called his theory of the three stages of perfection (catharsis, *theoria*, and *theosis*) "the greatest absurdity in Mystical Theology."

¹⁸⁷ Podmore, "Mysterium secretum et silentiosum", Perlego.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

Gregory's Henry is akin to Kierkegaard's 'anxious Knight of Faith' Abraham: Abraham is not privy to God's plan when he is commanded by God to carry out the horrific task of murdering his first-born son Isaac¹⁸⁹. God's silence isolates and singles Abraham out as a lone individual in a secret relationship (covenant?) with the Absolute, 'sacrificing the ethical for the sake of a religious mystery'¹⁹⁰. This mystery is faith. In Kierkegaard's words, 'Faith is this paradox, and the single individual simply cannot make himself understandable to anyone.'¹⁹¹ Abraham's 'most difficult attachment' to God (according to Agacinski's exegesis) becomes his detachment from Isaac, 'a sacrifice of relation to the other demanded by Abraham's anxious and secret communion with God'¹⁹². This horrific command becomes the source of Abraham's experience of the *mysterium tremendum*, and he himself becomes a source of a *horror religiosus*.

Henry's 'smiling, waking sleep, hearing only the voices of angels' can be understood as a prototype of Abraham's 'secret link' with God, what Derrida thinks is 'a terrible mystery, a secret to make you tremble' in his discussion of Kierkegaard.¹⁹³ His attachment to the divine necessitates a detachment from his subjects, of whom he is the father. This 'monstrous, outrageous, barely conceivable' call for a meaningless sacrifice can only be perceived by the 'absurdity' of faith. If God sees in secret and communicates in secret, the believer has silence forced on him by his belief. The idea of a God who sees in secret also inspires contemplative prayer where the communication is wholly interiorised and silent. Silence, then, is God's very identity. 'If he were to speak to us all the time without any secrets, he wouldn't be the other,' Derrida states.¹⁹⁴ Yet Frank England's evangelist but engaging '*The Silence of God*' posits a question for Derrida: 'If silence is *who* the divine creator is - if silence is of the character of God; and if silence is *how* God communicates - if silence is the mode of interaction with which the sacred engages with the material and the temporal; then silence, rather paradoxically, recasts

¹⁸⁹ John Lippitt, *The Routledge Guidebook to Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* (New York, Routledge, 2003), Perlego.

¹⁹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 60-84.

¹⁹¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Jovian Press, 2016), Accessed on Perlego.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Quoted by Simon D. Podmore in *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God: Anatomy of the Abyss* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 43.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 44.

itself as a form of communication. And if silence communicates, then it must employ some mode or modes of reciprocal interchange.¹⁹⁵ These questions are pertinent, but the ‘absurdity’ of faith prevents an easy resolution of such matters. Why ‘Heaven itself falls silent’ (Revelations 8:1) can only be answered by ‘Let all the earth fall silent before God’ (Habakkuk 2:20).

Fear and Trembling begins by acknowledging the failure of Johannes de Silentio to understand Abraham’s circumstances, because the very nature of Abraham’s relationship with God resists exegesis. Henry’s mystical silence also involves this kenosis -- an abandonment of speech in recognition of the lowliness of all things material -- as the beginning of communication with the divine. The sacrifice (of his subjects) is the lamb that God himself provides for the burnt offering. Perhaps the analogy can be extended to equate Isaac’s redemption with the restoration of Henry VII on England’s throne: the monstrous sacrifice is ultimately incomplete. The messenger of God stays Abraham’s hand; England is saved from complete destruction by Henry Tudor’s victory. The secret, silent communion with God is rewarded, but the meaning of the silence cannot be decoded. It is nothing, and everything. Is there, perhaps, a hint of a struggle with the darker side of the divine? To quote Podmore again, ‘perhaps Abraham’s silence is one of self-enclosed despair before a God who now reveals the darkness of his shadow side?’¹⁹⁶ Because of its inability to reveal itself, this silence is open to multiple readings. Kierkegaard, in fact, suggests that Abraham did struggle to accept God’s diktat, implying that we cannot rule out silence as a language of protest in our understanding of the episode. It is also possible that Abraham’s silence both submits to and struggles with God’s command, yet the suggestion that it is a quiet protest against the God ‘who sees’ is compelling, because it allows us to question what we mean when we accuse God of being silent, of ‘recognizing the distress and counting the tears and forgetting nothing’¹⁹⁷?

To say ‘God was silent’ of any given moment (during the crucifixion, the Holocaust, the ethnic cleansings) reveals more about the human experience of a certain historical event than the nature of God. Paradoxically, if silence speaks, Henry’s silence

¹⁹⁵ England, *Silence of God*, Perlego.

¹⁹⁶ Podmore, *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God*, Perlego.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

speaks about the dead, the survivors, and the witnesses of the Wars of the Roses, and conceals in its ‘nothingness’ and ‘everythingness’ a vista of muted traumas that cannot be spoken about openly. Every character in *The Cousins' War* is compelled to live in the shadow of this silence, and endure its burden. Silence is a common response in the novels to phrases like "Godspeed", "God willing", and "God be with you." Speechlessness can be caused by a very justified shame¹⁹⁸, or it can be a method of forgetting the trauma embedded in all post-war depictions of violence. We do not encounter these as facts in the series, but images commemorating sundry modern evils emerge throughout the story.

In *Silence: A Christian History*, MacCulloch identifies three areas of ‘conscious shame’ for western churches: ‘the concealment of clerical child abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, the relationship of all Western Churches to the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews, and worldwide Christian attitudes towards slavery, particularly as they have affected African-Americans.’¹⁹⁹ Perhaps one may suggest that the series instructs us about these various silences -- there is the muteness of horror surrounding the events on the battlefield, there is silence in Margaret’s slew of unsuccessful marriages: ‘I pray to God to forgive me for my sins to my husband, and to receive him into His holy kingdom where there is no war and no rival kings. It is only when I hear the bell start to toll over and over in the tower above my head that I realise it is dawn, and I have been on my knees all the night, and that my husband of thirteen years died without asking for me.’²⁰⁰

Following his uncle’s departure, Henry Tudor has to face the Yorkist army alone, and communicates his loss via wordlessness:

‘Godspeed, Your Grace.’

Henry nods, and tries not to feel a sense of terrible loss as the man who has hardly left his side in the twenty-eight years of his young life turns his horse and canters slowly away, west to Wales.’²⁰¹

There is an incomprehensible silence (seeking explication) that convey how characters process events like regicide:

¹⁹⁸ MacCulloch, *Silence*, 254.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.,

²⁰⁰ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 206.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 366-367.

'What was he talking about? The death of Warwick?'
 'No, I say shortly. Something worse.'
 'Edward of Lancaster? The young Prince?'
 I shake my head. 'That was in battle.'
 'Not the old king?'
 'We never speak of it. Ever.'²⁰²

These are wounded silences (silences engaging continually with unhealed memories) but there is also the more self-consciously pious silence of Margaret's prayer. And amid these entangled webs of meaningful silences is the ideal Franciscan silent retreat recommended by Elizabeth Woodville's brother Anthony, a sly glimpse at the sort of life Henry would have preferred:

'I want to ride from monastery to monastery and rise at dawn to pray and,
 where there is no religious house for me to spend the night, I want to sleep
 under the stars and seek God in the silence... I have to have silence to hear the
 voice of God. And silence to write my poetry. And silence to be myself.'²⁰³

Yet the narrative suggests repeatedly that an epiphany of God might never be revealed in mystical silence or in secret visions that come to hopeful young women. The manifold moral truths of our lives are recorded in 'the ethical primacy of the human face'.²⁰⁴ Unlike Gloucester and Henry Tudor in Shakespeare, there is no corrective against Margaret's and Anthony's obsessive pursuit of a mystical-religious relationship with God at the cost of their relationship with their subjects and peer (Margaret assists in the murder of the two young princes in the tower and Anthony is an important fighter in Edward's army). Seen at a distance, of course, each instance of interiority is wholly inaccessible, and we can hope to understand them only in terms of one another. An obdurate insistence on a mystical/metaphysical oneness with God may be as totalising as the single minded pursuit of the throne, an idea reminiscent of the earlier disapproval of royal piety. Gregory seems to believe that the price we have to pay for this isolated, individual, secret relationship with God is as unknowable as the unreachable relationship itself. For Kierkegaard, this price is Isaac, the sacrificial offering. But it can be anyone and anything - England, the church, or, as in Margaret's case, one's own morality. In any case there is in each of us an inner sanctuary inviolable to any kind of desecration. 'This interior,'

²⁰² Gregory, *The White Queen*, Perlego.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ England, *Silence of God*, Perlego.

writes Podmore, ‘inviolable and sacred space - an interior holy of holies in which ‘self’ is unknown in Love - is a silent and secret inner sanctum of divinity which cannot be desecrated.’²⁰⁵

There is no way to negate the fact that divine silence inspires profound fear. Podmore references Henry Susa, who might have been anticipating Kierkegaard’s work on Abraham when he said, ‘Lord, let no one confide in Your silence, for truly Your silence will soon be turned to dreadful thunder.’²⁰⁶

Once Abraham’s hand has been stayed, Isaac has no part to play in the binding, and Abraham never speaks with the Lord after that.²⁰⁷ Mystical communion with the divine does not guarantee salvation: ‘In this wake of solitude, Abraham’s apophatic secret might be read as mere mystification. There is little sense of the mystical union of wills as apophasis gives way to estrangement. We do not read of Abraham’s prayers. We are left, perhaps, to speculate once more upon silence: the silence of God and the silence of Abraham’s state of desolation, abandonment, even God-forsakenness.’²⁰⁸

Henry’s plight comes under the same scrutiny: there is no divine union, only the solitary once-king left to ruminate in a prison cell without God. Such silences are inevitably shrouded in darkness. To quote Podmore again, “the suspicious other demands to know ‘are you praying’, ‘what is your silence hiding?’”²⁰⁹ Gregory does not exclude this angle in her shrewd examination either. Communication with God is often a space of conflict:

‘I am guided by God!’ I protest.
‘Yes, because you think God wants your son to be King of England. I don’t think your God has ever advised you otherwise. You hear only what you want. He only ever commands your preferences.’
I sway as if he has hit me. ‘How dare you! I have lived my life in His service!’

²⁰⁵ Podmore, “Mysterium secretum et silentiosum”, Perlego.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Genesis 22:1-18 is the final conversation Abraham has with the divine.

²⁰⁸ This is a perennial anxiety within mystical theology - interiority is always in the danger of regressing into mere mystification.

²⁰⁹ Podmore, “Mysterium secretum et silentiosum”, Perlego.

‘He always tells you to strive for power and wealth. Are you quite sure it is not your own voice that you hear, speaking through the earthquake, wind, and fire?’²¹⁰

This is the ‘anguish of Abraham’ that Sartre speaks about in his account of Kierkegaard’s treatment of the *Akedah*: ‘This is the anguish that Kierkegaard called the anguish of Abraham. You know the story: an angel commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son: and obedience was obligatory, if it really was an angel who had appeared and said, ‘Thou, Abraham, shalt sacrifice thy son.’ But anyone in such a case would wonder, first, if it was indeed an angel and, secondly, *whether I am indeed Abraham*. Where are the proofs? ...If an angel appears to me, what is the proof that it is an angel; or, if I hear voices, who can prove that they proceed from heaven and not from hell, or from my own subconscious or some pathological condition? Who can prove that they are really addressed to me?’²¹¹

But Gregory uses Henry’s silence to subvert the notions of danger the other silences in the narrative foster: while Margaret’s saints’ knees, Anthony’s retreats, Elizabeth’s witchcraft, and the deadly silences of the battlefield create tension (often between what is religiously right and what is ethically right), Henry’s silence is grounded in the contentment that was the primary Christian theme in Shakespeare’s tetralogy. Instead of inspiring the fear and anxiety that Kierkegaard’s absurd faith produces, Henry’s holy listening affirms a more medieval idea: the inalienable individual right to seek religious comfort in secrecy and in silence before God. Henry’s silence creates a sense of releasement between God and his soul (*Gelassenheit*), and this instigates the closure we find at the end of the story. The silence is what unites Lancaster and York, recognising that the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ are one in God’s presence. It resonates with Lukacs’ thought that *Fear and Trembling* helps him ‘lose God’.²¹² The first world war added to the dilemmas raised by Kierkegaard; mystical morality forbids violating the absolute commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’. But there is one crucial difference: in a secularised world, there is no one to save Isaac (or the object of sacrifice). This also forms the basis of Kafka’s misgivings about the ‘Abraham in the clouds’ Kierkegaard creates: ‘What I mean is, affirmativeness becomes objectionable when it reaches too high. He

²¹⁰ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 278.

²¹¹ Quoted by Lipitt in *The Routledge Guide to Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling*, Perlego.

²¹² Ibid.

doesn't see the ordinary man (with whom, on the whole, he knows how to talk remarkably well) and paints this monstrous 'Abraham in the clouds.'²¹³ To examine this idea further we return to Mark Taylor's introductory proposition in *Seeing Silence*: the beginning of all silence is death.

Henry's Death

When Margaret Beaufort describes Henry's death it is accompanied by her awareness that, because she is defined by her faith in Henry's holiness, she is speaking of some kind of self-erasure. The fervent belief that no one would be evil enough to hurt the merciful, sacred figure was part of the Lancastrian identity. This murder undermines Margaret's self-portrait, and the Lancastrian cause is desperately uncertain.

Edward came into London in a triumphal procession, Queen Margaret of Anjou in his train, and the same night our king, the true king, the only king, King Henry of Lancaster, died in his rooms at the Tower. They gave out that he was ill, that he was weak with ill-health. I knew in my heart that he died a martyr on the blade of the York usurpers.²¹⁴

The image of Henry's death is fraught with anxiety from the beginning. Women shudder at the thought of murdering a saintly king; even Yorkist men shy away from regicide: 'I close my eyes in horror at the thought of the king, all but a saint, being martyred by his own subject who has sworn loyalty to him.' This is Margaret's response to her husband's question, 'What if the king is killed in battle? What if York brings his broadsword down on the king's sanctified head?'²¹⁵ This modern sentiment does Lord Stafford credit, but it is exceedingly strange for a late medieval European soldier and courtier to express such chagrin over the possible murder of a king during a bitter struggle for power. It is consciously done: Henry is monarch of two countries, and a patron of religious learning. It was a sin thrice over to shed his blood. The graveness of the sin is easily bypassed by modern readers who are no strangers to frequent political assassinations but Elizabeth is more than alarmed when she finds out that her husband and his brothers have murdered

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 344.

²¹⁵ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 250-271.

the previous king in his cell. Her mother brings it up while the ‘forgotten king is being returned to his prayers,’²¹⁶ and the young witch is incredulous:

‘But who could bring themselves to kill him? He is a helpless man, a half-wit. Who could have such a hard heart as to kill him when he is our prisoner? He spends his days on his knees before a prie-dieu and gazing without speaking out of the window. To kill him would be like massacring a fool. And there are those who say he is a holy fool. There are those who say he is a saint. Who would dare murder a saint?’²¹⁷

Here again the hated idea is surrounded by silence, as Elizabeth berates her mother for saying such vile things: “You shouldn’t even speak of such things.”²¹⁸ This silence makes its way into every relationship Elizabeth has. It undermines her relationship with Edward and darkens her easy cordiality with her brother Anthony. She finds it impossible to conceptualise or narrate Henry’s death even after he has been buried. ‘Henry, madman or saint, is a consecrated king,’ she says. ‘His body is sacred. He is in the heart of his own kingdom, his own city, his own tower: he must be safe here. He is guarded by good men. He is a prisoner of honour to the House of York. He should be as secure as if he were in his own court: he trusts to us for his safe-keeping.

He is one frail man to three young warriors. How can they not be merciful? He is their cousin, their kinsman, and they all three once swore to love and be faithful to him. He is sleeping like a child when the three come into the room. What will happen to us all if they can bring themselves to murder a man as innocent and helpless as a sleeping boy?’²¹⁹

Though the ostensible issue at hand is Henry’s murder, Gregory takes advantage of Elizabeth’s stunned bewilderment to make a statement applicable to the sheer psychological burden of existing in a ruthless world. Can we read her unnerving fear as true shame? Is it standard for elegant ladies to be shocked by the very mention of killing innocents, or is the fear a pathological projection of Elizabeth’s (and the reader’s) religious doubt? Perversely the murder renews Lancastrian hopes, not for redemption or

²¹⁶ Gregory, *The White Queen*, Kindle.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

salvation, but for a lasting worldly recognition, spurring Henry Tudor on to remember and avenge his uncle's murder. It is possible to trace strains of purgatorial agonies in the exquisitely structured murder scene:

On my bare feet, making no noise, I tiptoe through the privy chamber and out into the presence chamber. The guards are silent at the door and I nod at them without a word and they lift their halberds and let me pass. I pause at the head of the stairs and look down. The stair rails curl round and round inside the well of the building...²²⁰

Elizabeth's 'petty pacing' through the Tower reminds us of *Macbeth* - a Christian political parable in which the hero violates the accepted moral order and is consequently fittingly punished by an exclusion from that order: he loses sleep, spouse, and, with her, all hope for a child. But Gregory does not present any such faith in legitimate royal succession (neither does Shakespeare and *Macbeth* ultimately mocks both the natural and political orders and their totalitarianism). In her fiction it is the simple terror of inhuman cruelty rather than treacherous prophecies that threatens to destroy all sense of political order. *Macbeth* and Banquo's fight to 'memorise another Golgotha', as the blood-soaked sergeant reports at the beginning of the play²²¹ is in turn reminiscent of Carlisle's warning in *Richard II* that usurping the throne of a legitimate ruler would devastate England. The possibility that Edward is 'memorising another Golgotha' underpins Elizabeth's description of the murder:

I can see Edward's hand going down and down to the floor below us, where the old king has his rooms. I see Richard's dark head far below me, at the old king's doorway, as if he is waiting to enter; and I hear George's voice floating down the stairwell. 'We thought you had changed your mind!' 'No, it has to be done.'²²²

It follows, doubtless, that 'if it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly'. But Henry, too, is Edward's 'kinsman', and his king, and because Henry is an honoured political prisoner, his guest. But Gregory steers clear of bloodshed: Henry is smothered to death. If ghosts are conventional starters in Senecan revenge tragedies, here

²²⁰ Gregory, *The White Queen*, Kindle.

²²¹ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 1, Sc 2. Accessed on <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/macbeth.1.2.html>

²²² Gregory, *The White Queen*, Kindle.

it is simple guilt-ridden fear. Elizabeth is frozen into silence by Edward's cruelty, and this silence enters the existing network of sinister silences in the long narrative. She has her own 'But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen?'' moment as soon as she knows the deed has been done: 'But I do not call out to stop them. I do not run downstairs and catch Edward's arm and swear that he shall not do this thing. I know that he is in two minds; but I do not throw my opinion on the side of compassion, of living with an enemy, of trusting God for our safety. I do not think: if they do this, what might someone do to us? I see the key in Edward's hand, I hear the turning of the lock, I hear the door open to the king's rooms, and I let the three of them go in, without a word from me.'²²³

Her silence during Henry's death and long after Henry has gone may reflect her powerlessness but it needs to be there for two simple reasons: first, so Henry's desires and presence may exert some force beyond his death, and second, so that silence itself (his own and Elizabeth's) becomes a tool of death -- his silence remarkably also becomes a ghostly presence as Henry Tudor restores peace in England. But why is blood not shed? Why does Gregory avoid the compelling motifs inherent in the theme of blood revenge? She possibly sacrifices one compelling theme in her pursuit of another, hitherto-unexplored possibility of Henry dissolving into his own silence. Elizabeth makes it clear that Edward and his brothers placed a pillow over Henry's mouth and held it there till he stopped breathing: might not the desolation of extreme religious interiority devour one? Isn't Kierkegaard's absurd faith ultimately self-consuming? Isn't this unnatural longing for oneness with God a threat to exteriority, and might not the world exact its own revenge in the face of this perceived threat? Does silence before God become a contested space?

While we cannot completely ignore these implications, it's far more probable that *how* Henry dies finally matters less than the fact that he dies. Throughout the series, it is implied that Henry's mercy would be the end of him.

'The queen herself warned me that the king will pardon and release Herbert, and he will live to attack us again. Mark my words. Our king is an expert at forgiveness. He will forgive the man who raises a sword against him. He will forgive the man who raises England against him. Herbert will be released, and in time he will come back to Wales and he and I will fight all over again for the

²²³ Gregory, *The White Queen*, Perlego.

same handful of castles. The king forgives the Yorks and thinks they will live with him in charity.’²²⁴

This is a little excessive: there is nothing to dampen our emotional response to Henry’s *via dolorosa* at first glance. But Henry’s obstinate silence and refusal to retaliate is finally as destructive as the ‘capricious cruelty’ of the medieval world. And it is certainly ironic that the devastation of the Wars of the Roses begins with a king’s staunch refusal to be cruel to his subjects. These paradoxes are made manifest in the way Gregory fashions Henry VI: ‘He is filled with the greatest of kindness and the greatest of trust. He cannot bear a grudge, he sees every man as a sinner striving to be good and he does what he can to help him. You cannot help but love and admire him.’²²⁵

This paradox prompts the same questions as the *Akedah*: how can a source of virtue bring forth such unfathomable tragedy?

There is nothing to relieve the unbearable religious anxiety that the story reveals. Stafford tries to elide this fact with prudence. ‘He is a great man,’ Stafford tells Margaret. ‘But perhaps not a great king. He is beyond us all. It just makes it very hard for the rest of us. And the common people only see weakness where there is greatness of spirit.’²²⁶ Henry’s silence, and his being stifled to death is a reflection of this central, unresolvable tension, and it is better understood when read in the light of Shakespeare’s trilogy. Just as Richard II, King Lear, and Henry VI are clearly linked -- all of them are humiliated and exiled -- Henry has a clear kinship with Abraham and Job, two overpowering patriarchs from whom an unreasonable sacrifice is demanded. Levinas calls this (the situation where one is forced to abandon ethics to focus on religion) the beginning of Kierkegaardian violence. Kierkegaard’s ‘domain of belief’ does not seek ‘external justification’. ‘Even internally,’ writes Levinas, ‘it combined communication and isolation, and hence violence and passion.’²²⁷ We do not need to empathise unequivocally with Henry to disapprove of theological violence, but Kierkegaard doesn’t seem to commend Abraham’s faith, it is possible that he questions the standard conceptions of what is adequately ethical. Henry is numinously two kingdoms in himself, also a true

²²⁴ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 126.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Quoted by Lipitt in *The Routledge Guide to Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling*, Perlego.

patriarchal figure. This is the burden borne by the other: Isaac is willing to be sacrificed, and England, ‘poor country’, is ‘almost afraid to know itself’. Notwithstanding Levinas’ problems with Kierkegaard, he makes an interesting point about the *Akedah*: ‘the highest point of the whole drama may be the moment when Abraham paused and listened to the voice that would lead him back to the ethical order by commanding him not to commit a human sacrifice.’²²⁸ If God’s second command is Abraham’s reward for having faith in God’s good will, then it is not a true test, since faith requires Abraham to believe in a possibility that Isaac will be sacrificed. This is an ethical/religious paradox: Abraham knows that he must kill Isaac, but also has to *believe* that Isaac will not die. The tragedy is not that Abraham has to choose between his son Isaac and God; it is his lack of options that overwhelms us. Abraham is forced to choose between a divine gift and a divine order. It is God’s injunction that Henry must treat his subjects with mercy, and it is also God’s injunction that Henry protect England from her enemies, just like Abraham has been commanded by God to love Him, and also treasure Isaac, a gift from God to Abraham and Sarah during their old age.

Henry’s stifling underlines a struggle not between the human and the divine, but between the divine and the divine. He is not trapped in a jail cell of his own making or the stubbornness of Isaac’s willing self-sacrifice (he tells his brother Ishmael that he is going to shed more blood on Mount Moriah than his brother did during his circumcision).²²⁹ The Tower is not Gethsemane, and his death will not redeem his subjects. But it is important that the Wars end so England may testify to Henry’s martyrdom. Once Henry is dead, Elizabeth sees a peaceful kingdom after sixteen years: ‘The country is so settled and peaceful one would think there had never been a rival king and armies marching at double time to face each other. The country has welcomed the return of my husband; we have all rushed towards peace.’²³⁰ But peace is not achieved by a character insisting that there is peace; the plot has to accommodate this peace and readers know that there is more mayhem to come. Elizabeth tries to bury her

²²⁸ Genesis 22: 11-13. But the Lord’s messenger called out to Abraham from heaven, “Abraham? Abraham?” Abraham said, “I’m here.” The messenger said, “Don’t stretch out your hand against the young man, and don’t do anything to him. I now know that you revere God and didn’t hold back your son, your only son, from me.”

²²⁹ In Galatians 4:28-29, Paul makes it clear that Ishmael represents the believer’s first birth (the flesh) and Isaac represents the second birth (the Spirit).

²³⁰ Gregory, *The White Queen*, Kindle.

overwhelming guilt in her love for her children, which only serves to deepen the tragedy. Henry's ghost resists such simple obliteration: 'Now and then I can hear the distinctive squeak of joy from my son. Every time I hear his voice my heart lifts that I have a boy, and a prince and that he is a happy baby; and my mother, thinking the same, gives a small nod of satisfaction.'²³¹ This is the elder one of the two Princes in the Tower, both of whom would mysteriously disappear from their rooms in the Tower where their uncle Richard had imprisoned them. Commemoration of Henry's death is forced on Elizabeth, whose silence has facilitated his murder. This is not to say that Henry's blood is on her head and on the heads of her sons; their disappearance only adds to the steadily increasing body count. These anxieties are subsumed into a larger, protracted mourning for a terrible crime. Edward doesn't necessarily pay for his part in Henry's death; he dies an ordinary death, surrounded by his family. Yet the pall of gloom refuses to lift, a sentiment conveyed well by Anthony's pompous poem on the state of his mind:

Somewhat musing,
And more mourning,
In remembering
Th' unsteadfastness;
This world being
Of such wheeling,
Me, contrariying;
What may I guess²³²?

These moments keep Henry's silence alive because his stifling needs to be seen, heard, and experienced again and again, so that it can be re-found. The central moral conflict in Henry's character defies death. And this is what Elizabeth is terrified of: 'This death has been on my conscience even before we did it. How heavily it will sit with me from now on only God and my conscience knows. And what price will I have to pay for my part in it, for my silent listening, without a word of protest.'²³³ Henry is guilty of the same thing: silent listening without a word of protest. Everything Elizabeth tries to put behind her (Henry's death, her family's Lancastrian roots, her mother's trial) is stirred, and she doesn't want to stay in a place where 'armed men can walk into the room of an innocent and hold a pillow over his face'. In the end, bloodshed during battle is merely tedious;

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

what is truly horrible is a kinsman willing to shed your blood for the crown and the throne. In truth, the tower may not be Henry's Gethsemane but England is Golgotha. The sense of unrest Henry's stifling triggers at length becomes an unbearable and unreasonable panic. In a manner unexpected, Henry's silence becomes a living companion in Edward and Richard's court and household. Elizabeth is cowed by this omnipresent 'ghost', and she transforms from a playful flirt to a scheming witch, and ultimately becomes a gloomy elderly woman simmering with anger for her lost son. These strange images of death culminate in the disappearance of the innocent young Richard, her son, and her sending a page boy (disguised as her younger son) to his death. This brings the story closer to its passionately sentimental elements.

Harrowing images of the war, and the theological weight of divine silences make it hard for us to picture that there might be another, more elemental kind of silence that emanates from a story rooted in parental cruelty: the one that is caused by a misery that strips a king of his divine status and his dignity (Henry, Edward, Richard, and Henry Tudor are all isolated, fatherless patriarchs doomed to lead dead-end lives). There is no suggestion of a place that kings can retreat to for care or encouragement. The kindly Duke of Gloucester is missing from Gregory's narrative. Rage and impotent despair mutate into feelings of shame commingled with continued admiration for a family that fatten them as pigs for slaughter. Adults emerging from such veiled childhoods are bound to experience lacerating paranoia throughout their lives: Henry is obsessively pious, Edward is a compulsive womaniser, and Richard is unreasonably cruel. Henry's stifling offers a measure of resolution: it subsumes into itself all the little sorrows that aren't considered noteworthy, but are genuine nevertheless. Gregory's treatment of them attests to this fact. Margaret wants to establish an order of nuns and is jeered at for this. Elizabeth just wants to go home again but she cannot; Anthony wishes to lead a religious life and is burdened with aristocratic duties. Perhaps the lack of a proper theological framework is due to the ethical disorientation of the world she portrays - better theology would merely have been a better cover for their state of disintegration. And this may also be why the characters sometimes seem vague and unpersuasive: they have failed to receive responses that make people feel whole and authentic.

In an extraordinary way, Gregory achieves here a pre-Shakespeare reality effect. Henry's stifling is not another layer of interpretation superimposed on a classic

martyrdom scene, but an attempt to create something that might have existed before the trilogy - the raw, half-baked series of events later polished by a master dramatist. This is a modern illusion, but it is thrilling and convincing. Above everything else, she returns us to the most potent fact that it is impossible to be a merciful king in a merciless world. Henry has enormous, poignant potential for virtuous leadership, and his is an extraordinary image of what a Christian King can be. From a rational perspective, this model of leadership seems especially infantile after the wars. No one can draw comfort from a belief in Henry's selfless empathy and apparently limitless patience— but this is not Gregory's point at all. No amount of robustly practical leadership could insulate humanity against the political catastrophes of the twentieth century, and Gregory throws an unflattering light on the concepts of crusades and 'justice'. All characters are, at all times, inches away from a terrifying state of primordial helplessness. This delicate balance is a double-edged sword; emphasising benevolence and tenderness dilutes discussions of guilt, moral responsibility, and the toxic bonds within family. Christian ideals of the warrior king revolve around bravery so much²³⁴ (as has been previously explored in our examination of early medieval requirements of kingship) that they miss why Mary is a far more attractive model of guidance and leadership. Marian devotions are still a popular religious tradition within Roman Catholicism; Pope John Paul II entrusted and consecrated the entire world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1982 and 1984, a ritual repeated by Pope Francis in 2013.²³⁵ Gregory invokes what was most appealing about late medieval religious culture: its recognition of the widespread need for a figure who had Seven Joys and Seven Sorrows. In this context it is also interesting to recall how popular Marian meditations were during Henry's times. In *The Cousins' Wars* fulfilling this requirement is a political task to be treated with requisite seriousness. So what weakens and wears down the series in the beginning enriches it later.

Henry's death fulfils, with appropriate cathartic intent, our emotional requirement to feel usefully and profoundly sorry for all the devastation we are surrounded by. It is a death 'most foul, strange, and unnatural' but it does not provoke the revenge-instinct. Henry's initial inability to wake up (dreaming and smiling in his dreams) potentially

²³⁴Gregory, *The White Queen*, Kindle.

²³⁵ "Our Lady of Fatima and Pope Francis' consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary," Archdiocese of Baltimore, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://www.archbalt.org/our-lady-of-fatima-and-pope-francis-consecration-of-the-world-to-the-immaculate-heart-of-mary/>.

threatens to undo everything that has gone before it but being smothered to death gives him his own voice (much like madness releases Ophelia from her silence, Henry's decidedly good madness releases him from his role as king of all he perceives). Because his character is rooted in Very Christian Values, it is completely alien to the narrative. In other words, if he were given an audible voice, it would be considered madness as well. Language itself is corrupted to accommodate falsehoods:

'I want you to believe that they died or they were taken, without my order, without my knowledge, without my consent, while I was far away preparing to fight. To fight your brothers, actually. One night.'
'Which night?' I ask.
'The night that it started to rain...'
'Oh, that night.'
He hesitates. 'Do you believe me, that I am innocent of their deaths?'
'No,' I say coldly. 'I don't believe you. I don't trust you. But I am not certain. I am horribly uncertain of everything...'
'So what will you do?' I ask.
'I'll do nothing, and say nothing,' he decides, his voice is bleak and weary.²³⁶

Words fail to describe the misery caused by human cruelty. Henry's silence and murder cannot re-voice the dead, but it can be an admittance of the horrors England has been forced to live with since the Hundred Years' Wars. To be clear, silence cannot evoke the brutality of what has been witnessed, or correctly represent it - it can only contain these feelings. In *The Silence of God*, Frank England describes perfectly why suffering can express nothing more than a mourning for itself: 'Should they find some forms of verbal saying, the task remained to order these terms so as to attempt to stutter their protests into sensible meanings in grammars that already had excluded them as human speakers.'²³⁷ England is speaking about Holocaust survivors but, in truth, he speaks for all silent sufferers, especially when he speculates about the identity of the people listening to the tales of the survivors: 'For they wept to a pitiless and increasingly tenebrous sky, darkened by the sooty residue of the damned, which then floated back down to rest upon the sparse diet of bread and gruel and on the persons who no longer were persons...'²³⁸ The air is heavy with the refrain of "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Words only re-etch memories of bloodshed onto the minds of the

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ England, *Silence of God*, Perlego.

²³⁸ Ibid.

suffering. For hope of divine deliverance we have to turn away from empty words towards 'the empty stillness of divine silence'.²³⁹ It is natural for readers to depend on Henry's 'ghost' for a sense of closure, to expect his ghost to pursue the living. But the ghost is a sympathetic stillness—almost an attempt to stand in for an absent divinity. Henry Tudor is not planning to attack England on the behest of his great uncle's ghost; he is actively creating his own destiny as a warrior king, whereas Shakespeare's Henry Tudor almost yields to his fate as soon as Henry VI's ghost blesses him on the night before the battle. Here Henry has the theological consolation of being a prime player in a Christian revenge tale, but Gregory resurrects Henry's silence repeatedly without any intention of avenging his death. And Henry's silence, too, is haunted by its own ghosts.

Henry's Death and the Early Mystics

(Now that all is silent within me, will I, who have
hardly known how to talk to myself, still be able to
speak? I almost cannot hear myself any more. On this
'almost' I shall rest my words or, rather, what stub-
bornly still wants to be words—though they be deaf
to the call of the world—and take entire charge of
them. Expressing nothing, they will express me all the
better.)

Pre-Dialogue, II

By Edmond Jabes

Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop

Jabes, the famous French surrealist who had to flee Egypt during the Suez Crisis of 1956, asserts that God withdraws Himself from a crisis to 'make possible our speaking'.²⁴⁰ If, indeed, "God's withdrawal" can open the space for the word and the human word makes it possible to subjugate and denigrate, then no amount of theological consolation (that the now-absent God has given humanity the gift of the word and, with it, the gift of creation) can stem outrage at this divine presence whose silence exacts such an unthinkable price. It is not here claimed that Henry approaches God within this emptiness created by God. Yet there is a similarity between God's withdrawal from the world (very different from the Godforsakenness that results from the violation of sanctuary) and Kierkegaard's concept of the soul yearning to 'let go of self and rest

²³⁹ Podmore, "Mysterium secretum et silentiosum", Perlego.

²⁴⁰ Quoted by England, *Silence of God*, Perlego.

completely in God, in a state of detachment (*Abgeschiedenheit*) and releasement (*Gelassenheit*).²⁴¹ Podmore calls this 'an emptying of the self-will into the divine will in which God also rests in the soul'.²⁴² This *emptying* of space is necessary to allow God's essence (not God himself) into the human soul. In *Interior Castle*, St Teresa of Avila (of the Spanish Carmelite tradition) compares this shared space to 'a mansion of His where He and the soul rejoice in each other alone in profound silence'.²⁴³ Since God secretly shows us that he hears our prayers, 'it is well to be silent, as He has drawn us into His presence'.²⁴⁴ This great secret castle can also be built in the space created by God's withdrawal, who must be present because He had to depart, and He wasn't banished by humans. The space God grants humans to create their own words may be 'the principal chamber in which God and the soul hold their most secret intercourse'.²⁴⁵ St Teresa asserts that this union is a 'spiritual marriage'²⁴⁶ and God Himself enters the innermost centre of the soul in which He dwells too, recalling Jabes' "that which contains is itself contained".²⁴⁷ This centre is inaccessible to the Devil himself and to exteriority in general. John of the Cross²⁴⁸ extends her contention to include the possibility that the faculties themselves need to be shut down to receive these divine blessings in secrecy and in silence. Only when '*dum quietum silentium containeret omnia*' (peaceful silence encloses all) can the soul journey to the Lord and burn with love in a 'dark and secret contemplation'.²⁴⁹ This is the self-same journey of contemplation symbolised by the ladder to heaven Jacob saw as he slept²⁵⁰ (we may recall the numerous descriptions of Henry as 'sleeping', 'dreaming', 'unable to wake up', and 'hearing the voice of angels'). Once the soul has overcome the Dark Night of the Soul it proceeds on a mystical ascent

²⁴¹ This state of interiority is a substantial threat to exteriority.

²⁴² Podmore, "Mysterium secretum et silentiosum", Perlego.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle or The Mansions* (1577) Accessed on <https://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/tic/index.htm>

²⁴⁵ Quoted by Podmore in "Mysterium secretum et silentiosum", Perlego.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ John of the Cross is identified most with the phrase 'Dark Night of the Soul' but he never used that in any of his writings.

²⁴⁹ Podmore, "Mysterium secretum et silentiosum", Perlego.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

through the 'dark night of faith, in detachment (Kierkegaard's *Abgeschiedenheit*) and purgation of itself...'²⁵¹ Let us return to Gregory's description of Henry's sleep/silence:

The king dreams on, smiling in his waking sleep...I try to let my soul drift to God, and feel the absorbing peace that must wash the soul of the king so that he does not see the worried faces of his counsellors, and is even blind to his wife when she puts his newborn baby son in his arms...²⁵²

The concept of letting the soul 'drift to God' is key to this notion of mystical ascent that John of the Cross puts forward in *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.²⁵³ Silence and secrecy are divine rather than demonic for apophatic mystics because they instigate contemplation, 'whereby the understanding has the loftiest knowledge of God, called mystical theology'.²⁵⁴ This, again, evokes an 'absurd faith' since mystical theology is "a secret even to the understanding that receives it".²⁵⁵ John calls this 'the abyss of faith, where the understanding must remain in darkness, and must journey in darkness, by love and in faith, and not by much reasoning'.²⁵⁶ According to the mystics, therefore, Henry is so much sacrificing exteriority (as Kierkegaard and Derrida propound) as *stifling* it, stilling it into passivity to allow God within: 'It is best to learn to silence the faculties and cause them to be still, so that God may speak'.²⁵⁷ This form of mystical prayer 'dissolves the self-will within a dark night of silence'.²⁵⁸ Exteriority is silenced, interiority also falls silent and *silentium* reigns.

Conclusion

What happens when a monarch subjects himself to such self-emptying? As we previously explored, all exteriority transforms into The Other to be sacrificed like Isaac on Mount Moriah, and, in this context, England during the Wars. In Gregory's words, 'Who knows

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 51-52.

²⁵³ *Subida del Monte Carmelo* is a treatise on achieving mystical union with Christ written between 1578 and 1579 right after John of the Cross escaped from prison; Accessed on <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/ascent-of-mt-carmel-12494>.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 55.

what he thinks, poor soul? Who knows what he understands now, or even if he can stay awake?'²⁵⁹ Henry's interior withdrawal may be what opens him to a previously hidden exteriority. In *The Way of Perfection*, St Teresa rejoices that her rapture (union with God) occurs silently and secretly because it protects her from the Devil's temptations. Silence also helps her preserve 'the secret of our sufferings between the self and God'.²⁶⁰

But far more importantly, such silence in the face of 'unjust condemnations' is also an Imitation of Christ who kept silent when questioned by Pilate. The three Synoptic Gospels emphasise that Jesus kept silent at key moments during his trial— MacCulloch calls it 'one of the most eloquent quiet stares in human history'.²⁶¹

Now Jesus stood before the governor. And the governor asked Him, saying,
"Are You the King of the Jews?"

Jesus said to him, "It is as you say." And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing.

Then Pilate said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" But He answered him not one word, so that the governor marveled greatly. (Matthew 27:11-14)²⁶²

Imitatio Christi is the beginning of all Christian journeying unto salvation, and as such it is fitting that this triggers a holy contemplation. Thus the self-emptying does not shut the other out, or sacrifice it. The grace of *Imitatio Christi* transfigures the 'unassailable alterity between self and God, and between self and other'.²⁶³ Through Christ's love, all relationships between interiority, exteriority and inter-subjectivity are transcended as the boundaries between the self and the other dissolve. Quakers call this unhindered resting place the inner light. Mark Taylor refers to Pierre Lacout's meditation entitled '*God is Silence*' while discussing this Quaker theory: 'In this deep silence, there comes a silence deeper still which is religious experience in its purest form. I want to express this

²⁵⁹ Podmore, "Mysterium secretum et silentiosum", Perlego.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ MacCulloch, *Silence*, 33-34.

²⁶² Podmore, "Mysterium secretum et silentiosum", Perlego.

²⁶³ Ibid.

experience and so I seek for the right words. And the richest words I find are the simplest, the most silent ones: Presence, Inner Light, Love, Life.²⁶⁴

Quite surprisingly, Ronald M. Green's recent work on Kierkegaard appears to endorse this view as well. Faith involves 'a selfless care in which all proprietary claims have been renounced': '*Fear and Trembling* begins to suggest to us that the text as a whole is not is not quite the terrifying defense of religiously commanded homicide as it seems to be. Rather, it begins to appear as a more traditional defense of selfless love as a central feature of the religious life.'²⁶⁵

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard defends using love to dissolve these external boundaries:

Love does not seek its own. Love does not seek its own, for there are no mine and yours in love. But "mine" and "yours" are only relational specifications of "one's own"; thus, if there are no mine and yours, there is no "one's own" either. But if there is no "one's own" at all, then it is of course impossible to seek one's own.²⁶⁶

In the context of the narrative, Henry's silence cannot bridge the deep divide between the members of the Plantagenet family, and neither Kierkegaard nor John of the Cross wants us to interpret their concepts so literally. But it does allow for a delayed and reluctant yet purposeful reflection upon the divide itself, and the hatred it has engendered. After Henry's death, characters lose the ability to speak about him or about his legacy. Elizabeth tells Anthony that she never discusses the 'old king' with Edward, and Margaret seemingly forgets all about the holy king who inspired her childhood dreams of establishing a holy order. Henry Tudor maintains a staunch silence on the subject, which seems almost ridiculous because he was claiming the right to rule on the virtue of

²⁶⁴ Taylor, *Seeing Silence*, Perlego.

²⁶⁵ Quoted by Lipitt in *The Routledge Guide to Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, Perlego.

²⁶⁶ Elsewhere in his *Three Edifying Discourses* Kierkegaard wrote, 'The love which covers a multitude of sins in never deceived... When hate dwells in the heart, then sin lies at a man's door, and its manifold desires exist in him; but when love dwells in the heart, then sin flees far away, and he sees it no more. When disputes, malice, wrath, quarrels, dissensions, factions fill the heart, does one then need to go far in order to discover the multitudinousness of sin, or does a man need to love very long to produce these outside of himself! But when joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance dwell in the heart, what wonder, then, that a man, even if he were surrounded by a multitude of sins, remains an alien, a stranger, who understands only a very little about the customs of the country, even if these were explained to him? Would not this, then, be a covering of the multitude of sins?'

being Henry's nephew. Henry's silence is an experience they cannot escape, but with time it becomes a healing space for the fallen souls to consider who they have become and what possible futures await them. In a way this silence speaks on behalf of them till they commence their own withdrawals, and the novel certainly seems to suggest that they shall. This is how Henry fulfils the task of the contemplative: by extending his interior journey to the restless exterior and providing a path to meditate upon one's own history.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘Yet He did not open His mouth’: Henry VI in the Digital Age

'Got some old-fashioned roses here. See this one, striped red and white.'
'Commandant Beaurepaire,' said Tuppence. 'Us calls it "York and Lancaster" here,' said Perry. 'Wars of the Roses. Smells sweet, don't it?'¹

The murderer in Agatha Christie's 1968 novel *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* goes by the aliases Ms. Yorke and Ms. Lancaster in turns. She had been a wild child all her life, a dancer who aborted a child in her teens ("I was a dancer, I didn't want a child... the doctor said it would be all right, but it wasn't all right"). She later married Sir Phillip Starke, hoping to have another baby but unhinged by guilt over the early abortion, starts murdering children. This is the inside of Yorke/Lancaster's head, a fear-filled space where competing religious virtues are at play continuously. To understand her, we must follow no fewer than three separate discourses: the problem of holy murder or infanticide (kept alive by the powerful *Akedah* rhetoric of human sacrifice), practical applications of the moral teachings of the *Akedah*², and the problematics of divine grace granted by such a course of retribution. This is a lot to ask of a bestselling murder mystery reader, but Christie isn't finished. The mystery drowns out the theological discomfort at the crux of the plot, so this becomes an underdeveloped premise and these ominous elements don't fulfil their promise. But it is a useful document of a particular time in Britain, and Christie weds the child killings to a greater English/Biblical mythos. The language of sacrifice and redemption is familiar.

The experience of reading a twopenny mystery as an exploration of a theological conundrum is complex. The England she writes about - symbolised as a red and white striped rose - has contradictions baked into it from the beginning. It is a nation that espouses freedom and dignity yet treats all suggestions of pacifism with utter contempt. But for someone studying a long lost, rather pathetic late medieval personality, what material change is visible between Jack Cade's rebel forces who stormed the streets of

¹ Agatha Christie, *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (London: Pocket Books, 1982), 85.

² As explored in the previous chapter, *Akedah* is a supreme example of sacrifice also. Throughout the medieval ages, Jews recited parts of the *akedah* daily. A reason for sounding the ram's horns on Rosh Hashanah is to remind people of the substitution of the ram for Isaac.

London in 1450, demanding the arrest of ‘traitors’ surrounding the king and the ‘Arrest Bill Gates’ protestors of 2021 who surrounded his car right before his dinner with Queen Elizabeth II³ (situated as Britain is on the verge of political confusion and collapse)? Like the red and white striped rose, characters like the three Henries are ghosts among the living. In our newfound interest in medievalism, their lives are among many tired lessons that need to be recast and rethought. Fanciful, medievalist alternate versions are relatable and recognisable in our era of extreme political polarisation.

The fourth, and final, chapter of the study will examine how post-9/11 film, television, and popular fiction construct and manipulate the fictional identities of Henry VI (in the TV drama *Game of Thrones*, the 2019 David Michôd film *The King*, and the *Wars of the Roses* tetralogy by bestselling British author Conn Iggulden) in relation to questions surrounding his piety and sleep. In both George R. R. Martin’s historical drama and Michôd’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s *Henriad*, fatherlessness triggers a separation anxiety that places unbearable strain on Henry’s identity, a process we can compare with Freud’s equating religious practices with neuroses in *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices*. Iggulden’s novels, literary works that examine crucial moments of encounter between Henry and his subjects, give us an origin story for his silence and what supports this mythmaking is a series of allegorical parallels we find within European cinema. It is possible to relate this interrogation and denial of Henry’s piety with the questions raised by Bergman’s trilogy on God’s silence, and, more particularly, the famous image of God as a spider (which is, again, borrowed from Ovid’s representation of Arachne.) Further, a theological critique of Iggulden’s radically innovative understanding of Henry’s sleep will be attempted. This critique draws upon the concept known as *theosomnia*, roughly translated as God-sleep, and tries to problematise the Biblical idea of sleep being a hallowed and hallowing activity.

Traces of Henry VI in David Michôd’s *The King*, George R. R. Martin’s *Game of Thrones* and Freud’s Idea of Neuroses

‘You need not fight. These feuds need not be yours,’ says Timothée Chalamet’s Henry V (in David Michôd’s 2019 epic homage to Shakespeare’s *Henriad*) to his brother

³ Kyle Farrell, “‘Arrest Bill Gates!’ Protesters swarm Downing Street as they halt cars at Boris dinner,” in *Daily Express*, October 19, 2021. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1507873/downing-street-protest-boris-johnson-bill-gates-dinner-cars-arrest-latest-news-vn>.

Thomas right after young “Harry Hotspur” Percy has been defeated in the Battle of Shrewsbury⁴. Days later, he assures the Dauphin of France (played by Robert Pattinson) that he knows he doesn’t speak for his father: ‘I know you do not speak for your father so I come to you now, directly. I have not come to surrender. Too much Christian blood will be spilled on this field today. So I propose this. You and I fight, one man on one man. We fight in our armies’ stead. If I lose, my men will leave this place forthwith and forever. You will have my head. If I win, I will assume this kingdom’s crown upon your father’s death. Save your men.’ The Dauphin, gleefully sociopathic, doesn’t agree. ‘Let us make famous that field out there. This little village of Agincourt that will forever mark the site of your callow disgrace.’⁵ *The King* works as a medievalist fantasy - there is something fairytale-like in Michôd’s version of a military king who would willingly sacrifice his life to save Christian blood or forgo his birthright to save his friends.⁶ His insistence on medieval realism paints an ugly, malicious, and bloodthirsty early fifteenth century, yet retells a compelling cultural myth by depicting a ruler as more merciful than he had been. He also makes a significant, revealing choice in his opening shot. The ‘traitor’ Hotspur wades across a sea of freshly slaughtered bodies on a battlefield, a war that splinters England into civil discord.⁷ The anxiety of rebellion hangs around Henry IV as much as it did his unfortunate grandson; Hal’s bravery prevents us from realising what a deep feeling of regretful nostalgia the battle scenes carry. His casting choices have something to do with this haunting quality. Chalamet plays Hal with the detachment that accompanies the character’s distaste for politics. Michôd uses Hal’s fictional softness as

⁴ *The King*, directed by David Michôd, written by Joel Edgerton and David Michôd (2019; Netflix, 2019), Netflix/DVD.

(Since this work has used the published film script of *The King*, the writers have been credited and acknowledged.)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The film was roundly criticised for not depicting any inner conflict or hidden Machiavellian instincts in Hal, and this is partly the reason the film was chosen for inclusion in this chapter. Henry V in *The King* is the image of the Victorious Christ, soldier saints, and warrior saints. Most soldier saints had been martyred during the Diocletianic Persecution of AD 303–313. Was it an uncomplicated stereotype? Nothing involving divine violence can be, but *The King* comes close to idealisation of this character.

⁷ Warfare is significant especially in the filming of *Richard III*, *1 Henry VI*, and *Henry V*, all of which have important battle scenes, rousing battle speeches, the celebration of brave victories, and tragic deaths during combat. Unfortunately, for cinema, this also reduces characters to what Murray Dahm calls ‘clothes-horses’. Renaissance stages did not represent medieval battles in meticulous detail. Both Olivier’s 1944 and Branagh’s 1989 versions of *Henry V* showed us battles directly inspired by the second world war, with Agincourt turned into a version of Somme.

an avenue to explore more complex political issues of dynastic succession, the psychological effects of war, and the possibility of a ‘victory’ when everyone you knew has died (Hal loses his brother and Falstaff to various battles). We watch the English noose tighten on France, but whether it’s Hotspur’s rebellion, or the Dauphin’s foolhardiness, the end result is a muddy field full of corpses and whimpering, wounded soldiers. The modern viewer waits for Henry V to bring England back to normal; he never does.

The King is not only a wish-fulfilment story about how Henry V wins a Very Christian Victory in the Battle of Agincourt. It is a story about how a lifelong pacifist inadvertently begins a civil war that takes his son’s life, and ends only when an illegal usurper defeats Richard III. Stripped of Shakespeare’s Harfleur and Agincourt speeches, it also discloses how our own interest in medieval studies have changed. A substantial amount of cinema derived from Shakespeare’s historical tetralogies is unwatchably horrifying⁸, with battle scenes giving us images of death and devastation reminiscent of surrealism. Such adaptations highlight how close Henry VI’s own story is to one of sheer survival and escape. He is silent throughout the battle of St Albans, so we are never taken into that epicentre of hell; but he does not actively defend his palace during Cade’s rebellion, so we don’t see him marching the streets of London. His marginalisation ironically allows him to live longer than Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VII.

But Michôd’s suggestion of a redemptive, humanist equivalence between a weak-willed Henry V and his cloister-bound son is an uncertain one. It may be the kind of narrative issue that dramatisation entails, but *The King* also makes the suggestion that William Gascoigne had sent the ‘French’ assassin to goad Henry V into declaring war on France.⁹ At the end of the film, his bride-to-be Catherine de Valois explains that her father sent no assassin, and that far from being a victorious military monarch, he is a weak strategist: “So easily riled, so easily beguiled,” she says. Chalamet’s Henry V gives an insight into Shakespeare’s previous trilogy, and he is psychologically closer to Shakespeare’s Henry VI than Lawrence Olivier’s glorious 1944 film hero that was meant to rouse the spirits of the English soldiers on the battlefield. Michôd shares

⁸ The previous versions of *Henry V* are included in the list of Shakespeare films that are too violent. Multiple versions of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are also quite brutal.

⁹ William Gascoigne was the Chief Justice of England during the reign of Henry IV.

Shakespeare's curiosity about fatherhood and accompanying feelings of guilt and regret. Hal refuses to visit his father on his deathbed:

CLOAKED MAN: Your father, His Majesty King Henry, is ill. He requests your presence.

HAL: For what?

CLOAKED MAN: Your presence has been requested.

HAL: I suggest you return to the palace directly and tell him his request was wholly ignored.

CLOAKED MAN: I have been instructed to deliver the request with great urgency.

HAL: Then you might tell him your urgency was also wholly ignored.¹⁰

This memory might come from actual biographical material, but it is also there in Shakespeare. This is the man Hal wanted to be, something very close to Kenneth Branagh's 1989 portrayal of him (in his directorial debut) as a reluctant conqueror dragging his feet to war. Both Branagh and Chalamet play Hal as a young man with a healthy disdain for monarchy.¹¹ Branagh's version contains a brilliant four-minute tracking shot of Hal carrying the body of a young man through a battleground, through a tableau of almost every character in the play, living, wounded, or dead, while the *non nobis, domine* is sung. The assumption of leadership in both films is fraught with trauma: Michôd and Branagh are haunted by a furtive nostalgia for events we have no reason to remember, but we do. While Henry IV unravels, then rallies, over a period of a few years, the *miles Christi* figure is explored in a political setting. The distance that once seemed so vast between Henry V and his son will close to the point that they appear as mirror images of one another. Let us examine Joel Edgerton's screenplay describe Hal's waywardness:

INT. TAVERN / EASTCHEAP -

A space has been cleared on the floor to stage the cockfight. The 'cocks' are Hal and the drinker, crouched on haunches and facing off. Beale stands behind Hal holding a horizontal sword six inches over his head. Another man stands behind the drinker, holding a stick six inches over his.

FALSTAFF Rules are plain. You topple over, you lose. You rise your head to the level, you lose. Those are the rules. *Un, deux, trois.*

¹⁰ *The King*, 9.40-10.04.

¹¹ The Augustinian conversion is in full effect in this vision of the play.

The fight is on. Hal and the drinker waddle towards each other, swiping and grabbing. They tussle, retreat. Tussle, retreat. Onlookers yelp support. And then Hal grabs the drinker by his knee and topples him over. Onlookers howl. Falstaff raises his arms in the air.

FALSTAFF (CONT'D) The Lord hath spoken!

Hal lies on his back, laughing.¹²

This is far removed from the general weighty atmosphere of the second part of *Henry IV*, where Hal's psychological journey isn't on the surface; there's no uneasy sentimentality attached to his progress to monarchy and all wars are bitterly absurd. What we have in the absence of Shakespeare's treatment is a bleak, acerbic humour that encompasses both regret and compassion. Death is such a systematic event that victory becomes a joke. Amongst this unfathomable cruelty, Hal's inherent sense of unworthiness plays out. We convince ourselves that this *bildungsroman* is credible and sane, but there is a Sisyphean angle to these wars he fights. Henry IV dies almost as soon as Hotspur's rebellion is quelled; no sooner has Hal been crowned that the king of France insults his inexperience with a mock 'playing ball' as a coronation gift. Shortly thereafter, Gascoigne sends an assassin along Hal's way and he declares war on France, taxing the commons relentlessly and cruelly for an investment that would only bring returns to the wealthy merchants and nobles. Far from being a remarkable win, the battle of Agincourt is a mistake Hal made because he was too quick to be riled, too young to understand that the king of France was unlikely to send an assassin to murder an unseasoned boy-king who was perfectly capable of bringing England to ruins with his personal vices.

King Charles VI: "This conversation we have - or are about to have - has been had many times before and will be had many times again for centuries to come, between men from all corners, between men of vanity and men of good reason, in whatever combination. I would like to believe that you and I are men of good reason. Men of vanity would have this trouble continue until the brink of our mutual devastation. Maybe beyond. I have, of course, travelled here to offer you my surrender. Maybe it is our shared destiny that our lands be ruled as one. We have shared histories - shared apocrypha. Might it be that this is the path we have travelled to make our unity so."¹³

¹² Joel Edgerton and David Michôd, screenplay of *The King*, available for access at 8Flix.

¹³ Ibid., 99.

According to Michôd, therefore, the legacy of Agincourt is fear, because it promised a long series of wars to hold on to the French lands that had been conquered. Henry VI inherits a kingdom that cannot properly remember what traumatises it, or reflect upon the psychological effects of facing a long war with a neighbouring country. When the funeral train of Henry V enters Westminster Abbey in the opening scene of the first part of Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, Bedford, Gloucester, Exeter, Warwick, and the Bishop of Winchester have a completely distorted view of reality. The 'heavens are black' because Hal began a war that he couldn't finish. There are other distinguished film versions of Shakespeare's second tetralogy - BBC's *The Hollow Crown* has Tom Hiddlestone playing Henry V and Benedict Cumberbatch Richard III - but Michôd restores poetic justice. Hal's indecisiveness (as he balances the human instinct to hang back and survive with the nationalistic desire to fight for his dignity) promises that his son's refusal to fight does not merely reflect a lack of bravery or kingly spirit. It is a possibility that among the warring nobles and dissatisfied Frenchmen, Henry VI is the steelier and forceful party, without the vindictiveness that weakened his father.¹⁴

It does not make for a pleasant story, but the only way to diminish this vicious cycle of hatred (that Charles VI hints at) is to suffer in silence.

Unsurprisingly one of the canniest authors to notice this is the author of *A Song of Ice and Fire* - more popular as *Game of Thrones* - and professor of English and Journalism George R. R. Martin. He borrows his historical source material for *Ice and Fire* from the wars of the Roses and Shakespeare's first tetralogy, but refers to Henry V while talking about the horrors of war: 'Shakespeare refers to it, in those great scenes in Henry V, where King Hal is walking among the men, before the Battle of Agincourt, and he hears the men complaining. "Well, I hope his cause is just, because a lot of us are going to die to make him king of France."¹⁵ Martin readily admits that *Ice and Fire* is an adaptation of Shakespeare. There is at least one direct allusion to *2 Henry VI*'s

¹⁴ Protection of the Promised Land is part of Christian ethos. We turn back here, again, to the figures of David and Saul who were triumphant in battle. The figure of the Dauphin, brash and experienced, is built on the lines of Goliath, whom David defeats with a single sling shot.

¹⁵ Quoted by Jeffrey R. Wilson, *Shakespeare and Game of Thrones* (New York: Routledge, 2021), Google Books. Original quote appears in George R.R. Martin, *George R.R. Martin: The Complete Rolling Stone Interview*, by Mikal Gilmore, RollingStone, June 13, 2014. Original interview available on <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-news/george-r-r-martin-the-complete-rolling-stone-interview-52421/>.

“Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” when a character in Martin says “Heavy is the head that wears the crown.” In many ways *Game of Thrones* manipulates our attachment to the two tetralogies in order to coerce the audiences into feeling something that is, otherwise, unearned. It gives us the opportunity to see Shakespeare welded to corporate ethics, but it’s also another TV/novel series that relies on Shakespeare’s psychological insight to carry out the emotional lifting the novels can’t manage on their own.¹⁶

This is not to say that *Ice and Fire* is a bastardised form of the tetralogy. Martin is keenly aware of this. ‘I don’t know if I’d ever claim it’s enormously original,’ he said to Mikal Gilmore during his RollingStone interview in 2014. ‘You look at Shakespeare, who borrowed all of his plots. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, I take stuff from the Wars of the Roses and other fantasy things, and all these things work around in my head and somehow they jell into what I hope is uniquely my own.’¹⁷ There is the most obvious intersection between Martin and Shakespeare: the shared source material. It is worthwhile to consider if knowledge of the first tetralogy enhances our understanding of Martin’s fantasy series, but that would be above and beyond the scope of this discussion. Martin’s medieval world is calibrated and complex enough to mirror the twenty-first century and the fifteenth century.¹⁸ The Lancasters are Lannisters, Yorks are called the Starks, and Tudors are Targaryens. Life in Westeros centres around the Iron Throne, the political machinations that surround it, and a number of deadly battles, but Henry VI is little more than a footnote. Henry’s Westerosi counterpart is Aerys II Targaryen, also called the Mad King and King Scab. A just and peaceful ruler at the beginning of his reign, Scab descended into insanity after three of his sons died. His obsessive behaviour is a result of his fear for his children’s life. After a revolution during which he was imprisoned for months, there remained little hope of his recovery. He slaughtered every living member of the houses that had revolted against him. His cruelty and fascination with fire went hand in hand, and he began burning traitors with wildfire, a highly flammable substance. These executions also gave him sexual pleasure, and he abused his

¹⁶ It would be remiss not to mention that all post-Shakespeare Henry VI reimaginings depend heavily on Shakespeare’s portrayal of him, not only Martin.

¹⁷ Martin, *The Complete Rolling Stone Interview*.

¹⁸ Arguably, life in Westeros is far more brutal and more exciting than life in medieval Britain. The church governed every part of social life, so the later seasons with the rising power of the Seven would lean more towards reality.

wife every time he executed someone. (This extremity reads like a natural inversion of Henry's preference for chastity and the many apocryphal stories of his aversion to scantily clad ladies and debauchery, in general.)

'We know not only what characters think and feel, but what they eat, wear, see and smell — even the sex of their horses,' says Anne Groell, who has been Martin's editor at Bantam Books for two decades. 'George's characters feel like people because they are people, with all the foibles and doubts and internal contradictions that every one of us contain. We can relate to these characters because we are these characters.'¹⁹ Focused as it is on high politics and medieval political/philosophical ethos, it's also a ravishingly visual exploration of war. Undoubtedly the characterisation (adulterous queen, ruthless dragon-riding queen, incestuous twins, evil witch, cunning courtiers) is less subtle than Shakespeare's, but the drama is presented with a stark economy.

The wars in Shakespeare are morally/theologically reasonable, dealing with a world where Edward and Richard are punished by Henry VI's appointed saviour of England, and logic is restored. (The Lancastrian) Henry's humiliation and murder are too heavy for England's conscience and, at the proper moment, Henry Tudor steps in. There is no room for detachment in Shakespeare; Henry is as much an astute strategist (as is normal for an exceptionally well-read monarch) as an ineffective policy-maker. The world of *Ice and Fire* (on TV, at least) is dreary: the camera is fascinated by clammy dawns, grey dusks, and torrential rain. The hoofbeats of horses are ominous, and there is no cheer in the warm meals served in inns.²⁰ The majestic figure of Henry Tudor is replaced by a warrior-khaleesi, Daenerys Targaryen who, in the final episode of the series, burns down the city she was trying to recover.²¹ There is little possibility that they are motivated by ideas. They're almost always at the mercy of circumstance (recalling Macbeth). The war of succession begins with Aerys 'The Mad King' Targaryen burning

¹⁹ Charles Yu, "George R. R. Martin, Fantasy's Reigning King," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2018. Accessed on <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/t-magazine/george-rr-martin-got-interview.html>.

²⁰ The wars are the central parallel, but Martin's world is not more magical than Shakespeare. There are many articles describing the series as Shakespeare with dragons, but Shakespeare has a fair amount of 'magic' (problematic as the term may be) in the tetralogy, from the Duchess of Gloucester's black magic to the prophecies and ghosts.

²¹ There are Christomimetic elements here as well: the Victorious Christ figure is just behind the smokescreen of medieval Westeros, and Daenerys is fighting for the protection and preservation of the Promised Land till she burns it down.

down King's Landing and being deposed by Robert Baratheon for this crime; the series ends with an improbable 'soothsayer' character ruling Westeros. Of the two promised saviours, Daenerys Targaryen rains fire on King's Landing, and in a miserable mirroring of the past, is killed by her lover (and nephew) Jon Snow, who is also revealed to be a Targaryen at the end.

Note how Martin writes about her entering Qarth:

The outer gates were banded with copper, the middle with iron; the innermost were studded with golden eyes. All opened at Dany's approach. As she rode her silver into the city, small children rushed out to scatter flowers in her path. They wore golden sandals and bright paint, no more.²²

Jon ultimately returns where he came from. There are a few crucial political messages hidden in the finale. In Season Six, Daenerys Targaryen had told her Hand Tyrion Lannister that Lannister, Stark, Targaryen, Baratheon, or Tyrell were just 'spokes on a wheel. This one's on top, then that one's on top, and on and on it spins, crushing those on the ground... I'm not going to stop the wheel, I'm going to break the wheel.' When Daenerys' dragon melts the Iron Throne, we assume this is the systemic wheel-breaking that was being referred to.²³ The winner of the Game of Thrones is Bran the Broken, who lacks the wish to rule and he cannot father children. That makes him even more suitable for ruling, according to Tyrion. 'Good,' he says. 'Sons of kings can be cruel and stupid, as you well know. His will never torment us. That is the wheel our queen wanted to break. From now on, rulers will not be born. They will be chosen on this spot by the lords and ladies of Westeros to serve the realm.' Tyrion suggests that the next ruler be chosen by a council of Westerosi elite but the most radical idea of all is Samwell Tarly's. He wanted to open the election to the people of Westeros. 'We represent all the great houses,' he tells the gathered lords and ladies, 'but whomever we choose won't just rule over lords and ladies. Maybe the decision about what's best for everyone should be left to, well, everyone.'²⁴ There's a roll of laughter in the hall. Perhaps the wheel can never really be

²² George R. R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings: A Song of Ice and Fire: Book Two* (London: Random Publishing House, 2003), 318.

²³ Quoted by Caroline Larrington, *All Men Must Die: Power and Passion in Game of Thrones* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 92.

²⁴ David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, *Game of Thrones* Ep. 806 The Iron Throne. Accessed on <https://storyfactory.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Game-of-Thrones-S08E06-The-Iron-Throne-.pdf>. Please note that dialogues spoken in the actual TV episode have been used here. This is sometimes slightly

broken. Only a measure of justice and peace can be hoped for. Sansa breaks away as Queen of the North, an isolationist statement in the midst of calls for unity. Her sister Arya sails to whatever lies west of Westeros with the sigil of her house on the sails. The protagonist of the series, Jon Snow, returns to the wilds with the Free Folk, a group of forest-dwellers that didn't accept any inherent or hereditary political authority.²⁵

This is a tiptoeing around Shakespeare, not an original interpretation. It stands to reason that Bran is crippled. He gains a new kind of power when he's pushed down a tower by Jamie Lannister: the wisdom of the Three-Eyed Raven. But he begins as an innocent and remains an innocent, and it is possible that this virtue is rewarded.²⁶ So it happens that a paralysed, little known (or unknown to most of Westerosi nobility), and hitherto futile teen is chosen to lead the seven kingdoms for his wisdom. Shakespeare is sometimes optimistic about the counsellors' infighting. Most (not Richard III or the bishop of Winchester) nobles are rational and open to persuasion, and there are instances of courtiers having good-faith conversations with one another about their political beliefs and changing their minds.²⁷ There are also characters whose self-interest and naive belief in ideologies make it difficult for them to compromise and frequently lead them to dead-end and bloody wars. And the end to this long, tedious struggle for supremacy is the promised Very Christian King, with a tacit admittance that wars never really end. There

different from the script, which is to be seen as a map, rather than something that is followed extremely closely.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Very different from Henry Tudor's establishment of a new dynasty, although Bran is technically the First Stark ruler, and the temptation to compare him with Edward IV is strong. Bran's journey included no Christomimetic struggle or moral conflict. He gains wisdom as a supernatural gift, but who is to say that is divine?

²⁷ This is how Henry V defines a good courtier:

Show men dutiful?

Why, so didst thou. Seem they grave and learned?

Why, so didst thou. Come they of noble family?

Why, so didst thou. Seem they religious?

Why, so didst thou. Or are they spare in diet,

Free from gross passion, or of mirth or anger,

Constant in spirit, not swerving with the blood,

Garnish'd and deck'd in modest complement,

Not working with the eye without the ear,

And but in purged judgment trusting neither?

Such and so finely bolted didst thou seem The Westerosi courtier is not very different from his medieval British counterpart.

is solid political precedence for this conclusion (other than its historicity): deadlocked councils end up electing political upstarts as a compromise to avoid never-ending wars after years of division and strife.²⁸ The difference between Shakespeare's and Martin's understanding of what the wars taught us is crucial: Sansa Stark's northern independence would have been objected to in Shakespeare; other territories would have demanded independence, or more concessions for their continued subservience. For these reasons, *Game of Thrones* sets English audiences a stiff test of self-denial. In order to understand Martin's political lessons, they must forget all about Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, an act of detachment made more difficult by Martin's choice of names for his aristocrats (Lannisters and Starks resemble their original counterparts a little too much). But this, too, is an eternal literary cycle: authors ransack their inspirations to create cultural touchstones for their own generation. Martin enriches with his own personal political vision and subtlety the now-familiar story, expanded over seven long books and eight seasons of a TV series. Most minor characters have vanished from here; consequently, audiences and readers familiar with the first tetralogy are not deprived of the suspense woven into Shakespeare's speeches. The characters are types, but none of them are abstract.

What it doesn't take into account is *Henry VI*. Westeros has memories of a king like *Henry VI* etched on its politics, trade, and puritanical attitudes, but the 'mad' king himself isn't around. He leaves a heavy legacy of political mistakes; this is part of Martin's moral plan for his universe. In the 2018 interview he gave to *The New York Times* journalist Charles Yu, Martin quoted Julius Caesar from memory: 'The evil that men do lives after them;/ The good is oft interred with their bones.' Then he added his own version: 'We shouldn't forget about the evil that good men do.' Part of this political dilemma derives from the question we faced and tackled at length in the first chapter: what does it mean to be a virtuous king? When we speak of someone ruling 'wisely and well,' what do we mean? 'Many good men throughout history have been terrible kings. Many bad men have been good kings. Of course, now we live in a time where we have a bad man who is also a bad president,' Martin had said.²⁹ The first chapter of this work tackled the problem of conceptualising this basic political/ethical question: can a positive

²⁸ And, often, civil war. Between 1563 and 1764, thirteen elections were held in the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth.

²⁹ "George R. R. Martin, Fantasy's Reigning King," *The New York Times*.

ethical virtue have negative political connotations? Since all conscious political/philosophical understanding is coloured by ethical reasoning, ‘what a king ought to do’ should be the same as ‘what a king is obligated to do.’ If this is the case, *Game of Thrones* resolves this conflict in a rather cynical manner. When Jon asks Tyrion if he did the ‘proper’ thing by killing Daenerys Targaryen (who lost her mind and burned down King’s Landing by the end of the series), Tyrion suggests that Jon ask him the same question ten years later. Neither the saviour-avenger Daenerys nor the morally pure Jon is rewarded at the end, but the moral quandary they find themselves in is interesting. This is how the script for the finale lays out the avenger’s transformation into a tyrant:

Amidst the ashes of her conquest and the corpses of her enemies, Dany accepts the worship of her followers. The devastated city stretches out below her, but she shows no signs of ambivalence or doubt. She has burned the village to save it.³⁰

A century ago her father had denounced traitors with this curse: ‘Let him be king over charred bones and cooked meat. Let him be the king of ashes.’³¹ In an inversion of Shakespeare’s Henry VI prophesying the ascension of Henry Tudor to the English crown, the saviour figure here is doomed to rule over burnt corpses. Is Martin essentially reducing multiple ethical discourses to a straightforward moral question? These issues are part of the political conundrum that the show explores: ‘What happens when the non-existent bumps against the decrepit? A question for the philosophers,’ says Olenna Tyrell, a stately and wise matriarch. A travelling playhouse recreates how the war began.

‘The line of succession!’
‘What’s that mean?’
‘The proper progression! The lawful ascension!’
‘What’s that mean?’³²

The series begins with a tortured soul murdering a mad king, and ends with another tortured soul murdering a mad queen - war, loyalty, and insanity are synonymous in Martin’s universe. Instead of Henry’s obsessive piety, Martin creates a pattern of mental

³⁰ David Benioff and D.B.Weiss, *Game of Thrones*.

³¹ George R. R. Martin, *A Feast for Crows: A Song of Ice and Fire: Book Four* (London: Random House Publishing Group, 2005),

³² This brings our earlier discussions on primogeniture and virtue to an amusing, but complex close. The threads are too tangled to properly answer what ‘lawful ascension’ really is.

illness that is best equipped to deal with the broadest possible range of these substantial political problems. It's not only a certain monarch who is mad; the sheer concept of one person ruling over all is so perverse that it is certain to descend to horror at any moment: it's a kingdom in permanent decline. Distraction, melancholy, and *acedia* (the despair that comes from losing faith) are woven into this horrific and cynical treatment of individual madness. Like Philippa Gregory, Martin must have sensed the possibilities in fascist trappings as conquering heroes rape and pillage every poor village in their way.

Strewn along the blood-drenched path are kings who drink wildfire to turn themselves into dragons, queens who are devoured by their pets as their offspring watch, 'and, of course, there's the Mad King, killed by my uncle,' gloats Joffrey, who beheaded Lord Eddard Stark and made Ed's daughter (Joffrey's fiancée) look up at his head. Another aristocrat, Ramsay Bolton, rapes his bride on their wedding night and frequently feeds his enemies to hungry bloodhounds. Insanity is an escalating fever in Westeros - one that consumes monarchs, aristocrats, and commoners alike and turns them into bloodthirsty fiends. This notion is reflected in what we have seen happening in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Afghanistan, to name countries where mass killings have become commonplace. The sight of the underage monarch Joffrey Baratheon, cackling viciously while hacking an ancient book to pieces, brings a very different, but recognisable slaughter to mind. Piety, however, is still a very dangerous virtue for a king to flaunt.

Tywin: What is a good king's single most important quality?
Tommen: Holiness?

Tywin: Baelor the Blessed was holy. And pious. He built this sept. He also named a six-year-old boy septon because he thought the boy could work miracles. He ended up fasting himself into an early grave because food was of this world and this world was sinful.

Tommen: Justice.

Tywin: A good king must be just. Aerys the First was just. Everyone applauded his reforms. Nobles and commoners alike but he wasn't just for long. He was murdered in his sleep after less than a year by his own brother. Was that truly

just of him? To abandon his own subjects to an evil he was too gullible to recognise?³³

Perhaps the realities of royal insanity matters little to commoners and kingdoms: virtù has the right to shun ethics, morality, and the dictates of religion if political circumstances so require. The consequences of Aerys' murderous rages were very similar to the consequences of the kindly ineffectiveness of Henry VI. There are also significant similarities between their characters:

‘That internal feud within the York family spilled over with (*simultaneously*) the external feud of the Lancasters... Henry VI won back the crown, but, like Aerys Targaryen, deteriorated into madness.’³⁴ Shakespeare’s reworking of the Tudor myth eventually becomes the central plotline of the series, though Martin doesn’t lift the characters from history. ‘In both cases,’ writes Wilson, ‘noble houses feud for a crown put up for grabs during civil war, resulting in the decimation of the Lan- family; peace only returns to the realm when civil war is ended by the union of someone from the -rk family and someone from the T-family. But the Tudor myth, and specifically Shakespeare’s treatment of it in his first tetralogy, provides a number of other parallels that readers love to discover and debate.’³⁵

Incest and insanity are intimately connected in Martin’s universe. Aerys ‘The Mad King’ Targaryen, himself a result of inbreeding, married his sister Rhaella Targaryen to keep the bloodline pure. He was wise, generous, and peaceful when he was young. He later grew increasingly suspicious of every noble who was on the king’s Small Council, notably Tywin Lannister (Tyion’s father). During the Defiance of Duskendale, he was imprisoned and tortured for six months before he was rescued. This marked the beginning of his insanity. He executed everyone who might have been involved, and grew increasingly murderous. After years of sheer brutality, he was murdered by Jaime Lannister (Tywin’s son) when he came to know of Aerys’ plans to burn the city down with wildfire. This murder was never avenged because the next monarch Robert Baratheon pardoned Jaime and allowed him to return to the kingsguard. His offspring survived, until Daenerys Targaryen went mad herself and actually ordered her dragons to rain fire upon their city. Paranoia, hallucinations, and schizophrenia were three of the mental diseases that Aerys suffered from; everything must have been exacerbated by the

³³ David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, *Game of Thrones Season 4 Episode 3*. Accessed on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doY0IjisBlk>.

³⁴ Jeffrey R. Wilson, *Shakespeare and Game of Thrones*, Kindle.

³⁵ Ibid. (Italics mine.)

trauma of imprisonment. Targaryens believed themselves to be dragons in human form: this is why Aerys burned his victims and his uncle Aerion Targaryen drank wildfire to transform himself into a dragon.³⁶

These features are reminiscent of Henry's grandfather Charles VI, who suffered from glass delusion and had iron rods sewn into his clothes to prevent himself from breaking if he came into contact with other people. During another episode in 1395, he claimed he was St George and his coat of arms was a lion with a sword plunged through it. Martin is, among other things, profoundly fearful of 'free spirits' in closed institutions.³⁷ This is a simplistic approach to mental illness: the conditions are treated like choices that can be reversed by force of will. Every monarch is a tyrannical, self-gratifying beast. Consider what Jaime Lannister says about the mad king he assassinated: 'As the saying goes, "every time a Targaryen is born, the gods flip a coin." They must have dropped the one for King Aerys. For at first, he seemed to have dodged the family madness. But as he grew older, he began to see conspirators everywhere and where there were none, he worked to create them.'³⁸ This ferocity imposes on him a crazy grandeur - the kind we recognise in Macbeth. Perhaps the Westerosi system cannot accommodate prudent or wise kings, and, like Daenerys Targaryen puts it, we cannot foresee what has never been before. We may be expected to connect the increasing madness in Westerosi kings with the political turmoil in Trump-era America. If so, the connection doesn't work. It is interesting to look at insanity as a radical acceptance of evil, but mass burnings and wilful unpleasantness can only reduce the many complex political narratives doing the rounds in American media. The story of Aerys II works within the confines of the medieval fantasy genre - it was never meant to be a window into the life of Henry VI, a real king with real political problems. However, like Jeremy Enger put it in his scathing review of the series finale in *The New York Times*, 'the show that has been broadly about a society's transition from murderous, dysfunctional dynastic rule and entitlement

³⁶ The chapter referenced Westeros.org for background material available on the plethora of characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

³⁷ See David Green, "The Madness of Kings: Kingship and Royal Power" in *The Hundred Years War: A People's History* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2014), 80-94.

³⁸ David Benioff and D.B.Weiss, *Game of Thrones Season 1 Episode 4*.

politics to a more collectivist model consummated that concept, killing off yet another conquering monarch and replacing her with an elected king.³⁹

A broken king is a fitting choice for a realm doomed to repeat its patterns of violent insanity. Is the king responsible for the Wars of the Roses different from the ones that slaughter their way to the throne, sack conquered cities, or believe they are made of glass? One response might be that this is the show's internal logic: Aerys' murderous rages and Henry's obsessive piety are both essentially meaningless because the wheel crushes the realm irrespective of it all. Conversely, this perspective is a refreshing explanation of Henry's utter failure to save his crown and subjects. Like Shakespeare's combination of lowborn madness (Cade's semi-comical attempt at revolution) and highborn intrigue, this mix of Nurembergish nightmares with promises to free and save a nation whose people have just been butchered is also politically meaningful.

The question that remains is: where are the gods in this premodern epic? Martin's universe has many religions: the nameless, faceless Old Gods of the Forest, the widely adopted Faith of the Seven, the Drowned God, R'hllor (the Lord of Light), and the Many-Faced God of Death. Martin compared the Faith of the Seven to medieval Christianity in his November 2011 interview with *Bullseye*: 'The religions are made up religions, in that sense, imaginative religions. I based them on real world religions just tweaking it or expanding it a little. The faith of the Seven is of course based on the medieval Catholic church and their central doctrine that there is one god who has seven aspects is partly based on the Catholic belief that there is one God but he has three aspects: Father, Son, Holy Ghost. With the Seven, instead, you have The Father, The Mother, The Maiden, The Crone, The Smith, The Warrior, and The Stranger, who is the death figure.'⁴⁰ Martin may have borrowed the number from the seven sacraments, but the Faith of the Seven is closer to Protestantism than the easy-going form of Catholicism the Carolingians tried to use to unify their vast kingdom. Martin borrows heavily from many mythologies, the

³⁹ Jeremy Enger, "Game of Thrones' Season 8 Finale Recap: All Hail King Who?", in The New York Times, May 19, 2019. Accessed on <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/19/arts/television/game-of-thrones-series-finale-recap.html>.

⁴⁰ George R. R. Martin, The Sound of Young America: George R. R. Martin, with John Hodgman, *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*, Episode 62, 19th September 2011. Accessed on <https://maximumfun.org/episodes/bullseye-with-jesse-thorn/george-r-r-martin-author-song-ice-and-fire-series-interview-sound-young-america/>.

Kabbalah, and parts of the Old Testament. Like medieval Catholicism, the Faith of the Seven has fringe sects and ethics scandals. 'The Sparrows are my version of the medieval Catholic Church, with its own fantasy twist,' Martin once told *Entertainment Weekly*. 'If you look at the history of the church in the Middle Ages, you had periods where you had very worldly and corrupt popes and bishops. People who were not spiritual, but were politicians. They were playing their own version of the game of thrones, and they were in bed with the kings and the lords. But you also had periods of religious revival or reform—the greatest of them being the Protestant Reformation, which led to the splitting of the church—where there were two or three rival popes each denouncing the other as illegitimate. That's what you're seeing here in Westeros. The two previous High Septons we've seen, the first was very corrupt in his own way, and he was torn apart by the mob during the food riots [in season 2]. The one Tyrion appoints in his stead is less corrupt but is ineffectual and doesn't make any waves. Cersei distrusts him because Tyrion appointed him. So now she has to deal with a militant and aggressive Protestant Reformation, if you will, that's determined to resurrect a faith that was destroyed centuries ago by the Targaryens.'⁴¹

But in this version of Catholicism, the Septon/Sparrow is an anti-hero who is a menace to King's Landing, frequently cruel to those who don't deserve it, and only rarely tender. The concept of moral evil in institutional religion is a pervasive, and well-researched one, and the figure of the High Sparrow is of interest to us only as a dark mirror of Henry's gravest flaws and worst impulses. Martin experiments with the darker sides of religious scripture, exploring humiliation and redemption as potent sources of evil; saving grace is a non-existent idea here because faith or atonement cannot diminish human responsibility for suffering. This thought has two strands: it is easy to read the episodes as glorifying the religious value of inflicting physical torture (much like child sacrifice is glorified in the *Akedah*) but that reading would be inconsistent with classical exegesis (like the *Akedah*, again, which has traditionally been read positively from the time of Augustine till the Reformation). And yet, to read it wholly in a positive light is to turn our backs on the text itself.

⁴¹ George R. R. Martin, "Game of Thrones': George R.R. Martin reveals which religion inspired the Faith Militant", by James Hibberd, *Entertainment Weekly*, May 24, 2015. Accessed on <https://ew.com/article/2015/05/24/game-thrones-george-rr-martin-religion/>.

Martin has often spoken about his fascination with the Catholic interpretation with redemption, most recently during his interview at Brown University: 'I also find the question of redemption fascinating. Maybe, I'm not religious now but I was raised a Catholic, so maybe it's a question that comes to me from my whole Catholic upbringing and the things I learnt from my Sister Mary in Catechism. I mean, you know the whole question of forgiveness for sin, you know. The Catholic church teaches you to go to confession. And you're forgiven for your sins, even terrible sins. But certainly our society doesn't necessarily deal with that. We don't forgive people.'⁴² Humiliation, abasement, and a noble death are traditionally accepted Christian redemptive formulae, but Martin makes humiliation and death meaningful in a more contemporary way. His *Bullseye* conversation made his theories on death very clear: 'My characters who come back from death are worse for wear. In some ways, they're not even the same characters anymore. The body may be moving, but some aspect of the spirit is changed or transformed, and they've lost something. One of the characters who has come back repeatedly from death is Beric Dondarrion, The Lightning Lord. Each time he's revived he loses a little more of himself. He was sent on a mission before his first death. He was sent on a mission to do something, and it's like, that's what he's clinging to. He's forgetting other things, he's forgetting who he is, or where he lived. He's forgotten the woman who he was once supposed to marry. Bits of his humanity are lost every time he comes back from death; he remembers that mission. His flesh is falling away from him, but this one thing, this purpose that he had is part of what's animating him and bringing him back to death. I think you see echoes of that with some of the other characters who have come back from death.'⁴³ The horror of the Faith of the Seven (like the horror of Isaac's binding) is seeded in a deeply-felt family drama, where damaged characters like the High Sparrow wrestle with the everyday terrors of leading a puritanical organisation. He offers us an opportunity to really observe the sort of consolation theology offers to individuals:

Olenna Tyrell: 'Half the men, women, and children in this foul city break the sacred laws. You live among murderers, thieves, and rapists, and yet you punish Loras for shagging some perfumed ponce, and Margaery for defending her brother?'

⁴² George R. R. Martin, interview by Tom Doherty, *The Brown University Library presents An Evening with George R. R. Martin and Publisher Tom Doherty*, Brown University Library, October 30, 2014. Accessed on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TB5AU_bCZJg.

⁴³ George R. R. Martin, *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*.

High Sparrow: 'Yes. The Gods' laws must be applied to all equally.'

Olenna Tyrell: 'If it's equality you want, so be it. When House Tyrell stops sending our crops to the capital, everyone here will starve. And I'll make sure the hungry know who's to blame.'

High Sparrow: 'Have you ever sowed the field, Lady Olenna? Have you ever reaped the grain? Has anyone in House Tyrell? A lifetime of wealth and power has left you blind in one eye. You are the few, we are the many. And when the many stop fearing the few... I imagine this is strange for you. Everyone you meet has a hidden motive and you pride yourself on sniffing it out. But I'm telling you a simple truth. I serve the Gods. The Gods demand justice.'⁴⁴

Although Martin gave the High Sparrow no background in the novels, we learn from the series of books that he was the son of a rich cobbler who became too fond of the lifestyle of aristocrats. The series makes an expert psychological study of the insecurities a cobbler might feel while stepping into a soon-to-be-septon's shoes, aligning audiences with the High Sparrow's perspective to the degree that we share his disgust for the rich and powerful. Yet his presence is a sinister one. He is ambitious, and will obtain political power if only to impose what he believes is divine will on the populace, whether or not they want it. He can be unnerving ('The poor disgust us because they are us, shorn of our illusions'⁴⁵) but he is kind to the poor and lives a humble life.

He shares Henry's distaste for lavish garments, and is always seen in a plain white woollen overall (though, of course, it is Ralph Fiennes who makes the plain overall inseparable from Henry's personality).⁴⁶ Both of them are men looking for meaning at the end of their lives and devout scripture readers. But their stories are thematically similar only as far as they were rescued from a possibly degenerate life by their faith, and inflicted their faith on people who had no use for it. If what haunted *Windsor Forest* was a memory, the character of the High Sparrow is haunted by an idea. The idea that the faith that had once won wars will, in fact, be able to prevent one from happening. If analysed solely from the perspective of how the Sparrow is the sole source of questionable piety in a ruthless court, he does begin to look like a double portrait of Henry grappling with complicated questions about moral responsibility. But Henry's

⁴⁴ David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, *Game of Thrones Season 5 Episode 7*.

⁴⁵ Ibid., *Season 6 Episode 7*.

⁴⁶ Ralph Fiennes played the 1988 RSC production of *Henry VI* in a white monkish robe throughout.

faith rises from the scriptures, a community of simple faith, and tradition. What the Sparrow (or the Puritans) views as necessary change, Henry would have decried a ruinous compromise. And although the backdrop in 2016 is different, the crisis around the future of the church is centuries old. We are reminded at intervals of the sexual abuse and financial malfeasance scandals plaguing the church, and Henry's strain of mysticism is out of touch with realistic behaviour. The Sparrow asks uneasy questions about human responsibility: visually, he's a death-bringer, a constant reminder that the old ways are about to die. All he can do is tentatively ally himself with the lesser evil; he befriends Cersei at first, then the Tyrells. Early on, we see his band of disciples treat with inhuman cruelty homosexuals, 'promiscuous' women, and anyone who does not adhere to their beliefs. Much of the actual torture is tame by today's standards, but the branding is gruesome.

In the Sparrow's light, we see Henry himself as a sinister wizard from a fairy tale, a man capable of knowing how his subjects live, steering their fates, and using his simple piety to seduce them into situations which hand them the destinies they deserve. The Sparrow's uncompromising nature makes him more appealing than Henry, and also less intriguing. Both of them are denied conventional victory, and have to be consoled with the conviction that their ideas will survive. *Game of Thrones* suggests that the Wars of the Roses were the disastrous consequences of uncritical adherence to 'simple, wholesome faith.' It is not Catholicism that Martin is attacking; it is the wilful self-delusion that Henry's contemporaries (like Vergil) saw him plagued by. Henry is not depicted as overzealously seeking material manifestations of an absent divinity, but his mirror is a good example of actual faith being subservient to superstition and self-interest. And because the text itself resists internally consistent readings, the Sparrow is also an extreme representation of a man who allows only his faith to fashion his destiny. So submissive is he to what the Seven requires of him that - by the end of *Season Six* - he believes in his quasi-divinity.

Is it possible that Henry's belief also gradually erodes his self-identity and that is, by itself, as humiliating a subjugation as Edward parading him in the streets of London? There is no trace of the meaningful introspection that redeemed the way he muddled the lines between prayer and fanaticism. There are moments when we feel like Henry is speaking through the Sparrow. In the episode called *Oathbreaker*, he persuades

the weak-willed King Tommen to keep his mother Cersei away from Myrcella's funeral. 'A true leader avails himself of the wisest counsel he can. And no one is wiser than the gods,' he says at one point.⁴⁷ Counsel is also one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, and it is the highest point prudence (the cardinal virtue) can reach. Our prior knowledge of Henry's 'insanity' amplifies the disturbance of the Sparrow's inevitable mental illness. Martin evokes an emotional crescendo that crashes into tragedy where all central protagonists succumb to a kind of collective insanity.

What messages, intended or unintended, does this portrayal of religio-political fanaticism convey? Might it include commentary on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, satire on the proliferation of school shootings in America, or is it a historically morphed image of Francis of Assisi, Anthony of Padua, and John of the Cross preaching with skulls in their hands and flowers at their feet? Does the wildfire which destroys the High Sparrow, all his little sparrows, and the septas denote an impending ecological disaster? Does Tommen joining hands with the High Sparrow say anything about misinformation slowly becoming a political cause? And finally, does this storm of cultural associations render this image meaningless? Rather than face this existential horror of self-destruction headlong, Martin and his writers are compelled to take the allegorical approach: piety is almost always on the verge of shapeshifting into something more sinister. This delusional belief gives *Game of Thrones* a steady emotional pulse: the High Sparrow's trajectory - from repentant sinner to honest priest to powerful celebrity - strengthens the devastating truth it is trying to convey. Narcissistic piety might be our end. But such readings are not theologically palatable, and neither the Sparrow nor (ultimately) Henry VI are madmen denying reality for their own deluded reasons. Once again, a fictitious power tussle harks back to the fifteenth century and the west's misadventures in the middle east; these are two separate yet conjoined realms.

One hundred and twenty years ago, in his seminal essay 'Obsessive Action and Religious Practices' Freud said he was certain many psychoanalysts had noticed the similarities between 'what are called obsessive actions in sufferers from nervous affections and the observances by means of which believers give expression to their

⁴⁷ David Benioff and D.B.Weiss, *Game of Thrones Season 6 Episode 3*.

piety.’⁴⁸ This more than superficial resemblance, and ‘an insight into the neurotic ceremonial,’ Freud claimed, could explain the psychological processes of religious life. Henry VI’s courtiers would have agreed with Freud’s premise of piety itself being a part of neuroses. ‘Obsessive Action and Religious Practices’ clearly has someone like Henry VI and the Sparrows on its mind, because the interpretation helps elucidate the Septon’s ‘obsessive thinking, obsessive ideas, obsessive impulses’ and his move to ‘a madness that takes the shape of reckless impiety’ (this was how the poet John Berryman described Shakespeare’s King John, a different kind of insane). This is also a complete inversion of theological order: piety is an illness and religious observances are manifestations of said illness. Henry VI embodies this inversion, and he is, in the end, destroyed by it. The evil he does by enabling the slaughter of thousands of innocents is horrific, even by Shakespearean standards. He does not lose our sympathies because ‘he submits to it (his piety - the obsessive impulse) without understanding its meaning’, and to the best of our knowledge, never gains this knowledge. His suffering increases as the body count soars, which is why he never loses our sympathy. His ‘unconscious guilt’ escalates and, as Freud writes, ‘dominates him.’⁴⁹

One may say that a sufferer from compulsions and prohibitions behaves as if he were dominated by a sense of guilt, of which, however, he is ignorant-an unconscious sense of guilt, as one must call it in spite of the apparent contradiction in terms, The sense of guilt has its origin in certain early psychological occurrences, but is constantly revived by temptations ·which are renewed at every present opportunity; it gives rise, moreover, to a state of anxious expectation, or anticipation of misfortune, which through the idea of punishment is linked with the inner perception of temptation.⁵⁰

This is a possible lens through which to view Henry’s renunciation of speech, although it is not referred to in *Game of Thrones*. If devotion is neuroses, voluntary rejection of speech is ‘a protective measure.’⁵¹ Repressing the desire to communicate in turn creates an anxiety ‘which is dealt with by directing it towards the future in the form of anxious

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, ‘Obsessive Action and Religious Practices’ in *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, ed. William Armand Lessa, Evon Zartman Vogt, and John Mamoru Watanabe (London: Harper & Row, 1979), 197-202.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 200-201.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ ‘Thus a ceremonial begins as an act of defense or security-as a *protective measure*.’

expectation.’⁵² The process is constantly threatening to turn against itself and the mind is forced to balance anxiety with the pressure of the repressed impulse. This diagnosis isn’t incompatible with Henry’s actual affliction: Freud recognises that sheer protective measures or ceremonies become increasingly ineffective to assuage guilt, and this is when actual ‘prohibition’ (loss of speech, in our case) comes into play. And to quote Freud again, ‘The protestations of the pious that they know they are miserable sinners in their hearts correspond to the sense of guilt of the obsessional neurotic; while the pious observances (prayers, invocations, etc.) with which they begin every act of the day, and especially every unusual undertaking, seem to have the significance of defensive and protective measures.’⁵³

It is easier to find pious people backsliding into sinful practices than diagnosed neurotics. That instigated more acts of penance that have counterparts in obsessive neurotic behaviour. The High Sparrow is a Freudian counterpart of Henry VI - an overwhelming guilt about his previous sexual encounters develops into a constant fear of divine punishment. Martin conjures an appropriate landscape to show religion ‘as a universal obsessional neurosis.’⁵⁴ There are fanatics worshipping old gods, the Faith of the Seven, a Lord of light (with an opposing deity who required human sacrifices), the Black Goat of Qohor who also required daily blood sacrifices, and the Many Fac’d God of Death. Devotees of the Many Fac’d God change appearances at will; Melisandre (the Red Priestess) of R’hllor has the power of prophecy and sundry magical abilities.

What it fails to do is recreate the essential strangeness of the character of the speechless king, surrounded as we are by oddities of every kind. If Henry is a raving maniac burning his capital, a murdered saintly monarch, and a pious reformer, perhaps he is reduced to a caricature of the misunderstood hero. There is none of the profound desolation of *Windsor Forest*, or the bleakness of Gregory’s novels, but there is no comfort either.

⁵² ‘Freud, Obsessive Action and Religious Practices, 200.

⁵³ Ibid., 201.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 202.

Isolation, Alienation, and the Contemplative Life: Conn Iggulden's Portrait of Henry VI in his *Wars of the Roses* Tetralogy

Reminiscing about a sketch of a melting snowman that her mother had made for her, Julia Kristeva mentions Dürer's *Feast of the Rose Garlands* (1506) and *The Virgin with the Canary* (1506) in her work on the symbolic value of skulls in art history and literature called *The Severed Head*. She writes: 'Before creating his engraving *Melancholy* (1514), Dürer here glorifies the Mother of God, drawing his inspiration from the Venetian master Giovanni Bellini... The rosary, a Dominican invention, alternated a dozen "Hail Marys" with a single "Our Father," thus combining the "joyous mystery" of the birth and the "sorrowful mystery" of the Passion. No such alternating with Dürer. These children's heads superimpose the red beads of the Passion over the white beads of Mary: all the black melancholy of the "sorrowful mystery" inscribed immediately in the white roses of the "joyous mystery."'”⁵⁵ We turn to another copper engraving of Dürer in our search for possible echoes of Henry's mysterious silence - *Saint Jerome in his Study*.⁵⁶ Thematically quite distinct from his painting of the same name, the engraving starts off as a study of contemplation and quickly mutates into something else. Produced roughly fifty years after Henry's death, the image of the fourth century Christian scholar is fairly stereotypical: he is sitting in his study with the legendary lion he had helped (by removing a thorn from its paws.) Sleeping beside the lion is a dog, Dürer's symbol for loyalty. St Jerome is engrossed in work, and scattered around him are things that remind us of the subjects that kept him occupied. There is a skull, a small crucifix on his desk, and an hourglass. There are books, pens, papers, and scissors, no doubt attesting to his prowess as a theologian. Dürer's focus on *memento mori* is balanced with a plethora of soft pillows and a pair of comfortable slippers (both indications that although he was in a monastery, his daily life wasn't bereft of all pleasures.) Very unlike his own *St Jerome Penitent in the Wilderness* or *St Jerome by the Pollard Willow*, the saint in this engraving is famous for shutting the audience out of it. The warmth and intimacy of the theological/contemplative life is Jerome's own, while Jerome's penitence or the gloom

⁵⁵ Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, tr. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 7.

⁵⁶ *St Jerome in His Study* is a copper engraving by the German artist Albrecht Dürer. The 1514 artwork shows Jerome in his study, with a halo around his head, sunlight streaming in from a window beside him, and a dog and lion peacefully sitting in the foreground. There is also a famous painting of the same name by Antonello da Messina, created in 1474.

of the personified Melancholia may be shared by us. The intimate effect is created by the sight point being very far off centre, which ‘strengthens the impression of a representation determined not by the objective law of the architecture but by the subjective standpoint of the spectator who is just entering – a representation which owes to precisely this perspective arrangement a large part of its peculiarly ‘intimate’ effect.’⁵⁷ Let us also not forget St Jerome had his puzzling rivalry with Augustine to occupy his thoughts; the art critic Peter W. Parshall thinks the ripe gourd suspended above the threshold is a reference to the philological controversy about the gourd in the Book of Jonah (‘And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd’) that occupied him for an entire decade.⁵⁸ It doesn’t quite mean that Jerome was contemplating that debate, but it indicates Jerome’s preferences as a text critic and the way he understood certain Biblical events. The mystery of the contemplative silence of Jerome has its origins in the character of Jerome and perhaps Dürer, it’s not a reflection of the viewer’s innermost thoughts. It is emotionally wrenching and intellectually fulfilling: Jerome’s failure to win his critics over, Augustine’s victory, and Jerome’s perseverance in spite of that victory strike us as utterly real, while the actual cause of Jerome’s meditation (alienation? A gradual dislocation from a stable sense of reality?) elude us. Undercutting this feeling is the figure of Dürer himself, a man blessed and cursed with a prodigious talent that condemns him to a life of isolation.

Jerome’s isolation might be his own. We’re able to plant Dürer’s own alienation in him because his character is able to accommodate such interpretations. The engraving Dürer supposedly distributed with St Jerome, *Melencolia 1*, is generally understood to be a symbol for the lack of comfort in secular learning. Scholars cannot reach a consensus about what the paraphernalia all around her means. The accepted opinion is that of Panofsky’s, who believed that ‘Dürer incorporated, through the medium of Saturn, the imagery of geometry- the governing principle of art- with the Neoplatonic conception of melancholy as divine inspiration and thereby created a Geometer’s or Artist’s

⁵⁷ Thomas Puttfarcken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting 1400–1800*, (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 94.

⁵⁸ Peter W. Parshall, “Albrecht Dürer's St. Jerome in His Study: A Philological Reference” in *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 53, No. 3 (CAA: September, 1971), 303-305.

Melancholy.’ The noted scholar Philip L. Sohm is beset with an unease about this easy association of divine creativity with the ‘sullen, passive’ figure of Melancholy. The German philosopher Cornelius von Agrippa had described Melancholy as a ‘frenzy’ and, in the words of Sohm, ‘surely Durer’s *Melancholy*, despite her attributes, does not seem psychologically akin to Agrippa’s melancholic genius.’⁵⁹ It may have been a starting point of sorts for Durer’s understanding of this subject, and he goes on to explain that the figure is a representation of melancholic afflatus. This, perhaps, is Dürer’s alternating of Jerome’s ‘joyous mystery’ with Melancholy’s ‘sorrowful mystery.’ St Jerome is not the centrepiece of the engraving. He is in the well-lit background of a room, his eyes on a manuscript, writing peacefully. Dürer forces our eyes on him and the issues that are likely to have been on his mind. The effect could have been alienating, but it becomes more conspiratorial (although Dürer isn’t inviting us to partake in Jerome’s contemplation.) Is the viewer breaching Jerome’s guards? But one of the more charming quirks of the piece is a comfortable chair at a distance from Jerome that a visitor seems to have vacated. Jerome’s study is a tight space that creates familiarity: the tiny room is his sanctuary and his escape, a place where he works and thinks, as well as a sturdily built emblem of his being. In time, this room might serve as a confession box for Jerome and his students, and a therapist’s couch for the viewer, a place for confidences and communion. But does it shed light on the theological teachings of Jerome?

It, perhaps, isn’t meant to. Dürer does not place Jerome at the centre of any particular philosophical/theological controversy. What are the four walls of the room keeping at bay? Perhaps the dangers associated with the rocky deserted terrains Dürer imagined Jerome performing his penances in. His little study signifies both departure and return, a peaceful emotional containment that does not require a release. Dürer creates a humanistic epic in one frame; it’s not a vision of the scholar Jerome was. Surrounded by the lion, dog, the gourd vine and the pillows, Jerome becomes a product of his experiences. The symbols are as straightforward as the narrative is complex. For the most part, it is unencumbered by flourishes that might draw our focus away from the story. By the time we finish exploring Dürer’s ideas, everything is imperceptibly blurred, the divide between Jerome’s and Dürer’s expressions of piety, the different ways they

⁵⁹ Philip L. Sohm, "Dürer's 'Melencolia I': The Limits of Knowledge". in *Studies in the History of Art*, Vol. 9 (National Gallery of Art: 1980), 16.

themselves approach theological issues in their lives. Dürer's reserve is essential to his worldview: any leanings towards the dramatic are kept in check, and the negative spaces are filled with a meaningful silence. These silences complete the narrative.

The force of this peaceful containment has its origin, in the character of the protagonist and Dürer's self-recognition with his subject. Some of the best representations of Henry show his piety as an extension of narcissism: he is infatuated with his own goodness. But his deliberate silence casts a longer shadow now than it did in Shakespeare's time. In Connor Iggulden's series of novels on the Wars of the Roses, this silence proves what an effective framing device it is for a comment on the imperatives of wartime commerce and the absurdity of infighting. It is also an intense observation of a family whose status quo is threatened by outsiders. *Stormbird*, *Margaret of Anjou*, *Bloodline*, and *Ravenspur: Rise of the Tudors* illustrate Iggulden's puzzled sense of humanity at its most optimistic.⁶⁰ Although the novels can be understood and enjoyed as they are, the series has more resonance if we remember Shakespeare (as with every text we have examined.) And largely because Shakespeare's *Henry VI* has reclaimed some of its lost popularity, Iggulden's techniques may seem a little self-conscious, even impressionistic at times. As a person, Henry VI is not at all what a medievalist would expect. It is difficult to understand why such a monarch would use silence as an instrument of piety. But in the light of Iggulden's series, we are reminded that *Henry VI* began a cycle of historical plays about fathers and sons. So much happened off the stage, implied but not shown. Shakespeare wordlessly uses time and space in the first scene of *1 Henry VI* to establish one of nature's oldest routines: inheritance.⁶¹ So does Iggulden, and in a very similar way. The series begins with the death of Edward III, and his three sons driving away the 'whore' his father had taken in his last years. The moral atmosphere is strangely puritanical for mid-fourteenth century England. One of the advantages of his scale is that he doesn't dart from one plot point to another, and this moral rectitude allows us to contemplate and inhabit the action.⁶² This brings an ordinariness and artlessness to serious theological observations: 'John of Gaunt rested

⁶⁰ Conn Iggulden, *Wars of the Roses: The Complete Collection* (London: Penguin, 2017). Kindle.

⁶¹ Studies on inheritance and legacy have also progressed and acquired new meaning in a society that regularly sees debates on the ethics of imposing a tax on the act of receiving 'gifts' from the previous possessor.

⁶² The complete collection consists of 1675 pages.

his hand on Edmund's shoulder. 'I know, brother. I love him too.' Thomas frowned at both of them. 'Will you have him die with your empty chatter ringing in his ears?' he said sternly. 'Give him silence or prayer, either one'.⁶³

Like Dürer's technique of simply shutting his viewers out, we are here prompted to involve ourselves on our own. And despite the actual deathbed, the prologue plays out like an Expressionist nightmare sequence, the type that European filmmakers used to startlingly surreal effects throughout the fifties and sixties.⁶⁴ We are given a casual glimpse at what appears to be a veiled commentary on salvation.

'I was dreaming, lads. I was dreaming of a green field and riding across it.' The king's voice was thin and reedy, so high and weak that they could barely hear. Yet in his eyes they saw the man they had known before. He was still there, watching them.⁶⁵

Orthodox doctrine and ritual have been our major preoccupation throughout this discussion, and with Iggulden we arrive at a quest for a credible truth behind religious faith. This is meant as a note of appreciation for him as a theologian, or, at least, a religious writer. He creates philosophically ambitious concepts and symbols with his images and dialogue. We are, along with the regents and their consorts and spies, trying to decode Henry's complex condition. Iggulden marries several religio-political conceits with the frankest treatment of Henry's sexuality that we have seen. This comes to him naturally.

Why would Iggulden be interested in Henry VI? The author's work is confined to stories of characters balancing themselves on some kind of moral precipice: Julius Caesar, Genghis and Kubla Khan, the 10th century monk and political adviser to the Saxon Kings of England, St. Dunstan. It has been a list of criminals, Nihilists, and overreachers. What makes the weak-willed English king a possible Iggulden protagonist? The answer lies partly in his fondness for his country. Asked by *The Writers Write* about

⁶³ Iggulden, *Wars of the Roses*, 26.

⁶⁴ The defining example of German expressionist filmmaking is *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919). It can be very loosely understood as the representation of responses to reality rather than reality itself. Western civilisation had long been moving towards a breakdown of verisimilitude in art, though, of course, this is not a concrete philosophy in and of itself. It would go on to leave its own impression on film *noir* and horror films, both of which we discuss later in the chapter.

⁶⁵ Iggulden, *Wars of the Roses*, 27.

the greatest love of his life, Iggulden answered: “Well, obviously I could say the wife, or books, or the great stories of history and the examples therein. Or words perhaps. The truth is, it’s probably the land itself, odd as that may sound. Along with the culture and the people. I feel a connection to it, whether I’m wandering the South Downs, or sitting on a peak in the Brecon Beacons, or even enjoying a meal in a restaurant. It’s unfashionable to say it, but I like it here.”⁶⁶ The Wars of the Roses is one of England’s favourite homegrown horrors, and he is known for providing long-suffering historical characters a measure of peace. If Gregory’s primary concern was investigating the death of God, Iggulden questions if there is anything to believe in after the death of God. He finds curiosities hidden in what he terms ‘veins of gold.’⁶⁷ Henry’s unique situation is one of the troublesome, wonderful events that is not part of general knowledge in England today. Much of what Suffolk or Winchester does in his series is not an attempt to help Lancaster or York. It’s a desperate struggle to stay politically relevant, and it’s powered by a constant hum of suspense and the inkling that everything could come crashing down around us at any minute. This is not an unfamiliar device of Shakespearean tragedy and there are such magnificent mini-tragedies strewn all over the novel. In many ways, this is his long-sought reckoning with Shakespeare. Let’s examine how a Lancastrian spy discusses the death of Henry V with Suffolk:

‘I remember Prince Hal, William! I remember the lion! Just ten more years and he’d have had the rest of France at his feet. Henry of Monmouth was my king, no other. God knows I would follow his son, but this boy is not his father. You know it. Instead of a lion of England, we have a dear white lamb to lead us in prayer. Christ, it makes me want to weep.’ ‘Derry, please! Your voice carries. And I won’t listen to blasphemy. I don’t allow it in my men and I expect better from you.’⁶⁸

Academics don’t typically see in Shakespeare a writer of spy thrillers⁶⁹, but it is impossible to deny that he is also interested in rumour, conspiracy, mistaken identities, and political intrigue. With this alignment acknowledged, *Stormbird* is also a daring

⁶⁶ Conn Iggulden, The Writers Write Interview (London: 7 December, 2020). Accessed on <https://www.writerswrite.co.za/the-writers-write-interview-conn-iggulden/>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 30.

⁶⁹ Lisa Hopkins has a wonderfully witty exploration of why so many crime writers frequently allude to Shakespeare. See *Lisa Hopkins, Shakespearean Allusion in Crime Fiction: DCI Shakespeare* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

departure for Iggulden as he creates this fictitious historical character: Derry Brewer the Lancastrian spymaster. He cares deeply about placing Henry within a very specific mediaeval world. By now, the wars have become a memory of a story told a hundred times a hundred different ways. The country is a doomed dreamscape:

England was cold that month. The frost made the paths shine whitely in the darkness, clinging to the trees in drooping webs of ice. Guardsmen hunched and shivered as they kept watch over the battlements. In the highest rooms, the wind sobbed and whistled as it creased around the stones. The fire in the chamber might as well have been a painting for all the warmth it brought.⁷⁰

The language is close to *Windsor Forest*; Iggulden shares Alexander Pope's sense of place, be it the freezing Windsor palace gardens, the blasted heaths of St Albans, or the market of Tewkesbury. But these places are also being stripped away, as Iggulden focuses only on Henry's condition, Edward's revenge, and Richard's unfortunate rise to power - it all curdles into a bleak story of madness and death. Familiarisation with unknown landscapes is a powerful way to accomplish a sense of remembrance and intimacy with the events. To Iggulden, responding to certain places is more important than archival research: "I went to Sandal Castle ruins in winter and it was brutally cold. The thought of trying to use a sword in those temperatures changed how I looked at battles like Towton, fought in snow. I have to visit key locations to look at the geography. Walking from the village of Saxton to the battlefield at Towton was a key part of understanding how the forces of York moved."⁷¹

There is a void in the places we encounter in the *Roses* series - perhaps it's the absence of the schemers, adventurers, and political players that once populated the stages all those centuries ago. Yet the baroque-ness of the stories is thrilling: the simple death of a king spirals into a maze of madness and death. Throughout you feel like Iggulden is in alignment with the Bard, to whom he is indebted for his ability to make his readers "care about the characters in a few lines."⁷²

⁷⁰ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 30.

⁷¹ Conn Iggulden, Historia Interviews: Conn Iggulden, interview by Toby Clements, *Magazine of the Historia* (9 June 2016). Accessed on <https://www.historiamag.com/historia-interviews-conn-iggulden/>.

⁷² Iggulden, The Writers Write Interview.

The feeling of desolation (the keystone of the Windsor Forest musings) couples with this specificity of place to show us a very simple thing: marshes and gardens and monasteries have looked very much the same throughout the ages. They are strangely full of and devoid of history. A cold Towton battlefield might not appear differently to us than it did to all the Yorkists who marched there four centuries ago. Although Iggulden (evidently) took pains to recreate a realistic landscape, we are closer than ever to Shakespeare's empty stage. The inventiveness of the soundscape reminds us, again, of German expressionism and film *noir*: 'The summer sun rose over a clear horizon at Windsor, lighting the great walls in red-gold as the town around it grew busy... Somewhere close by, they could hear orders being roared and the tramp and jingle of marching soldiers. York's movement towards the king's private rooms was about to be met by armed men. The three with him loosened their swords in the scabbards, cracking knuckles and necks in anticipation.'⁷³ The sounds mirror the haunting quality of the presences. The effects of echoing footsteps, dripping blood, knocking, and even yawning are invested with layers of meaning.

Henry VI's Piety and the Man of Sorrows

'That's what the boy said to me,' Derry replied. "Bring me a truce, Derry," he says. "Bring me peace." Peace when we could take it all with one good season of fighting. It turned my stomach – and his poor old dad must be turning in his grave.'⁷⁴

The spymaster has described the scenario his men would have preferred: 'The king is twenty-two and his father was a proper fighter at that age. Remember? Old Henry would have torn their lungs out and worn 'em as gloves, just to keep his hands warm. Not the lamb, though. Not his boy. The lamb can't lead and the lamb can't fight.'⁷⁵ Anyone familiar with the two tetralogies knows that nothing is quite the same once blood has been spilled.

⁷³ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 70.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

Henry VI is a traditional Christian figure of expectation, but, like the famous Franciscan saying, ‘why, oh God, aren’t you who I want You to be?’, the demi-divine ruler here is a subversion of the saviour archetype.

We began this discussion with Dürer’s *Three Children’s Heads* and Kristeva’s explanation of Dürer’s religious leanings. ‘The rosary, a Dominican invention,’ writes Kristeva, ‘alternated a dozen “Hail Marys” with a single “Our Father,” thus combining the “joyous mystery” of the birth with the “sorrowful mystery” of the Passion. No such alternating with Dürer. These children’s heads superimpose the red beads of the Passion over the white beads of Mary: all the black melancholy of the sorrowful mystery inscribed immediately in the white roses of the joyous mystery.’⁷⁶ This technique is very close to Iggulden’s, alternating the warmth and joy of Henry’s devotion with the joy of his martyrdom. Grace isn’t a word that fits into this mould of Henry VI easily. Gregory’s trilogy is certain of humanity’s desertion of God in a post-Holocaust nuclear age, but Henry here is searching for God (as opposed to ‘truth’ or ‘meaning’) in the face of fatherlessness. His introduction is written in recognisably religious language:

Across a swathe of frozen, crunching grass, the two men walked in darkness to the Windsor chapel, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, Edward the Confessor and St George. In starlight, with his breath misting before him, Derry nodded to the guards at the outer door as they passed through into a candlelit interior that was almost as cold as the night outside. The chapel seemed empty at first, though Suffolk sensed and then caught glimpses of men standing among the statues. In dark robes, they were almost invisible until they moved. Footsteps on stone echoed in the silence as the watchers walked towards the two men, faces hard with their responsibility. Twice, Derry had to wait until he was recognized before he could make his way along the nave towards the lone figure at prayer. The monarch’s seat was almost enclosed in carved and gilded wood, lit by dim lamps hanging far above. Henry knelt there with his hands out in front of him, tight-clenched and rigid. His eyes were closed and Derry sighed softly to himself. For a time, he and Suffolk just stood and waited, gazing on the upraised face of a boy, lit gold in the darkness. The king looked angelic, but it broke both their hearts to see how young he seemed, how frail.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 7.

⁷⁷ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 35.

This particular trinity - the Intercessor, the Confessor, and the Warrior - highlights Henry's source of authority beautifully.⁷⁸ The angelic, kneeling figure (the Worshipper, perhaps) completes this Christian pattern. We already know that he is inconsequential to the political storyline. The political events, in fact, are worldly replications of his higher quest for a spiritual kingdom. This is suggested by the remoteness of the chapel wherein he lives most of his life. Derry and Suffolk need Henry VI to act as a mediator between them and this otherworldly space. He speaks a language very different from his courtier and spymaster. He blinked when he saw them, then smiled at them both, crossing himself and muttering a final prayer before rising on legs made stiff from hours of stillness... 'My heart is full to see you, Lord Suffolk. Come now, stand up. The floor is too cold for old men. I'm sure that's right.'⁷⁹ The chasm between the men is as visible in Henry's speech as it is in his silence. His simple concern makes the spy and the minister seem fundamentally evil. This is an important political shift from Shakespeare's inscrutable king who finds himself in a court full of vultures and negotiates his survival accordingly. Henry's golden face signals he is the Light (John 1:4 says 'In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.') True to Blacman, Henry is clothed in 'robes of righteousness,' wearing a simple cloth of wool with plain leather shoes and no gold. He has guileless eyes and no trace of his massive bloodline on him. What he has, however, are bleeding hands.

'They just bleed and bleed,' Henry says.⁸⁰ Henry is no longer just a Christological figure; he is the Man of Sorrows. ('He was taken from prison and from judgement: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken,' says Isaiah 53:8). The Suffering Christ and the Pensive Christ were Messiah prefigurations that prominently displayed the stigmata and were very popular devotional images in late medieval piety. But almost immediately this extreme representation of faith is offset by Henry's

⁷⁸ It should be noted here that we rarely see them being portrayed as a single character, except, perhaps, St Edmund of East Anglia and St Olaf the warrior king.

⁷⁹ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 36.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

divulging why he had been wanting to pray. His uncle had told him that the French would not be able to capture him while he was praying. Isn't that a wonderful thing, he asks.⁸¹

An easy explanation for this suspicion of piety is Iggulden's admiration for war heroes, many of whose stories he had heard from his own father while growing up. A real-world hero he looks up to is second world war fighter Douglas Bader, the 'insanely brave, aggressive, ruthless and endlessly abrasive' military man. Like Gregory's grandfather during the first world war, his father had been a fighter pilot during the second world war. A hero, according to him, is 'one who inspires us. One who has courage and possibly just a bit of style.'⁸² Edward IV is his idea of the courageous hero, and it is characteristic of modern writers to try and rationalise faith in God with the reality of God's silence. In a series about unspeakable suffering and death, faith is also a source of anxiety. But he refrains from making Henry a site of religious despair solely. Derry knows the young king is intelligent, and he wants peace at the cost of lands in France. Henry's initial unwillingness to be like his father is treated with fear and anxiety as an attempt to break away from his own bloodline. Derry's insistence that Henry is not his father's son carries the deep anxiety about natural inheritance, a fear that Suffolk's 'I will not hear blasphemy!' does nothing to alleviate, though it gives the young king political legitimacy. This disgust and anxiety are expanded to problematise Henry's piety, and we will return later to address this issue. At the moment it is important to comment on the way Iggulden rationalises Henry's obsessive need to remain in the dark chapel. Beyond the religious symbolism is a fatherless young man terrified by the everyday horrors of being a son, a military leader, and a king. Suffolk is overwhelmed with sorrow at Henry's youth and fragility:

Suffolk felt a surge of affection for the young king. He had watched Henry grow with the hopes of an entire country on his shoulders. Suffolk had seen those hopes falter and then crumble into disappointment. He could only guess how hard it had been for the boy himself. Henry was not stupid, for all his strangeness. He would have heard every barbed comment made about him over the years.⁸³

⁸¹ This is another way of using piety as a protective measure, though vastly different from how Freud imagined it.

⁸² Conn Iggulden, Conn Iggulden: 'I thought I couldn't write without smoking', *INews*, July 24, 2020. Accessed on <https://inews.co.uk/culture/books/conn-iggulden-interview-the-gate-of-athens-books-lockdown-561044>.

⁸³ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 38.

There is a very Kristevan separation anxiety in Henry's relationship with his dead father. In *The Severed Head*, Kristeva describes the infant's guilt at being cast away from his or her mother in these words: if it seems as though Mama is dead, mustn't I myself die in turn, die to thought, neither eat nor speak?⁸⁴ Henry is his father's son only in a biological sense. He is, in this particular sense, both insider and outcast. Is Henry the remnant of his father that needs to be acknowledged? Kristeva speaks of the mother's body and the resultant depression of the body detaching itself, while Henry feels his exclusion from his father's martial legacy. It is interesting that Henry's self-identity is rooted in the absence of his father and his faith is a result of a kind of erasure. Here Henry is 'almost awake,' caught between his conscious desire for isolation and a subconscious desire for attachment. This posits two possibilities: this piety is a pathological neuroses (remembering Freud's 'Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices') and that it's a less explored result of postmodern existentialism. It is possible to reconcile the two opposing approaches, to read his prayer as occupying the space between fear/rejection of God and being repelled by God, like the *Akedah*. To do so, we will explore one of the most complex thought-bearing images of blind faith that the twentieth century has offered us: the picture of a spider.

Henry VI's Absent God, Ingmar Bergman's Spider, and Ovid's Arachne

'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I also am known,' writes St Paul in the thirteenth chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians.⁸⁵ In a celebrated film that borrows its title from St Paul's words, the Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman tells us the story of a schizophrenic and fatherless young girl (not very unlike King Henry) having delusions about 'God.' When she ultimately sees God in the final scene of the film, He is a spider. She says: 'The door opened. But the God that came out was a spider. He came toward me and I saw his face. It was a terrible stony face. He crawled up and tried to force himself onto me, but I defended myself. The whole time I saw his eyes. They were cold and calm. When he couldn't penetrate me, he continued up my chest up onto my face

⁸⁴ Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 5.

⁸⁵ St. Paul, Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, in *Commentary on Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians*, by Frederick Louis Godet (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1893), 254.

and up the wall. I have seen God.⁸⁶ In another Bergman film, *Winter Light*, the protagonist Tomas suffers a crisis of faith and equates God with a monster. 'Every time I confronted God with the reality I saw,' he says, 'he became ugly, revolting, a spider-god.'⁸⁷ It is well known that the themes of religious despair in his trilogy are borrowed from his early childhood and questions about personal faith that he had while growing up. We seem to have circled back to the question discussed in the third chapter. Is God sadistic? Does He derive pleasure from commanding His devoted follower to sacrifice his first-born son? Why does He test Job's loyalty in that horrific manner? How do we read the methodical terrorising of the Egyptians in Exodus today? For centuries we have understood the crucifixion as an overwhelming example of divine sacrifice for the redemption of an entire race, but is sacrificial torture-unto-death redemption the madness within Christianity? This is not a new question. Countless pages of research have been devoted to establishing Christian monotheism as the origin of authoritarianism, intolerance, misogyny, fundamentalism, the patriarchy and a tremendous amount of meaningless violence. It is not a question we shall take on here, but it is necessary to remember that the Suffering/Pensive Christ displaying his Five Precious Wounds is central to Christian salvation doctrine. In short, the blood price has to be paid.⁸⁸

Why a spider? Perhaps because it is a fascinating subversion of Christ outstretched on the cross, replacing his wounds with claws and his blood with venom. It is the prototype of the Devil turning crucifixes upside down during exorcisms. Karin's father abandoned her and her brother at a young age and came back much later, only to exploit his daughter's hallucinations as material for books he had been writing.⁸⁹ Are all figures of expectation destined to disappoint us? Then God is a toxic fantasy produced by a schizophrenic mind. If not, He is an arachnid who defiles the innocent. Although without really meaning to, Bergman reminds us of the complicated Judeo-Christian attitudes towards sexual violence. While this is a valid way to read Karin's imagined

⁸⁶ "Karin announces that she has seen God", *Through a Glass Darkly*, directed by Ingmar Bergman (1961, Sweden: The Criterion Collection, 2003), Apple TV.

⁸⁷ *Winter Light*, directed by Ingmar Bergman (1963, Sweden: The Criterion Collection, 2003), Apple TV.

⁸⁸ That which is ill gotten brings sorrow to the getter (see Job 20:12-15). There are two explanations of this: thirty silver coins are the price of Jesus's precious blood, and the blood of Christ is the price of the salvation of humankind.

⁸⁹ *Through a Glass Darkly*, Ingmar Bergman.

rape, it is also an addition to the horrors of a spiritual void. In *Ingmar Bergman: Theatricality Contra Theology*, Michael J. Shapiro writes that theatre is the space Bergman turned to because it provided the distance he needed from religious piety.⁹⁰ Whether triggered by a negative space or psychosis (which, one might argue, is also caused by this spiritual void), this fairy tale-like monstrous villain is a particularly stable symbol for what is ultimately a distressing and recurring emotional state.

Bergman is indebted to Ovid and Dante for the many complex functions of this spider-god. One of the most entertaining stories from Roman mythology is the myth of Arachne. Seen first in book six of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Arachne is a skilled and haughty seamstress (an exclusively female activity):

One at the loom so excellently skill'd,
That to the Goddess she refus'd to yield.
Low was her birth, and small her native town,
She from her art alone obtain'd renown.⁹¹

Drunk on her superior weaving skills, Arachne scorns Athena/Minerva who challenges her to a weaving contest. Athena makes representations of four separate Gods vs mortals battles where four separate men were transformed into other creatures for daring to defy their masters. Arachne's tapestries showed a different kind of transformation:

Arachne drew the fam'd intrigues of Jove,

Chang'd to a bull to gratify his love;
How thro' the briny tide all foaming hoar,
Lovely Europa on his back he bore.⁹²

Enraged by Arachne's faultless weaving although she approved of her talent inwardly, Athena struck her on her forehead. Immediately, Arachne hung herself. "Live; but depend, vile wretch," cried Athena, "Doom'd in suspense for ever to be ty'd..."⁹³ Let us try to distance ourselves from the feminist angle of this tale of creative autonomy and

⁹⁰ Michael J. Shapiro, "Ingmar Bergman: Theatricality Contra Theology," in *The Phenomenology of Religious Belief: Media, Philosophy, and the Arts* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), Perlego.

⁹¹ Ovid, 'The Transformation of Arachne into a Spider,' in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, tr. Anonymous (London: printed for Jacob Tonson, 1717). Accessed on ECCO-TCP.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

observe the transformed body of Arachne as a site of divine retribution *and mercy*. If we examine this powerful tale to understand female creative inadequacy and authorial anxieties, the myth is also a testimony to divine grace.⁹⁴ This would not be too surprising in ancient Rome/Greece. Frequently in fairy tales witches and wizards use transfiguration as a tool of reward and punishment.⁹⁵

Like the *Akedah*, the punishment of Arachne is *incomplete* and modified into something less heinous. The spider is chosen to provoke our fear and repulsion, but its simultaneous association with Athena's pity for Arachne's wretchedness places it right beside Genesis 22 as a source of profound theological anxiety. Bergman's spider-god is a duplication of this original complexity. We may venture to theorise about where this anxiety originates. From Dürer's children's heads to Bergman's and Ovid's arachnid fantasies, this gruesomeness provides emotional support to a world ridden by death, diseases, and starvation. Like Bettelheim said about the strange creatures in the Grimms' stories, 'behind it we soon discover the inner turmoils of our soul – its depth, and ways to gain peace within ourselves and with the world, which is the reward of our struggles.'⁹⁶ Myth and film are safe spaces to give our theological anxieties a shape and acknowledge them. Is it possible we are offending God by simply doing our own work or taking pride in it? Will He abandon me or punish me? What terrifying fate lies in store for us? In all the circumstances we have described, God stays the punishment. There is always the fundamental element of hope. We can confront our vile, taboo instincts for incest in hallucinations of spider-gods and release such repressed desires. When Karin resists, the spider climbs upon her breast and face and escapes onto the wall, leaving her traumatised but inviolate. This is a Christian lesson: if we meet our unjust hardships with steadfastness and equanimity, God will help us overcome them. Bergman's spider-god is an externalisation of our formless turmoils, and her schizophrenia becomes an 'enabling device.' Even as modernity attempts to show Christian theology as vain hope

⁹⁴ This is reading against quite a few centuries of traditionally accepted interpretations of Arachne's transformation. It has always been thought of as a cruel and devilish punishment.

⁹⁵ See David Gallagher, *Metamorphosis: Transformations of the Body and the Influence of Ovid's Metamorphoses on Germanic Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009).

⁹⁶ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), 309.

and salvation an impossibility, this need to outlaw any hope of redemption itself generates guilt and further anxiety.

The image of the praying king is a spider-god, uncertain of salvation but a sure sign of danger: ‘In starlight, with his breath misting before him, Derry nodded to the guards at the outer door as they passed through into a candlelit interior that was almost as cold as the night outside. The chapel seemed empty at first, though Suffolk sensed and then caught glimpses of men standing among the statues. In dark robes, they were almost invisible until they moved. Footsteps on stone echoed in the silence as the watchers walked towards the two men, faces hard with their responsibility. Twice, Derry had to wait until he was recognized before he could make his way along the nave towards the lone figure at prayer.’⁹⁷ This is not a naturalistic setting. It’s not what a chapel in the 1430s looked like; this is the mere idea of a chapel, a 3D model of a Windsor prayer house. Everything needs to be abstracted for Henry to play his part. In truth, the two men did not need to meet Henry while he was praying. Readers know exactly what will happen, so Iggulden uses this image to structure a philosophy around what will happen.

The monarch’s seat was almost enclosed in carved and gilded wood, lit by dim lamps hanging far above. Henry knelt there with his hands out in front of him, tight-clenched and rigid. His eyes were closed and Derry sighed softly to himself.⁹⁸

This moment of encounter is subsumed beneath the more engaging description of the king, but it is crucial to the underlying philosophy of the narrator. The son of the war king Henry V deep in prayer is a picture of purity and danger. It recalls medieval warnings against excessive royal piety and the more immediate danger that all Lancastrians following Henry VI will be slaughtered. Both courtiers are disturbed to find the king praying, but the only constant in the Wars of the Roses story – Henry’s single-minded devotion to his religion – is also not a constant here. The French can’t come as he prays, he tells Suffolk. Here he is meant to be associated with literal death as much as redemption. It forces its way through the theological subtexts that we have already examined. Who is the real innocent here? The king or the ambitious spymaster?

⁹⁷ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 36.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*,

The king was dressed in the simplest of clothes, just plain dark wool and blunt leather shoes like any townsman. He wore no gold and, with the look of a boy, he might have been an apprentice in some trade that did not require too much strength. Suffolk searched the young man's face for some trace of the father, but the eyes were guileless and the frame was slender, showing no sign of the massive strength of his bloodline. Suffolk almost missed the bandages on Henry's hands.⁹⁹

This might be a deeply subversive embrace of the sorrow of the Passion. All three men are innocent and complicit. Iggulden believes in a Shakespearian lesson we learnt in the second chapter: political power is a shadow on a wall.¹⁰⁰ There is the power of fatherhood and inheritance; there is the distant power of the Holy See in Rome, and the power of fate, on which the wars depend. Above all is the previously mentioned religious/philosophical anxiety behind the fear of death and abandonment. This may be why Iggulden doesn't think Henry is an eccentric, neurotic loner. The encounter is external to the war; we are aware of the fact that four centuries have passed since the war. Or perhaps the chapel is a stage and this is a tableau.

At this point the fundamental 'pious king' anxiety has been repeated numerous times for us. This is a frustrating interpretive dynamic, depending on the same scene playing out for us in different ways. Yet our frustration serves a purpose. Henry's piety is one of those absurdities that refuses to reveal itself, and this resistance has immense power in the narrative.¹⁰¹ It is not a mockery of the politics of modern medievalism but of what medievalists might make of this rehashed version of the 'truth.' Despite the respectability of the list of authors who have written stories and poems about the king, he never loses sense of the specificity of the medieval world in the timeless world of political/theological inquiry. Understanding Henry is a deliberate exercise of the memory.

In his book *Introduction to Christianity*, Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Emeritus) wrote: 'But in this area of things that can be seen and grasped, the area that determines the living

⁹⁹ Ibid., 37.

¹⁰⁰ This is a consistent theme in *Game of Thrones* also. Lord Varys, the master of whisperers, says, "Power resides where men believe it resides. It's a trick. A shadow on the wall. And a very small man can cast a very large shadow."

¹⁰¹ It exerts tremendous influence in nearly every narrative we have examined, obviously. The power of his silence is not understated in Shakespeare in a text that could not even obliquely refer to his mental condition.

space of man, God does not occur, however much the area may be extended. I believe that it is important that in principle the Old Testament contains this assertion: God is not just he who at present lies in fact outside the field of vision but could be seen if it were possible to go farther; no, he is the being who stands essentially outside it, however far our field of vision may be extended.¹⁰² This is Iggulden's view of the omnipotent, destructive, and horrifying role religion plays in our lives. Henry's prayers (and by logical extension, Henry himself) are an impossibility, a rupture in reasoning. Is Henry then both divine mercy and the impossibility of divine mercy? A spider-god? A severed head?

It is impossible to understand if Iggulden recognises the connection between the Kristevan separation and the lack/absence that Henry represents in his series of novels, but he repeatedly and deliberately defines Henry with words that signal loss and separation. We know only that he is not Henry V; what he is we do not know. His character is a moment of profound anxiety:

‘As you say, Lord Suffolk. We must have a truce. I depend on you to carry out my wishes. Bring me a picture of her.’ Derry had returned while the conversation went on, his face carefully blank. ‘I’m sure His Royal Highness would like to return to his prayers now, Lord Suffolk.’ ‘I would, yes,’ Henry replied, holding up one bandaged hand in farewell. Suffolk could see a dark red stain at the centre of the palm. They bowed deeply to the young king of England as he walked back to his place and knelt, his eyes closing slowly, his fingers lacing together like a lock.¹⁰³

The Sleep of Faith: An Origin Myth for Henry VI's Silence

Henry isn't the figural equivalent to Dürer's St Jerome or Kristeva's gruesome visions of severed heads or Bergman's monstrous spider-god. He is a response to their depression and turmoil and it's not a response dictated by their terms. There is something distinctly anti-intellectual in Iggulden's reading of Shakespeare's Henry. Suffolk's standing in for Henry during the royal wedding to Margaret of Anjou expresses how truly strange the entire process might have seemed to people who believed in the divinity of the anointed body of the king. Minus that sacrality, of what worth are marriage vows? Suffolk refuses to be a straw king for the exchange of rings. On the wedding day, Derry is forced to

¹⁰² Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 152.

¹⁰³ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 39.

explain that Henry was held up by a ‘small difficulty.’ He was quite unable to attend and could only send his most abject apologies to Princess Margaret and her father. ‘A small difficulty?’ King Charles said in stupefaction. ‘Have you any concept of the work that has gone into this day? Now you tell me your king is ill? It is a catastrophe!’¹⁰⁴ Lord Suffolk has to finally remove his wedding ring before he takes vows with Margaret. The monarch, however powerful and sacralised, is still a ghost troubling the conscience of the political players in the world of the text. The marriage and the truce are both reminders of what is missing and causes real moral discomfort to modern readers. When he is not an absence, he is a ‘ruin.’ “King Henry is a simpleton,” says York, “I knew it when he was a boy. He spent too much time with monks and cardinals and not enough wielding a sword like his father. They ruined him, Cecily. They ruined the son of my king with their prayers and poetry.”¹⁰⁵ During these moments, Iggulden enforces a strategic silence on Henry, whose space is co-opted by York, or Derry, or Suffolk and these courtiers represent him to us in their terms. This isn’t disempowering; Henry is never meant to be just a character. He is throughout a moment of encountering our deepest tribulations. While he *prays* (‘prays’ italicised by the author), French whores take back their lands.¹⁰⁶

As so often with such silences, the underlying emotional cause can be disturbingly sexual:

Her touch seemed to bring him calm, so that she dared not step away to undress. Instead, she kept her lips on his as her hands worried at ties and fastenings, yanking cloth away from her shoulders, baring them. It was impossible. ‘I ...’ he began, the word smothered instantly as she kissed him again. She could taste the blood that rimed his lips from the leech wounds, like iron in her mouth ... When Henry cried out, Margaret felt her body shiver in response, thin tremors of pleasure amidst the discomfort that somehow promised much more. She felt her husband rise away from the pillows, his arms and back growing hard as he held her, then going suddenly limp, so that he fell back like a dead man.¹⁰⁷

Congress with Henry is an ‘impossibility’ and ends in a deathlike state. Margaret’s sexual curiosity is one of the seamier angles in the novel. She is the spider-god preying on an

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 107.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 108.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 243.

innocent. Her aggression is an attempt to taint the purity and closed-off (locked) body of the anointed figure, although it is within the bounds of religion. Suggestions of rape linger below the surface of the story. Nothing is stated outright, and readers realise with a start that Henry had been unresponsive for more than a year when his son Edward was born. This is not literalism; unlike the prayer scene, this isn't working with symbols or images. We have to take this brutality at its face value. Consider again the infantile distortions of Henry as his wife tries to arouse him. There is a vague sense of repulsion at the virgin Margaret's lasciviousness: 'With one hand she pulled her dress up and tore at the cloth beneath, so that her buttocks were revealed. A stray thought came to her mind of the learned doctor opening the door at that moment and she stifled a giggle as she put one bare leg across her husband and tried to bring about a joining beneath the mass of garments.'¹⁰⁸

The visual association of congress with a prison of human limbs gives us a clue about why Iggulden decides to include a hitherto-untouched part of Henry's life. In truth, no latent eroticism can be teased out of any reading of his life except the surprising birth of his son. If Henry had any sexual curiosity, he seems to be punished for them. This tale of marital rape comes from a place of control. It is mildly shocking to see a medieval figure of worship degraded by his wife, yet we realise this is how it might have been.¹⁰⁹ This almost dead Henry becomes a subversion of the bleeding, holy martyr: this suffering is not Christological or redemptive. Henry's silence may well be the result of this trauma. Symbolic parallels sometimes explain emotional undercurrents better than straightforward interpretations. To that end, Margaret is clearly a corrupted type of Mary. She has visions of Sufflok while in bed with her husband, whom she is violating. Becoming one flesh is crucial to being a married couple ('Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' (Mark 10:6-8, ESV, quoting Genesis 1:27 and 2:24)) but here this holy mystery is source of horror, once again. This is separate from the central narrative as well. It is a part of what Henry has weathered, and out of all the threads Iggulden picks the one that feeds

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.,

¹⁰⁹ This is not an unhistorical addition. Henry had, in fact, been unresponsive for many months before his son was born.

and reinforces the overlooked areas in the king's life. Henry isn't wounded by Yorks but by people very close to him (his father and his wife, for instance.)

There is a schism in the consciousness of the narrative, a separation between the politics of the war and Henry's isolation. Even more cruelly, the novel is full of men who speak a language he cannot - from clever political hacks to roadside pimps and drunkards. We could, in theory, look elsewhere for this spiritual ugliness (it's a war novel). But we find it in a virgin's satisfaction at a slow dissolution of her 'victim.' Perhaps it is Iggulden's attempt to channel the frustration of the war into a hatred for the street freaks (Jack Cade) and perverted youngsters. Or, perhaps any attempt to penetrate Henry's being is a violation of his sacral nature.¹¹⁰

The traumatising power of the episode is hinted at during Henry's next scene with Margaret. The inner dimension of their relationship is unreadable and Henry himself seems to have been poisoned by the invisible, malignant spider-god: 'For a time, he thought the king would not respond, but then Henry sighed and spoke, his voice slurred. 'William would not betray me, Master Brewer. If the charge is false, he should be released. Is that the truth? ... The king's voice faded and he stared with dull eyes. Derry cleared his throat, but the face remained utterly still and slack, as if its guiding spirit had been snuffed. 'Your Grace?' Derry said, glancing up at Margaret in confusion. She shook her head, tears filling her eyes so that they shone. The moment passed and Henry seemed to return, blinking and smiling as if nothing had happened. 'I am weary now, Master Brewer. I would like to sleep. The learned doctor says I must sleep if I am to be well again.'¹¹¹

As Henry smiles at them innocently, Margaret says that he has suffered this vagueness for days. This sudden shift from a purely physical to a psychological imbalance is not coincidental. It is hard to imagine a monarch so receptive to every terror that surrounds him. This mixture of faith and doubt is compelling, and when Henry overcomes his 'vagueness' without prayer, it is satisfying. There is potential for body-horror in every move the sick king makes.

¹¹⁰ Eternity and the Triune nature of God are the divine mysteries, and it is the heart of the faith, but it is also a theological/intellectual problem.

¹¹¹ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 270.

She gaped as she saw Henry with his legs on the floor and two boots waiting to be put on. He had pulled a long white shirt over his bony chest and found woollen leggings. 'Margaret? Can you help me with these? I can't pull them on myself.' There were dark circles under his eyes, but he seemed more alert than she had seen him in days... Her husband put out an arm and she helped to raise him to his feet, tugging the leggings higher and fastening his belt. He looked thin and pale, but his eyes were clear and she could have wept just to see him standing.¹¹²

This is, yet again, another thought-bearing image. His presence will make no difference at all, yet it will symbolically carry its meaning beyond the story into theology. Iggulden's theology, like Bergman's, is existential and negative. Henry is never well again and Suffolk is hanged. We could have rested with the conclusion that God is thereby absent or silent, but the question is repeatedly thrown at us. Kierkegaard once remarked that it was man who needed to make the leap to God,¹¹³ but what if there isn't anything to leap to? Or, worse, what if it is a spider-like shadow? Is Henry in the wrong because he awaits God's help? Presently Iggulden repeats the same question through Henry's silence. As Margaret waits for Henry to speak to his courtiers about Suffolk's imprisonment, he grows cold and is silent. But the body of the anointed king still matters. If God is remote, Henry can communicate with the humans that surround him. This is an inversion of what happens in *Through a Glass Darkly*. Karin's delusion is a result of the incestuous encounter she has with her brother Minus. And although she goes away to an asylum at the end of the film, Minus finds peace in his relationship with his father. His initial revulsion of women and sensuality is still there, but the story has risen above it. Suffering for God is meaningless. Shakespeare is almost a parallel Freud, weaving his own modern myth around a dysfunctional family. Here sexual horror leads to a disaster, as Henry stands silent while William de la Pole is banished for five years.

'I am sorry to have brought you grief, Your Royal Highness. If it please God, I will return to serve you again.' Henry frowned vaguely. For an instant his hand half-reached but then fell back. All the lords knelt as Henry rose from his seat,

¹¹² Ibid., 279.

¹¹³ 'The leap of faith' is the idea that Kierkegaard is most famous for. The initial meaning of this is having a blind faith in God, and belief enough to leap into a Christian life. Secular thinkers often look at Kierkegaard as anti-rationality, but that overlooks how deeply enmeshed in religion 19th century Danish life must have been. Kierkegaard can be better understood as someone who believes that men are capable of much more than just reason. Theology might be working against itself by treating matters of faith with the intellect. Religion will always need an element of the 'leap of faith', even when one is fully intellectually committed to the path.

guided from their presence by the chancellor and his personal servants. *He had not spoken a single word.*¹¹⁴

An annoyed film critic once said this about Bergman's obsession with the silence of God: 'God is Silent. God is Absent. God is a Spider. God is the Sum of all Possible Love, and by my deductions, God is the artist.'¹¹⁵ To this the theorist Daniel Dervin added that the Artist is a Spider because 'his web holds at once his victims and himself as victimizer.'¹¹⁶ Perhaps medievalists are guilty of the same thing. We reduce Henry to an object of analysis to gain insight into the mind of the sufferer to use it for academic reasons, and in the process make Henry's suffering meaningless. It is worth pointing out that Henry - and especially as Ralph Fiennes portrayed him in 1988 for RSC - had become a type, and he is lit, framed, and styled in a distinctive way, bringing to mind the blue robes in which he was paraded through London after York won and in which attire early sixteenth century worshippers were used to seeing him. This work, too, uses Henry's condition to gain insight into certain soft spots of medieval theology. Analysing serious, or life-threatening, conditions requires us to respect the dignity of our subject. Iggulden takes great care not to portray him as woolly-brained, for Henry slumps and weeps with charming sincerity here. It lends the perspective an unforgiving and artless realism.

In many senses, he is the ideal American underground hero of the silver screen.¹¹⁷ Iggulden, with his preference for martial bravery and pulp sensationalism, is the perfect man to define Henry's resentment. Neither York (with their survivalist views) nor Lancaster (who believe in divine rights kingship) are patterns of morality Henry wishes to conform to. Medieval London looks like New York: a night world of the uprooted rebels, transients, and mercenary spies. Iggulden treats it with a Biblical fury. Henry's only possible reaction is a stupefied languor that enables even more cruelty. This is the hallmark of onscreen antiheroes who are not only malevolent misfits, but misfits audiences are supposed to sympathise with. Consider this powerful moment in the story

¹¹⁴ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 298. (Italics mine.)

¹¹⁵ It was Vernon Young who described Bergman's absent God in these words.

¹¹⁶ Daniel Dervin, "Ingmar Bergman's Films: The Spider-God and the Primal Scene," in *American Imago*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Fall, 1983), 228.

¹¹⁷ The underground hero is very close to the European existential hero (Meursault in *The Stranger*). In both cases, the trouble in question is an existential one, rather than socio-political. As it is, the character makes no sense without its theological underpinnings.

where Margaret wonders if she is pregnant: ‘Henry didn’t seem to remember their first stolen intimacy, as drugged and ill as he had been at the time. She had been bold enough to go to him half a dozen times since and it was true her fluxes were late that month.’¹¹⁸

And although Iggulden’s Henry has a clear Shakespearean dimension, it is as a fictional construct that he acquires a sociopathic ‘God’s Lonely Man’ edge. Margaret’s behaviour gives his silence an origin myth, if only to address the misery of the people who are affected by his condition. Although human communication is akin to salvation in Bergman’s theology, in twenty-first century medievalism, all language of familiarity and intimacy is used to create an illusion of human connection. Conversations are manipulated into a kind of capital (medieval equivalents for friends and followers on social media platforms) and exactly like today, connections increase the possibility of propaganda, misinformation, and hatred. During one rare instance when Henry feels well enough to speak, he chooses to go pray instead. His hands are bandaged and he has been having very strange dreams, and he wants to go to the chapel to pray: ‘Henry was as pale as ever, though she thought he looked a little less thin. It pleased her to see there were no bandages on his left hand, where the wound had finally healed. A pink mark like a burn remained, ridged and hard compared to the smoothness of his skin elsewhere. There were still bandages on his right palm, a tight wrap of white cloth that was changed and cleaned every morning.’¹¹⁹

Henry’s hands are still wounded. His skin is still pale. Deprived of light, he sucks up every flicker of movement. After waking up from his months-long sleep, his first words are, “I am surrounded by *strangers*! These men are telling me I have a son. Is it true?”¹²⁰ Then an unpleasant idea assails him: whose son is it? The idea that Margaret wouldn’t want to be questioned in public does not occur to him. Morally unfettered at last, Henry mutates into a fatalistic *noir* hero (though oddly unencumbered by political commitment), a not completely unforeseen shift given his earlier dread and paleness of countenance.¹²¹ His fundamental emotional associations are unchanged, and this

¹¹⁸ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 322.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 391.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 530.

¹²¹ The concept of family became more important with the rise of eighties’ noir cinema. It is common to find a noir hero in the role of the traditional protector, and they save their families from a corrupt regime, or an evil overlord, or an unfair government. Robert Arnett says that the eighties ‘noir narrative opens with

problematizes Henry's faith. Iggulden feels the need to exult his anointed status and amplify it with another thought-bearing image that he fashions his story around:

Henry considered, looking aside as he judged his own strength. He was appalled at the weakness that beset him, but if he had judged the lost time correctly, he was thirty-three years old. The realisation that he was the same age as Christ at his crucifixion hardened his will. He had woken on Christmas Day, at the age of Christ at his death. It was a sign, he was certain. He would not wilt, or spend one more moment in his sickbed, no matter what it cost him.¹²²

Almost immediately, his son is brought to him and he recognises his offspring. This momentary relinquishing of the noose and religious rapture is also a dimension of doubt; if there is no God, then we can at least turn to Christological characters about whose divine rights much have been written. There is some religious truth in this, and considerable anguish. The discordant and murky elements of London are pushed to their limits and given a rich, squalid quality. As Henry rides to London, the first buildings he notices are workshops, storehouses built on cheap lands, and London markets. The horrible frost and biting cold make an eerie contrast to the severely weakened Henry. This London is a modern Nineveh in decay, steeped in 'foul miasmas that brought disease each summer.'¹²³ Marching to this macabre hellscape is the centrepiece of our next theological conundrum. Even though Henry is quasi-divine in nature, can a horse ride to the Westminster Palace be his Calvary? 'He could not recall such physical exhaustion before,' writes Iggulden, but he reminded himself over and over that Christ had fallen three times on his way to Calvary. He would not fall, he told himself, or if he did, he would rise and mount and go on.'¹²⁴ But this, indeed, is the mystery of incarnation: the author is showing us how divine nature and human nature can co-exist in one single person.

Conn Iggulden blames Henry's physical/mental state for the wars of the Roses squarely. 'He was not the son his father should have had,' Iggulden wrote in his historical notes for *Stormbird*. While the wars of the Roses had many fathers, one of them was

a status quo of crime and corruption.' Please note the similarity of this plot device with the 'corrupt courtiers and counsellors' of Shakespeare's *Henry VI* series.

¹²² Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 532.

¹²³ Ibid., 535.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Henry's utter weakness as a king.¹²⁵ This catatonia, and not Henry VI, is the key player, and this is aligned with the kind of heroes Iggulden believes in: Genghis, Caesar, Pericles. This preference for martial heroism allows him to dramatise Henry's weakness and sneak in an urban indifference to his torments. The exacerbation for his desire for ruling is implicit in his silence and resentment towards York for being a better ruler than he was. Iggulden's Henry struggles with his anonymity before being subsumed by it.

In his essay 'The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster', Norman Mailer suggested that the American existentialist – the hipster – encourages the psychopath within to explore life beyond security, memory or planned intention. The white man with the black man's existential synapses emerged into chilly New York nights (or, at any rate, on to film sets) looking for action.¹²⁶ This much we all agree with because it is what made antiheroes like Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*), Patrick Bateman (*American Psycho*), or Lou Bloom (*Nightcrawler*) household names over the eighties and nineties till now. The historical situation in which *Stormbird*, *Trinity*, and *Margaret of Anjou* were born are similar to the development of film *noir*: post-war disillusionment, radical social change along gendered and racial lines, and the political challenges that follow such feelings and changes. Iggulden advocates masculine action against a similar backdrop of severe economic hardship and a complete breakdown of society. Henry VI is not a Vietnam veteran looking for revenge; he is an urban, civilised existentialist. Consider how Mailer's definition of the true existentialist illuminates what we know about Iggulden's Henry: 'To be a real existentialist (Sartre admittedly to the contrary) one must be religious, one must have one's sense of the "purpose"—whatever the purpose may be—but a life which is directed by one's faith in the necessity of action is a life committed to the notion that the substratum of existence is the search, the end meaningful but mysterious; it is impossible to live such a life unless one's emotions provide their profound conviction.'¹²⁷

¹²⁵ This statement is complicated by his admission that his weakness 'wasn't a steady state,' and 'any man can be weak-willed, but his long near-catatonic state suggests some sort of physical damage.' "Wars of the Roses came from Henry VI being in a coma for 18 months," he stated in an interview to the popular history website Aspects of History.

¹²⁶ Norman Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster" in *Dissent* (Fall, 1957; 20 June 2007). Accessed on https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-white-negro-fall-1957.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

How is this thematically different from St Teresa of Avila or St John of the Cross? If we do see in Henry a philosophical hipster, it's because the antithetical/psychopathic philosopher has much in common with mystics (a fact Mailer acknowledges). They rely on their own inner convictions to understand that their radical nonconformity is just and they shift their desires from immediate gratification to a wider passion for future power (salvation, in the case of mystics). But this is not a polarised approach: there is – or should be – a large middle ground surrounding this vivid analogy grouping the Desert Fathers with psychopaths who seek salvation in slaughter. Henry occupies this qualified middle ground. Even at his most intense he is gentler than both antiheroes and major Christian mystics. He certainly does not possess what Mailer terms 'a burning consciousness of the present.'¹²⁸ This gentleness, a quiet desperation, comes from constantly 'engaging with death', a condition his wounds proclaim. This cohabitation with one's own spider-god signals that the life interior and the desire for exteriority, 'the orgy and the dream of love, the desire to murder and the desire to create, a dialectical conception of existence with a lust for power' simultaneously move man forward into life and backward into death. John of the Cross offers a similarly complicated schism of the human soul when he says that love consists of a great detachment from the Beloved. 'For whether it be a strong wire rope or a slender and delicate thread that holds the bird, it matters not, if it really holds it fast; for until the cord be broken, the bird cannot fly.'¹²⁹ The 'separateness' Mailer and John of the Cross reference is parallel. The visions of saints and psychopaths are so intense that sceptical reductions fail to affect it. Henry's words capture his own fragmentation: "Richard, Duke of York, I have ordered the Royal Seal brought to this room," Henry said. "You will pass it into my hands. When you have done so, you are dismissed as Protector and Defender of the Realm. Your chancellor, Richard, Earl Salisbury, is dismissed from that post. By my order, those you have bound will be freed. Those you have freed will be bound!"¹³⁰ This is the closest we get to an emotional release for Henry, and the satisfaction we derive relies on the king understanding that he is, in fact, 'the wise primitive in a giant jungle.'¹³¹ Henry is no longer the mystic moment

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Quoted by Ronald William Cadmus, *Still, In One Peace* (Hampshire: Circle books, 2014).

¹³⁰ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 539.

¹³¹ Mailer, *The White Negro*.

of encounter. Given his inability to speak his courtiers' language, this is almost a psychosexual release for him:

He looked up from under lowered brows, trying to judge the differences in the man who stared so coldly around him. The Henry he had known had been weak in thought and body, a man with no desires of his own beyond a love of prayer and silence. Yet the king standing before him seemed stronger in will, though he was white as candlewax.¹³²

This is the kind of courage that is threatening because it is so cathartic. By drawing us into his vortex, we are given the impression that we approach the focal point of this schism. But he hasn't been cured; at any moment, the city is crazier than him. His courtiers fail to 'recognise' him even when he seems to be reclaiming his power to rule. The spymaster Derry Brewer cannot believe his eyes when he sees Henry restored to power. The earlier Henry, feels the astute statesman, was but a shadow of the present one, and his eyes fill with grateful tears when he sees a true Lancastrian in front of him.

The eighteen-month coma might have been a healing sleep, healing his broken will, 'for all the cracks that remained beneath the surface.'¹³³ Mailer suggests that when a killer takes his revenge on the institutions that he feels are oppressing him his eruption of violence can have a positive effect on him. If the silence is a psychic discharge of a quiet boy gone wrong, then his recovery has to be final.

Silence and Theosomnia

The theological story of sleep as a divine gift is long and complex.¹³⁴ Christian practices like the Office of Compline, the *Examen* of Consciousness, and the keeping of vigils¹³⁵

¹³² Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 539.

¹³³ Mailer, *The White Negro*.

¹³⁴ There are multiple references to sleep in the Bible, although the Jewish understanding of sleep is a little different from the Christian understanding of it. Sleep can be divine, and you can receive divine communication during your sleep, like Jacob. It can be used as a metaphor for death, absence, or isolation. Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica uses sleep as a powerful image. Overall, sleep is a hallowed activity in the Bible.

¹³⁵ The word 'compline' is a derivation of 'completorium', a Latin word meaning completion. It is a quiet service before everyone finishes their day. Christians pray for protection during the night that is to come. The *examen* of consciousness is a legacy of St. Ignatius of Loyola. It means the few moments a person spends in silence with his/her consciousness and reviews their day. A prayer service on a night before Sunday is called a vigil in Christian liturgy.

suggest that it might be possible to envision an eschatology of sleep. The evening hymnody and prayer before bedtime underline the state of sleep as a state of grace and not sin, though sleep is often associated with sloth. In *Theosomnia: A Christian Theology of Sleep*, the Reverend Canon Dr Andrew Bishop finds examples of Christian attitudes towards sleep more in their liturgical practices than in written doctrine (here, again, we turn to popular beliefs and lay piety for evidence of the conclusions we are leaning towards).¹³⁶ To better understand how Christian understandings of sleep may inform our study of Henry VI, we need to remember that sleeping and waking relate specifically to death and resurrection. There is no single consistent theology of sleep in the Bible, or in the *Wars of the Roses* series. As we have already seen, Henry's subjects think of his comatose state as a deep healing that enables him to be who he truly is - his father's son and a Christian warrior. Henry, on the other hand, defines his stupor as a 'drowning.' He remembers being 'a different man.' He was 'fat with water and unable to cry out'. It wasn't a fate he wished upon any man, no matter what his sins were. Even before facing York, he could feel the 'weakness' in him. It is like fighting the sea, Margaret,' says Henry, 'too vast and green and cold. I build ... walls and still it rushes in, clutching at me.'¹³⁷ This inherent contradiction enriches the theological significance of Henry's 'sleep.' Henry's thoughts are broadly Calvinist here, where human nature is fundamentally incapable of accepting grace. Sleep traps the unsuspecting believer into laziness. The best way to approach theosomnia is as a range of beliefs and desires surrounding the holy state of sleep, waking up from sleep, and the possibility of dreams.

Theosomnia is the sleep of the disciple drawn from the sleep seen in Jesus as he slept in the boat on the Sea of Galilee during the storm (Mark 4.35–41 and parallels). This is sleep of radical openness to the Father, since it is a Christological posture. Theosomnia acknowledges that sleep is a time when God can work deep within the self, when control is lost and the ego, like the storm, is stilled: 'He must increase, but I must decrease' (John 3.30).¹³⁸

The literal translation of theosomnia is God-sleep and, by it, Rev. Bishop means hallowed sleep, sleep that is gifted by God, and sleep that is offered to God. God's watchfulness is prayed for during Compline to thwart lustful dreams that might taint this holy time.

¹³⁶ Andrew Bishop, *Theosomnia: A Christian Theology of Sleep* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), Perlego.

¹³⁷ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 570.

¹³⁸ Bishop, *Theosomnia*, Perlego.

Theosomnia is possible because God never sleeps, as asserted by Psalm 127: ‘The Lord who watches over Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.’¹³⁹ In *A Brief Theology of Sleep*, Pastor John Piper says that the modern tendency to believe we are in control is the sickness we are cured from every day, and ‘to cure us from this disease God turns us into helpless sacks of sand once a day.’¹⁴⁰ Sleep is very often a state of theophany in the Bible, most memorably when Joseph was warned of Herod’s plans in a dream (Matthew 2:13) or Jacob’s dream of the ladder approaching heaven (Genesis 28). But it can also be threatening and unsatisfactory like Samson’s sleep or Saul’s dreams (1 Samuel 28:6-20). A king’s sleep has additional implications for his subjects: is the kingdom unprotected while he is asleep? Henry’s state of sleep was dangerous for his kingdom and his awakening is cause for celebration. It meant he wasn’t going to die with a six-month-old on the English throne.

King Henry had donned a full set of armour in the manor house, rising before the sun and visiting a local chapel. He shone as he rode along the flank of the column, his great destrier cantering easily. The helmet he wore had a barbed golden circlet set into the brow, as much a part of the steel as royalty was part of the man. He came surrounded by knights and heralds holding three-lion banners as he guided his horse on to the great slabs of stone that made up the road north. Henry felt alert and vital, lifted by the sight of so many craning to watch him pass. They cheered the sight of the king, the sound drawn out of them by a sudden rush of pride and pleasure. It was unplanned and discordant, but it delighted Henry for all that. He reached the head of the column and took his spot behind the first three ranks, where Lords Percy and Buckingham rode. ‘God’s blessing on you all,’ Henry said.¹⁴¹

The idea of waking up a changed person to a changed world has an enjoyable history. Several Arthurian legends describe King Arthur being taken away to Avalon till England needed his martial services. In different versions of the legend, Arthur is found by herdsmen asleep beside the Excalibur, or with Sir Lancelot and the other knights sleeping till the rightful king was awake.¹⁴² King Harold of Anglo Saxon tales is believed to be

¹³⁹ Thinkers from Aristotle to Freud have studied sleep very seriously. This is the only theological study of the phenomenon called divine sleep, but it can profit from a dialogue with other studies of sleep.

¹⁴⁰ John Piper, ‘A Brief Theology of Sleep,’ in *Desiring God* (August 3, 1982). Accessed on <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-brief-theology-of-sleep>.

¹⁴¹ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 577.

¹⁴² See Geoffrey Junior, *The Marvellous History of King Arthur in Avalon* (Radford: Wilder Publications, 2018).

sleeping till he comes and frees the country from her Norman conquerors; Drake's Drum is thought to awaken Sir Francis Drake from the sea if England is ever in grave danger.¹⁴³ The third-century AD Greek historian Diogenes Laërtius writes that the famous seer Epimenides had fallen asleep for fifty seven years in a cave after he went in search of sheep that had wandered away. The cave was sacred to Zeus and this is where the seer was given the gift of prophecy. When he woke up and went back to his father's farm, it had new owners and his younger brother was an old man.¹⁴⁴ Epimenides is widely believed to be Rip Van Winkle's oldest ancestor. Although all these have interesting points to make about the divine nature of sleep, the most popular Christian legend about theophany is the fascinating Seven Sleepers tale, made even more entertaining by Voragine's *Golden Legend*, though no two authors or Biblical sources agree on the number of brothers, their names, or when they supposedly woke up.¹⁴⁵ They were a group of youths who hid in a cave to escape being persecuted for their faith, and fell asleep inside it. Waking up after what they thought was one day, they walked into the city to buy some food. It was a Christian city with crosses on buildings by then. Voragine thinks they slept for three hundred and sixty-two years but it is doubtful. When the emperor Theodosius blesses the sleepers, this is what he says: 'I see you now like as I should see our Lord raising Lazare.' One of the youths, Maximus, says, 'Believe us, for forsooth our Lord hath raised us tofore the day of the great resurrection. And to the end that thou believe firmly the resurrection of the dead people, verily we be raised as ye here see, and live. And in like wise as the child is in the womb of his mother without feeling harm or hurt, in the same wise we have been living and sleeping in lying here without feeling of anything.'¹⁴⁶ Iggulden's storytelling idioms have very respectable antecedents, although they look unfamiliar.

With respect to twenty-first century recreations of historical characters (Henry VIII and his wives in *The Tudors*, Cosimo de Medici in *Medici*, Louis XIV in *Versailles*,

¹⁴³ Sleep has a special place not only in legends like these, but also in myths and fairytales. There are Greek sleep deities, Sleeping Beauty, and the mysterious sleep of Snow White.

¹⁴⁴ See Yulia Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 177-217.

¹⁴⁵ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Lives of the Saints*, tr. by William Caxton (London: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 72-79.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

or Pope Alexander VI in *The Borgias*), one needs to consciously surrender to the aesthetics of the process of reconceptualising well-documented lives of individuals. But this process applies beyond television drama. The narrative traditions that influenced Blacman's life of Henry VI also inform contemporary historical dramas on television. *The Wars of the Roses* series draws on a more modern and recognisable set of narrative traditions, idioms, and styles (some of which we have discussed). Film *noir* shares a deep interest in death, redemption, and the (im)possibility of salvation with the Bible and is shaped by its rejection of all philosophical consolation. But the narrative aesthetics of the two are very different. Henry's eighteen-month sleep has a biblical/mythical resonance; when Henry wakes up from his sleep and finds that his piety has been replaced with a thirst for glory he recalls Epimenides, the Seven Sleepers, and the Arthurian legends. Without this cultural fabric, the episode has no entertainment value. The late fifteenth-century layman familiar with Anglo Saxon myths and Voragine's anthology would have been enthralled by the way Henry sleeps and wakes up to a different world. The resurrected Henry is a symbolically laden image:

The young king stood perfectly still, his face as pale as it had ever been. Through watering eyes, Buckingham saw Henry too had been struck. A shaft had passed right through the metal joint of his neck and shoulder. The arrow still remained, showing a bloody tip on the other side.¹⁴⁷

Bleeding kings are standard Christian totems of a distortion of rationality.¹⁴⁸ Accordingly, Henry seems (but only seems) subdued when we see him next, promising not to hold York guilty of anything he says. Dismayed at the sudden change in his lord, Buckingham says that the king is 'too good' a person. Derry Brewer echoes this sentiment a few lines later: 'The day was lost. The cause was lost. The king was lost. Blind with tears and mute with grief, Derry had run then for the abbey, thinking only of escape.'¹⁴⁹ Once Henry's sleep has been thoroughly explored and its thematic/narrative richness uncovered, the story has no further use for the character and he dies as quietly as he had lived. In his historical note, Iggulden says he suspects Henry having become an empty vessel by the time he was captured, seriously mentally ill, and unable or

¹⁴⁷ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 609.

¹⁴⁸ We can see the parallel with a bleeding Christ (the king) being a symbol for suffering and abandonment.

¹⁴⁹ Iggulden, *The Wars of the Roses*, 628.

unwilling to look after himself.¹⁵⁰ There is no suggestion of him having been tortured (except the smashed skull on his exhumed body, but he does not refer to it) or ill-treated. The religio-political message that a murdered and bleeding king's body conveys is irrelevant to the broader interests of the narrative.

The mystery of Henry's catatonia is theologically generative. In *Stormbird* and *Margaret of Anjou* it is a state that may descend on Henry at any moment. It is an ending pregnant with the possibilities of promising beginnings, like sleep. But sleep has to be invited, and catatonia arrives uninvited and threatens to upend consciousness. Conversely sleep indicates the presence of dreams, which are always a dangerous element.¹⁵¹ And preparing for sleep may involve fear and anxiety. Reviewing the events of the day, reconciling oneself to them, and having faith in God are necessary prerequisites for sleep. It is substantially similar to the uncertain moment of encounter with a deity we do not know the nature of. Catholic theology responds to this uncertainty by looking at the moment as the beginning of confession, reconciliation and protection as outlined by the Compline. There may even be a sense of abandonment in sleep: can God sleep too? The dominant theory is He does not slumber, but we also have the despair of Psalm 44:

Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.
Why do you hide your face
and forget our misery and oppression?

The Office of the Compline maps these perplexities and assuages them. The refrain 'Into your hands O Lord, I commend my spirit!' guides this intentional practice of preparing for bed. This includes 'penitence, trust, awareness of mortality, and hope of resurrection.'¹⁵² Theosomnia is sleep following Compline, hallowed and graced.

The spirit of surrender and vulnerability (both physical and spiritual) is very similar to Henry's non-responsive state. A short description of monastic Compline reveals how. Typically, all monks would cover their heads with a cowl after Compline ended, signifying the end of all speaking and hearing of words. Compline is when the

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 1227.

¹⁵¹ The messages we get in our sleep may be divine or demonic. While it may be God's way of talking to us, it might be the devil's way of ensnaring us as well.

¹⁵² Bishop, *Theosomnia*, Perlego.

entire monastery prays together before the great silence, as the opening words state: ‘The Lord Almighty grant us a quiet night and a perfect end.’ There are hymns sung but no candles would be lit because it is only a minor practice. Words would be taken from memory and recited in darkness.¹⁵³ Theosomnia is a condition that is bigger than oneself and a blessing not only of sleep but also of the time of sleep. Besides that, ‘in theological terms that something is a gift associates it with God, whose entire character is one of gift. The sheer gratuity of God is captured in this understanding of God: God’s giving of Godself,’ says Reverend Bishop. This view is supported by Psalm 127.3: ‘It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.’ The state of sleep is a gift (we may note how closely this language resembles Gregory’s ‘God is speaking to Henry in his sleep’). Theophanic experiences are granted only to the Lord’s blessed, as we see in our examples of Joseph and Jacob, and for exalted purposes. Adam’s *deep sleep* in Genesis 2:21 is necessary for God to take one of his ribs and close up the place with flesh, but the first theophany in Genesis is Abraham’s (then Abram).

As the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a terrifying darkness came down over him. Then the LORD said to Abram, “You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth. (As for you, you will die in peace and be buried at a ripe old age.) After four generations your descendants will return here to this land, for the sins of the Amorites do not yet warrant their destruction.”¹⁵⁴

Before this sleep God has promised the childless, 75-year-old Abram that he will have many descendants. With Henry too, the anxiety around inheritance works closely with the darkness and despair of silence. The promised end is far away, and, meanwhile, it is the feature of both patriarchs to sleep, to wake, and then act in accordance with what God has communicated. The Christian contention to Iggulden’s distrust of the sleep is that God sometimes needs to put believers to sleep in order to speak to our waking heart. This gives to the anointed one’s sleep a sacramental nature. We have considered the ways that existential crises and veteran trauma inform a Bergmanesque vision of the coma as the perverted piety of an American underground hero. But what really embodies a resistance

¹⁵³ Bishop, *Theosomnia*, Perlego.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

to these postmodern notions is the theological importance of the image of the sleeping Christ. The Synoptic Gospels represent Jesus as sleeping in the midst of a storm on the sea of Galilee (Matthew 8.23–27, Mark 4.35–41 and Luke 8.22–25):

Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!”

He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”

This is the most idealised picture of sleep that we find in the Bible.¹⁵⁵ Jesus sleeps with complete and perfect faith in His Father. The sleeping body of Christ is an exemplar for the monarch who embraces wordlessness during turmoil. Henry’s debilitation is an external symbol for spiritual gains. But what if Henry is more akin to Jonah, whose sleep worries and scares his fellow travellers (Jonah 1: 1-16)?¹⁵⁶ The parallels between the two are strong, since both are sleeping unconcerned through the storm, causing other people harm, and ultimately being sacrificed to calm troubled waters? Does this signal a contradiction in the way the scriptures define sleep? St Jerome (Dürer’s muse) looks at Jonah’s sleep as ‘the serenity of the soul of the prophet. He sleeps serenely because neither tempest nor dangers disturb him.’¹⁵⁷ Reverend Bishop prefers the analysis of Gregory of Nazianzus to Jerome’s. Jonah’s sleep may be one of self-protection, according to Gregory. He is in the depths of sorrow, so ‘he is tempest-tossed, and falls asleep, and is wrecked, and aroused from sleep, and taken by lot, and confesses his flight, and is cast into sea, and swallowed, but not destroyed, by the whale.’¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Adam’s sleep also prefigures a purer and more hallowed state of sleep. (Genesis 2:21 states So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh.)

¹⁵⁶ Jonah 1:5 - Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea to lighten it of them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner parts of the ship, and he lay and was fast asleep.

¹⁵⁷ Quoted by Bishop, *Theosomnia*, Perlego.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

And here again sleep has therapeutic value, unlike when the disciples fall asleep in Gethsemane. This value comes from faith in God, succumbing to an unconscious state is holy because the disciple and Jesus himself rests with confidence in the Lord. This sacred state ‘embodies the intimacy of the relationship of the Father and the Son, and thereby invites those who are God’s children by adoption and grace to share in that trustful sleep.’¹⁵⁹ Seen alongside Abraham, Jonah, and Gethsemane, the coma is the closest Henry is allowed near God. Paradoxically, Henry’s ‘sleep’ both reveals and conceals his identity. It makes him receptive to divinity and disables his political and familial connections. This moment of encounter between God and oneself leaves Augustine quizzical: sleep involves a lack of self-awareness yet our personal identities are exposed to God at the moment of falling asleep and during sleep. The closer one is to God, the more absent one is from oneself, but this is also a source of trepidation. Here we have Augustine showing us the true theological sense of the Corinthians verse that Bergman found so fascinating: But Thou, Lord, knowest all of him, who hast made him. Yet I, though in Thy sight I despise myself, and account myself dust and ashes; yet know I something of Thee, which I know not of myself. And truly, now we see through a glass darkly, not face to face as yet. So long therefore as I be absent from Thee, I am more present with myself than with Thee; and yet know I Thee that Thou art in no way passible; but I, what temptations I can resist, what I cannot, I know not.’¹⁶⁰

Bishop identifies a painful vulnerability in the way sleep also implies a state of unknowingness: ‘Augustine’s anxiety hinges on human identity because it raises questions about his true self and his intentionality: ‘during this time of sleep surely it is not my true self, Lord my God? Yet how great a difference between myself at the time when I am asleep and myself when I return to the waking state.’¹⁶¹ We find traces of the horror of personal shame and humiliation we explored in the study of the Henry VI cult. Our thoughts at bedtime may be a source of shame, but like Augustine points out, we won’t know ourselves till God shines a light on our darkness.

¹⁵⁹ Bishop, *Theosomnia*, Perlego.

¹⁶⁰ St. Augustine, *Confessions of St. Augustine*, tr. by Edward Bouverie Pusey (Religious Reprints, 2012), 127.

¹⁶¹ Bishop, *Theosomnia*, Perlego.

Conclusion

Theosomnia seems far from where we began: a simple-minded man tending to a red and white striped rose called York and Lancaster in a twopenny Agatha Christie mystery. The possible meanings of Henry's condition that we have considered range from practical narrative frameworks to the trauma of the White Negro. It is all profoundly hopeless and fraught with existential burdens. But a theological understanding of it, relating it with eschatology, transforms the image of the spider-god into a symbol of hope and grace (although the spider-god is also related to divine interference and forgiveness). There is another dimension to this transformation.

In the 2006 BBC/ITC production of *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, the simpleton Amos Perry is played by British actor Jody Halse.¹⁶² Director Peter Medak adds a character who apparently has little connection to the plot, a rare occurrence in a thriller. The simple-minded Amos has a brother called Job, who, in a fit of depression and lack of faith, turns to the parish bishop Septimus Bligh who isn't able to help him. With nowhere and no one to turn to, Job hangs himself on a tree in a nearby forest. This transformation is harder to account for, because tracing the Biblical antecedents of Henry's suffering inevitably depends on *which* Henry VI we are talking about. Still, the endeavour to find theological meaning in a whodunnit *is* satisfying, to answer the very first question this chapter raised. How startled might Medak be to discover that a foremost medievalist and Henry VI biographer John L. Watts calls him a 'man of few words and Job-like patience'?¹⁶³ The characters of Amos Perry and his brother Job touch the doctrines of faith and redemption. And unbeknownst to them, so does Michôd's Henry V. We have seen how *The King* tries to reconsider a few fundamental aspects of the relationship between Henry V and Henry VI, perhaps in response to the old accusation that Henry VI is not his father's son. The director attempts a different kind of kenosis here.

¹⁶² *Agatha Christie's Marple* season 2, episode 3, "By the Pricking of My Thumbs." Directed by Peter Medak, written by Stewart Harcourt and Agatha Christie, featuring Geraldine McEwan, Chloe Penn, and Oliver Jordan, aired February 19, 2006, accessed on <https://viaplay.no/serie/agatha-christies-marple>.

¹⁶³ John L. Watts, Foreword to the Yale edition in Bertram Wolfe, *Henry VI* (London: Methuen London Ltd., 1983), XIII.

A theosomniac reading of Henry's silence suggests that the horror inspired by Henry's wordlessness foregrounds an inability to see sleep as a hallowed and hallowing time and space. While Henry's piety and prayer can be seen as the residual effects of the trauma (of fatherlessness? The sexual assault?) he carries within, he wakes from his sleep with the intention of calming the sea of Galilee. Iggulden intuitively understands the fallout of this kind of trauma. Many medieval history websites diagnose Henry VI with the mental aberration of their choice (these include catatonic schizophrenia, catalepsy, and mutism, among others).¹⁶⁴ Each of these may be read alongside Freud's many works on obsession, trauma, neuroses, and repetition compulsion. The resultant discourse might be of value to a postmodern interpretation of this condition. As has been charted, Henry positions himself against the city, his own government, and entire ideologies of rule like an urban castaway (the film *noir* protagonist). His obsessive piety implies that norms have been broken, but post-9/11 literature has found more potent literary techniques of othering deviants. Besides, Shakespeare's tetralogy is a better example of studying his state as one of radical independence, even pleasure. The trauma in Iggulden's Henry is the result of a specific horrifying experience. It is the only origin story for Henry's breakdown into total muteness that does not attempt to frame his behaviour through various psychological categories. Instead of simply presenting the piety neuroses as a symptom and the sickness as violent therapy, Iggulden creates a portrait of a specific person with an experience of sexual assault.

Theosomnia and theophany also deal with Henry's coma as a lived experience in the light of what we can gather from the scriptures. The analysis is not meant to idealise Henry's quietness; it is an acknowledgement that the condition need not be characterised by fear, anxiety, or shame. But this is not an unambiguous exaltation of unconsciousness. The Compline does not render the Vigils unnecessary. While the disciples' inability to sleep amidst the storm on Galilee signifies their lack of faith, their falling asleep in Gethsemane suggests they are unable to perform a Perpetual Vigil. Henry's complete muteness may be an indication of the intentionality of his sleep, following Jesus's purposeful sleep during adversity; it may also be an avoidance strategy to ignore the unmitigated suffering caused by the Wars of the Roses. The faithful/faithless sleep nexus

¹⁶⁴ *History Extra*, *History Today*, *History Hit*, and even *Ranker* have clickbait articles on Henry VI's mysterious illness.

is unresolvable. What opens this nexus up to more misunderstanding is the association of any quietness with death. Sleep cannot act as a cover for death - this would be untenable in Christian theology. But it may be used as a euphemism.

Jesus says both Jairus's daughter and Lazarus are 'asleep' before he raises them. The use of sleep as a euphemism is clearer in Lazarus's case: 'After saying this, Jesus told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' (John 11.11-15)

If sleep is a euphemism for death, waking up is a euphemism for resurrection. While Henry is not typically remembered as a resurrection figure, his waking up reinforces the virtuous nature of theosomnia. It directs us towards vigilance and watchfulness, but assures us of protection and, in doing that, becomes a Christian consolation for scarred psyches and lost ideals.

Resurrecting Silences: A Conclusion

If, after reading this work on the different identities of Henry VI, you go to a bookstore to find out more about him, which section will you go to? To 'Religion' for books on the late medieval and early Tudor Henry VI cult? To 'Drama' for critical reading on Shakespeare's first tetralogy? To 'Popular Fiction' for more historical romances featuring the Wars of the Roses? Although all of these are useful sources, you are far more likely to go to the 'Biography' section and buy Bertram Wolffe's sprawling work on Henry VI's life, the work that was so closely referenced in the first chapter. One of the key issues for this work is the extent to which this is an accurate strategy for understanding the impact he had on late medieval piety and devotional practices.

Reading a biography is not a reasonable critical strategy to understand Henry VI's influence because his significance has little to do with his personal life or the practical implications of his kingship and his conceptions of his kingship. One cannot miss the heavy theological implications of this Lancastrian martyr being placed amid two strong intercessory characters on a crown that the Defender of the Faith would wear for the Feast of the Epiphany.¹ We have traced all devotional traditions associated with the humiliation and murder of Henry, yet the saint seems to be a world away from a character whose tenderness and vulnerability inspired a cult that still lingers.²

Reading about the miracles now is a pleasantly dissonant experience. Relics of the cult of Henry VI are also unreliable narrators, being so dangerously heretical. Here, as with all the examined texts, we may choose the interpretation that satisfies us, because none are inherently more consistent or accurate than the others. There is no reason for us to try to reconcile conflicting theologies since Henry's identity is driven by many concurrent and contradictory religious thoughts. He was doubly anointed, silenced, humiliated, murdered, and venerated as a saint. His miracles, too, are best understood as part of a dynamic devotional tradition where stories are heard, remembered, and repeated.

¹ In 2017, amateur treasure hunter Kevin Duckett unearthed a tiny gold figurine. It turned out to be a 2.5-inch statuette that might have been the centrepiece of the crown worn by Henry VIII and five of his immediate successors during the Feast of the Epiphany.

² The former Henry VI society does not seem to be in existence any longer, but there still is a group of people interested in preserving the memory of the king through the very informative website henrysixth.com. The owner of the website, K. J. Tattersall was a member of the society previously, and runs the site from Vienna. The Henry VI Society in Eton is still functional and well.

Saintly cults are an important part of sustaining theological and ritual tradition. And as with all mythmaking, there are inherent tensions in the foundations of the devotional narratives. Henry's overwhelming religio-political authority during the Tudor era was due, in part, to the sheer visibility of the cult. The formative beliefs and practices lie far back in the past: veneration of saintly kings have their origins in pure theocracy, where a leader is directly connected with the deity that a civilisation believes in (like Moses led the early Israelites), and ecclesiocracy. The cult of Henry VI borrowed much from the devotional practices of the cults of Edward the Confessor and Thomas Becket of Canterbury, and no matter how much the practices and beliefs were transformed, they were interpretations of traditions that had been received from the past (and sometimes from the Patristic Fathers themselves) with authority. The first chapter explained the history of the sacerdotal rights of the king because the formative foundations of the cult lay within the earliest Catholic thoughts about humiliation and martyrdom.

This is how Tudor propagandists borrow directly from Gregory of Nazianzus: Tudor propagandists gave the homegrown cult the regality necessary to legitimise Henry VII's accession to the throne, but their strategies of legitimisation and the lay devotional methods point to the more abstract, dispassionate conclusions of the earliest Christian philosophers.³

Henry's sainthood cannot be displayed for inspection like one of his woodcuts; sanctity and its veneration simply cannot be observed or scrutinised in that manner. But our understanding of medieval Catholicism is contingent on recognising the overwhelming visibility of Henry VI in lay fifteenth-century devotion. This is because of his intercessory powers: his anointed status as a king and Christomimetic suffering allows him to participate in (but not partake of) God's essence. And for devotees, knowledge of saintliness is a vindication of God's presence. Medieval Catholics knew what a centaur was, but knowledge of essence does not guarantee existence. Thomas Aquinas famously remarked, 'God is to be thought of as existing outside the domain of existents, as a cause from whom comes everything that exists in all its different forms'.⁴

³ Early Christian philosophers and apologists like Origen, Justin, Philo, and the Apostolic Fathers borrowed heavily from Plato, and, in doing so, found themselves veering towards overarching themes like penance, the nature of sin, confessions, and fasting. They moved away from standard NT issues.

⁴ Quoted by John Bowker in *God: A Very Small Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

This is a central tension in Christian theology. This is why Kierkegaard could claim that ‘God doesn’t exist. He is eternal’.⁵ There is, thus, a serious sense in which we say ‘*rex iustus*’, ‘*rex christianissimus*’ or ‘*rex catholicissimus*’. Christians place eschatological faith in the suffering of a twice-anointed human body. The importance of relics comes from this real need for a ‘tangible’ devotional experience. His tremendous political humiliation became a source of political authority in Henry VII’s reign, and this authority is derived from the one all Christians are in a covenant with.

Holiness is the condition enjoined on believers by the covenant: ‘The high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy’ (Isaiah 57.15) calls on his believers to demonstrate who he is. Leviticus 19.2 says, ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy’. Sainthood is one of the many interpretations of the Covenant relationship.⁶ This debate was at its height during Jesus’s life, and he was vehemently in favour of Pharisees reinterpreting Covenant law to suit human requirements. But the Passion and the resurrection altered every interpretive tool Christianity had previously used. People who had witnessed his miracles, heard his parables, and called him ‘Teacher’ called him ‘My Lord’ after the resurrection because it was the first concrete sign of the presence of the kingdom of Heaven and it was an unconditional event; the resurrection did not depend on keeping the Covenant law. The conflict between different characterisations of holiness is inevitable. Equally radical was the shift from the ancient view ‘Where there is suffering there is sin’.⁷ In the evolving world of saintly ideals, thoughts on humiliation and suffering are being contradicted and displaced. The sufferings of the sinless Job and the sufferings of the Suffering Servant who was in torment for the sins of others (both of

⁵ It is Climacus, one of his narrators, who says “‘God does not think, he creates; God does not exist, He is eternal. Man thinks and exists, and existence separates thought and being, holding them apart from one another in succession,” in Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments/Crumbs*.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 296.

⁶ Covenant theology is the result of 16th and 17th century Calvinistic thought, but it was based on a certain tradition of exegesis. The Bible is based on two separate covenants - the word *testamentum* means a covenant. It has to be interpreted ‘covenantally’.

⁷ This is the ‘classical view’: all suffering is a punishment for sin, and the process began with Adam’s separation from God. It is also intriguing that Rabbinic Judaism is based on a similar understanding of sin. It changes with the advent of Jesus, who engages with suffering from a position of clear authority and still allows it to be perpetrated on himself and his close friends but there is little discussion on why suffering should exist at all in the NT.

whose biblical histories have been referenced in Henry's characterisations) are very distinct, and Christ's Passion preserves these narratives. However, the new Covenant he establishes ('This cup is the new covenant in my blood: do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me')⁸ is built on the need for suffering and humiliation, and as this is the better Covenant, sufferers became personal agents of the New Testament God. Henry VI's theological status is unimpeachable; he is prophet, priest, and king (Christ's threefold office) humiliated and paraded and exalted after his resurrection (as a posthumous saint). This suffering, according to Luke, is 'necessary': O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? (Luke 24:25–26).

Paul traces a similar pattern. 'Have this mind among yourselves,' he writes, 'which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.' (Phil. 2. 5-9) The centrality of humiliation to the process of human salvation is key to understanding the mass devotion the cult of Henry VI inspired during the decades following his grisly death. And so central is the place of Christomimesis to the 'life' of Henry VI that we have had cause and opportunity to consider it during every stage of this exploration of his afterlives. But there is a slight distinction between Christ's "state of humiliation" and the strategic political humiliation of Henry. According to Calvinist theology, Christological humiliation "consisted in his being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time."⁹ Henry was doubly anointed as a child and suffered only after he was defeated in the Battle of St Albans and forced to escape. Being paraded upon his recapture while his own subjects cheered for Edward IV has its own divine parallel in the Jewish people's preferring Barabbas over their rightful king¹⁰ and Jesus being spat upon, beaten, and mocked by the

⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:25

⁹ The answer has been borrowed from the Catechism of the Presbyterians. It is freely available online on the website of the Cambridge Presbyterian Church and other churches, including books like *The Shorter Catechism Properly Explained* and magazines like *The Presbyterian Magazine*.

¹⁰ The Synoptic Gospels claim the crowds chose Barabbas's release and Christ's crucifixion.

Roman soldiers both on his way to Calgary and on the cross. The thought is essentially derived from Protestant doctrines of humiliation, though Franciscans were the earliest group of theologians who conceptualised Jesus's birth in the manger as a symbol of Christ's love for humility. Humiliated and suffering kings make approachable saints, as do wrongfully murdered archbishops. The cult became a field of power for the illegitimate Tudor government, but they were not required to impose a Christological narrative on Henry's life. It was already there. Also present was a memory of collective humiliation around the loss of France, much like Germany's humiliation during the Treaty of Versailles, Japan's humiliation after Pearl Harbour, China's devastating defeat at the First Opium War, or, on a larger scale, the humiliation faced by colonised countries.

With the prevalence of critical literature on 'marginalised' identities, perhaps different representations of Henry VI will not be ignored for long. But this character-based study has shifted the emphasis away from the nexus of politics, economics, and religion from which different portrayals of Henry derived their meaning. The predominance of Christocentric readings has diminished other very important elements in Henry's afterlives. Our subject is a white Englishman who ruled his country and wielded an unimaginable amount of political power; the effect of his silence would have been considerably different from the silence of Carthusian monks.¹¹ This effect is a good starting point to examine the foundations of the relationship between power and identity-formation.

A major portion of the conclusion, therefore, will focus on alternate routes through the territory covered by this study.

The Cult of Henry VI as an Instrument of State Aggression

We have examined humiliation in a radically different context, but for political philosophers, erasure of the past is also a technique of collective humiliation. Shakespeare rationalises the violence perpetrated by Henry V in Christological terms.

'Virtue he had, deserving to command:

¹¹ The French monastery of Cluny placed great emphasis on the spiritual value of silence during the 10th century. Monks were discouraged to communicate with one another except during two short periods of speech. It was forbidden to talk during church and at mealtimes. The routines of Cistercians and Carthusians also glorified silence. Bernard and Aelred, the great Cistercian monks, extolled the benefits of silence, which both saw as a method to 'remove' or dispel sin from one's mind.

His brandish'd sword did blind men with his beams:
His arms spread wider than a dragon's wings;
His sparking eyes, replete with wrathful fire,
More dazzled and drove back his enemies
Than mid-day sun fierce bent against their faces.'¹²

Henry VI takes on *Christus Victor* traits of substitutionary humiliation, atonement, and death when his ghost blesses Henry Richmond. This duality between divinely-sanctioned violence and human aggression is evident throughout both the tetralogies (and the Jewish-Christian-Islamic conflicts in the world). Henry's protracted psychological conflicts are given a moralistic framing. Shakespeare offers us three images of Lancastrian violence to ponder: the father-son recognition scene, the crushing of the Cade rebellion, and the actual Wars of the Roses. Yet, underpinning these images is an interdependent duality between 'Lancastrian' purity and 'Yorkist/French' danger. Henry VII enlivened the suffering of Henry VI (already intensified by intergenerational storytelling and Rome's insistence on monetising cults wherever possible) and fueled lay devotion to the royal martyr. Both holy matter and holy war are 'radical threat and radical opportunity'.¹³ The cult of Henry VI was a spontaneous response to the murder but the Tudors' surreptitious manipulation of it might also be considered a form of state aggression. Rather than displaying heads on pikes, the force of Blacman's *Collectarium* and the series of posthumous miracles urged the illiterate population to recognise Henry Richmond's source of political authority. This form of aggression is layered under the shrine, woodcuts, hymns, and the quest for canonisation, because it seeks to contort their previously learned notions of political authority, social order, and their place in that order. The divine right theory had very practical uses.

A second narrative of collective humiliation may also be traced across Blacman, the cult, and Tudor historiography. By essentially glossing over Henry's mental ailment, they're also building an instrument of collective erasure.¹⁴ It's a strategic removal of a

¹² 'Arms spread wider' is a clear visual reference to Jesus's outstretched arms.

¹³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (London: Zone Books, 2015)

¹⁴ Dr Daniel Rothbart explains this method in the second chapter of his study *State Domination and the Psycho-Politics of Conflict : Power, Conflict and Humiliation*. Collective erasure is an important method

symbol that belongs to a group of marginalised people - in this case, people with mental disabilities. Ironically, the cult also introduced a form of systemic compassion for such experiences of erasure, because the royal martyr helped the lowliest of the low in his posthumous miracles.¹⁵ From a certain perspective, it increases the perniciousness of the propagandists but it does not mean that the devotion Henry VI engendered was not a genuine psychological experience. Pilgrimages to bleeding-host sites and shrines were popular; people travelled hundreds of miles to venerate bloody cloths and blood-stained altars. Churchmen who sold figurines and icons of saints explained how to use them: where to place them, which way the statuettes should face, and how to venerate the saint. But it is difficult to fix the boundaries of devotion. A lot of anxiety stemmed from the possibility of the magically animated relics being the handiwork of ‘discerning spirits’. Scholars including Caroline Walker Bynum and Michael D. Bailey¹⁶ connect fifteenth century fears of witchcraft with necromancy, alchemy, and astrology. A mentally incapacitated royal martyr is paradigmatic of the religio-political anxieties that the crusades and superstitious practices triggered, and the cult reveals something of the essence of medieval beliefs. Unlike with intercessory figures for merchant communities such as St. Nicholas of Bari or personal protectors (Sts. Cosimo and Damien for Cosimo de Medici), it was impossible to manipulate Henry’s life in favour of a certain social class.

The Problem of Sorcery

Shakespeare’s first tetralogy is emblematic of this strange and fragmented legacy. Pilgrimage to Chertsey was fading by the late sixteenth century, and he did not function convincingly as a saint anymore. The trial and condemnation of the duchess of Gloucester for witchcraft introduced the possibility that Henry’s mental condition was the result of demonic activity. There was another, more sinister suggestion for discerning

of inflicting systemic humiliation, and Rothbart works on how whites used Black erasure as a technique of humiliation but his argument can be extended to a number of areas.

¹⁵ All systems of erasure similarly beget compassion for the subject of erasure.

¹⁶ Michael D. Bailey is a renowned professor of medieval studies. His major publications around this area include *Origins of the Witches’ Sabbath* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), *Late Medieval Heresy: New Perspectives*, co-edited with Sean L. Field (York: York Medieval Press, 2018), *Magic and Superstition in Europe: A Concise History from Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), and *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003)

exegetes: was Henry himself a magician? This was exactly what the reputed theologian Jean Bodin was afraid of - the influence of augurs and soothsayers on governments. 'If there is a sorcerer who attends at court, or magician, or soothsayer, or augur, or one interpreting dreams by divinatory art...he shall be exposed to torments and tortured without regard for his rank,' he wrote in 'On the Demon-Mania of Sorcerers'.¹⁷ The canon lawyer Jacques Duèze, who was Pope John XXII from 1316 to 1334, would have agreed with him. And this is how Michael D. Bailey describes Dueze's fear of demons taking over European courts in a lengthy chapter in his study *Fearful Spirits, Reasoned Follies: The Boundaries of Superstition in Late Medieval Europe*:

The pontiff detested sorcerers, and he feared that his and other Christian courts were beset by them. He instigated numerous investigations and trials, some targeting highly placed clergy, and he ordered officials and inquisitors under his direction to do the same. Generally counted among his proclamations condemning magical arts is the important bull Upon His Watchtower (*Super illius specula*), which declared that any Christian found guilty of demonic invocation was automatically excommunicated. He is emblematic, therefore, of the heightened concern about one major category of superstition brewing within the courts of some of the most powerful monarchs of the fourteenth century, namely the "errors and abominations" of demonic sorcery.¹⁸

Cases of political sorcery were clearly contrived to meet political objectives but they were grounded in real suspicion about the powers of demonic invocation. Twice the French clergy accused the papacy of heresy and sodomy: in 1303, they levelled charges of demonic consultation and homosexuality against Pope Boniface VIII and in 1307, Philip IV ordered the arrest of the leaders of the Knights Templar on similar charges.¹⁹ Bans, certain laws, and the entire penance system of Catholicism illustrate how demons threatened and fascinated lay medieval thinkers. In light of these tensions, Henry's foretelling Henry Richmond's accession to the throne wasn't an entirely unproblematic

¹⁷ Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, trans. by Randy A. Scott (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2001), 208. Quoted by Michael D. Bailey in *Fearful Spirits, Reasoned Follies: The Boundaries of Superstition in Late Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 71. Note: Bailey calls Bodin's work *On the Demon-Mania of Sorcerers*.

¹⁸ Bailey, *Fearful Spirits*, 71.

¹⁹ Malcolm Barber has a detailed study of the entire Templars episode in his book called *The Trial of the Templars*. Philip had written to other Christian monarchs asking them to arrest the Templars in their lands, and Clement V (who had resisted this move at first) was forced to acquiesce and ask other rulers to arrest the Templars too.

event. It legitimised Henry Richmond's usurpation of the throne in this particular narrative cycle, but it leaves lingering questions about the process of exegesis. The prophecy itself (Shakespeare's invention through and through) is a 'coincidence of opposites', to borrow Nicholas of Cusa's words. It combines opposing values and demonstrates both without violating the boundaries of either value (like the bloody clothes that were worshipped and relentlessly questioned). It is natural for interpreters to try and fill the gaps in the material they are interpreting; with the evidence Shakespeare had, there were many events he *could* have put into the play than we have space to discuss. A consideration of Shakespeare's sources makes it clear that the grounds on which historians select their 'truths' change often. Alternatively, the *vita* and the tetralogy fit a study of personal violence and murder in the late medieval era. We have examined a number of murders: Becket's violent murder in 1170, the execution of William Wallace in 1304, the unfortunates who were tortured and killed during the Inquisition, the death of Henry VI's son Edward, the strange drowning of George, the Duke of Clarence in a vat of malmsey, Richard III's several murders, and the beheading of Richard III by Henry Tudor. An exploration of the finer details of the rumours surrounding regicide and executions can be a valuable extension to his research.

Sanctity had been used as a tool for propaganda and legitimation in Europe long before Henry's bludgeoning disrupted medieval piety. The Carolingians and Merovingians sought power on the basis of an image of sacred Christian kingship, not only royal bloodlines.²⁰ The first chapter studied the way Charlemagne built a powerful ideology of Christian justice. Henry Tudor followed Charlemagne's example when he claimed the throne as a Lancastrian and Henry VI's rightful descendant: they were both promoting God's justice by limiting the use of violence by anyone other than themselves. Warren C. Brown connects the norms of private violence with political legitimacy in a chapter entitled 'Charlemagne, God, and the License to Kill' in his study *Violence in Medieval Europe*: 'Violence was evil when it struck a saintly bishop, yet it provided a vehicle for the bishop's martyrdom and sainthood. Victory in factional conflict, including victory achieved by violence, was a sign of divine favor.

²⁰ It is important to remember that both Merovingians and Carolingians established their dynasties on solid military victories; both dynasties were conventionally impressive and successful. Added to this was the Merovingian practice of having multiple sons from multiple wives. Carolingians had less interfamilial strife. However, the divine rights theory was meant more for protection than consolidation.

Successful violence was, therefore, itself a justification for political power.’²¹ Additionally, spilling sacred blood was imbued with theological meaning. Violent vengeance was the prerogative of God’s representative on earth.

Admittedly, choosing to study medieval Frankish and English rulers has forced us to overlook other rulers in Gaul, or Spain, or Turkey. It would have added a new dimension to our theological research to extend our gaze towards Jewish and Islamic attitudes towards materiality (medieval rabbis and Muslim theologians also discouraged tomb veneration) and contemplation. These are some of the larger pictures that accommodate the story of Henry VI’s life and martyrdom. Underlying all of them is the medieval obsession with salvation.

Henry’s Death-Story and the Threat of Spilled Blood

Henry’s neurotic piety is a source of tension in Blacman, Shakespeare, and Pope but his death is universally restorative and redemptive. Early Lancastrian reports of Henry’s corpse bleeding in the presence of Edward IV triggered the very first few pilgrimages to Chertsey. Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, theologians like Cusanus argued that Christ’s salvific blood couldn’t be seen because ‘our Catholic faith teaches us that the glorified body of Christ has glorified blood completely unseeable in glorified veins’ as he was incorruptible. Bleeding site hosts and blood-stained clothes were symbols of Christ’s salvific blood-spilling, and not meant to be worshipped at all. Henry’s widely publicised humiliation and murder were a complex, but an insistent locus of soteriological anxieties. His miracles suggest a shift towards, rather than away from, the visible, whereupon even gazing at his grave becomes a quasi-religious ritual in Pope’s *Windsor Forest*. In a way, Shakespeare’s image of the contemplative Henry reading his scriptures before Richard III hacks him to death is also a response to the threat of spilled blood - a parallel intellectual strategy to limit the power of sacral blood and direct our attention towards interiority. It is, of course, also possible to read Teresa of Avila’s and/or John of the Cross’s accounts of their mystical experiences alongside Shakespeare’s trilogy (both mystics were born within 150 years of Cusanus’s death). But having a material relic or a site of bleeding suggests that there is some amount of divine power in the site or the relic itself. In Henry’s case, he might actually have bled to death (as

²¹ Warren C. Brown, *Violence in Medieval Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 70.

evidenced by his exhumation) so the bleeding site, theologically speaking, is him (just like Christ is the Eucharist). This was a dangerous perspective in the middle ages, and it still is.

In his work on the Spanish Inquisition called *Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc*, John H. Arnold stated (in a very different context) that dealing with stories and with silence was the task of every historian.²² Resurrecting voices of the past may be an imperative, but there is an uneasiness associated with resurrecting a silence. Something more than intellectual stillness and interior passivity are at stake here. To think highly of war is, through this lens, a fundamental intellectual error. It is interesting to imagine Henry's "prayer of quiet", to borrow a term used often by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, in conversation with other narratives of mental incapacitation in the scriptures. We might enjoy thinking that a critical comparison with Nebuchadnezzar, Saul, and David 'liberates' Henry's silence. Occasionally a detailed analysis of the madness at the heart of Christianity - incarnation - allows his silence to speak for itself. The present study has avoided medicalising and diagnosing Henry's condition because there is already an immense body of valuable research on the political/legal implications of being ruled by a mad king. Our focus has been on Christomimetic rulership because Christ's life is also a model for perfect political behaviour (commentators like Bede, Hrabanus Maurus, and Angelomus of Luxeuil read biblical kingship narratives as part of a greater story about Christ the King). Philippa Gregory's story of Henry VI's silence also functions as a metanarrative about the insanity of God being forsaken by God. An important question the study raised was about the (im)possibility of divinity forsaking that which it inhabits; or if an amount of forsaking is necessary for kenosis.

It is also possible for us to compare our understanding of Henry's 'sleep' as a consolatory space with Plato's accounts of contemplation in *Phaedo* and *Gorgias*.²³ Just as silence without suffering or martyrdom is too ineffable to make theological meaning, mere contemplation is neither moral nor a sign of virtue. Christian contemplation is a

²² John H. Arnold, *Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 2-6

²³ Both *Phaedo* and *Gorgias* are dialogues. *Gorgias* is a Socratic dialogue and *Phaedo* is written from the perspective of *Phaedo Elis*, a student of Socrates who was present at his death bed.

rejection of the created world in order to minimise the distance we have with divinity, and a number of mystical encounters relate closely to the contemplative experience of the Platonic philosopher. Plato's importance to mysticism is widely acknowledged and studied by scholars.²⁴ This approach will bring forth the same question as the ones explored in patristic writing and Kierkegaard: how can this perfect philosophic virtue be a source of such tremendous suffering?

Alternatively, the connection between Henry's silence and the Socratic state of death-contemplation is remarkably lucid. Contemporary philosophers enjoy comparing Plato's version of his master's thoughts ("those who truly grasp philosophy pursue the study of nothing else but dying and being dead") with doctrines in the *Katha Upanishad*, the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, and the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, the canonical account of the Buddha's last days.²⁵ Any work comparing Christian contemplation with Eastern ideals of meditation can add new dimensions to a study of mystical silence.

Henry VI's Silence and Theophany

Henry VI has been played by actors like Alan Howard, Ralph Fiennes, Tom Sturridge, and David Oyelowo (the first black actor to play the king). Cinema and television were among the last mediums to join the history of conversations about Henry's insanity, as evidenced by our study of the 2019 film *The King* and the popular TV series *Game of Thrones*. The Christian cult of saints arose from the Greek and Hebrew traditions of heroes, and 'chosen ones' abound in classical heroic narratives. But, men of peace, says Chuk Iwuji (the latest black actor to play Henry VI in RSC's history cycle), are more difficult to play than warriors, champions, and protector figures.

Henry wants to be in another play, another world. He changes through the three plays – from the child, to the man trying to negotiate between his

²⁴ Arthur Versluis traces the history of contemplative science and literature in his work titled *Platonic Mysticism: Contemplative Science, Philosophy, Literature, and Art*. He suggests that early Christian meditations and medieval mystic practices had a Platonic origin, as do more modern contemplative actions. Platonic metaphysics sets the correct context for interpreting the works of Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, and most important medieval thinkers.

²⁵ This quote from Phaedo corresponds perfectly with Eastern thought on the soul living on after the destruction of the body. The *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* is an account of the Buddha's final days. Matthew Dillon (professor of Classical and Ancient History at the UNE) has a seminal work on this topic entitled *Dialogues with Death: The Last Days of Socrates and the Buddha*, a journal article that is freely accessible on JStor.

wife and country, to someone monastic. Sometimes, as actors, we are tempted to play the character's arc – but people don't know the arc of their lives. Inconsistency is what makes us human. Henry explodes and banishes the Duke of Suffolk; he weeps but asks the Lord Protector to resign his sceptre. These are bad decisions, but they are all real moments. Your responsibility is to play what's in front of you.²⁶

'Some days I couldn't connect to the molehill speech,' added Iwuji, 'when Henry wishes for a life elsewhere, and couldn't wait to get off stage. Then one day, I looked up and saw a woman who was in the audience for the umpteenth time. As I spoke, her hand shot up to her mouth and she sobbed, and I sobbed, and her gesture made me realise the audience were getting the speech and that my only responsibility was to share it.'²⁷ This intense adoration of humility was a notable feature of late medieval piety and theological debates, as we have seen in our study of the cult of Walstan. Iggulden's series undertakes a more realistic set of speculations on religious experience, very different from Gregory's unambiguously valorising mystical faith. Henry's catatonia is blamed on Margaret's sexual violation of him, exactly like Karin's spider-god violation of her. The difference in their responses to the image of the silent Henry reveal the contingencies of this image. From both it is possible to extract a Pauline pedagogy of the political/ethical life and read them alongside Agamben's or Slavoj Žižek's conception of 'the genuinely vital life' and the idea of encountering God as 'a rupture or an overturning'.²⁸ But a Christocentric reading of the Wars of the Roses is central to any or all these possible offshoots of modern political theology.

Some Conclusions

Holocaust theology transformed forever all narratives of silent suffering and humiliation, Christomimetic or otherwise. Gregory and Iggulden's Wars of the Roses is a fictional apocalyptic event. Their body of thought is post-Holocaust because of the moral seriousness of the suffering they depict, both veering from acceptance of God to a crazed

²⁶ Chuk Iwuji, *Chuk Iwuji on playing Henry VI: 'There's nothing wimpy about him,'* interview by David Jays, *The Guardian*, 27 June, 2016.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ This idea was suggested by Michael J. Shapiro's wonderful *The Phenomenology of Religious Belief: Media, Philosophy, and the Arts*. He analyses Pasolini's Paul screenplay (which puts Paul in a number of contemporary situations) and, in his own words, 'tries to extract a contemporary political pedagogy' from Paul, something that Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek had already attempted.

search for some kind of meaning. Following Elie Wiesel's chilling assertion that God was present in the little Jew boy that Nazis hanged from the gallows, Gregory, Martin (in *Game of Thrones*), and Iggulden use divinity as a fundamental absence that triggers spiritual transformation for better or worse. The significance of Henry's pacifism is narrower than it is in Shakespeare. His compassion and pacifism are intertwined with salvation as a human purpose, not a divine diktat. Compassion is a personal attribute and a sufficient motive behind pacifism. Iggulden replaces Gregory's wrought emotionality with long, pervasive renderings of the war, replete with gushing blood and mangled limbs. They delineate two significant roles played by Henry: the critical functions of a royal martyr on his Christian journey and a theological antagonist of the Jews: he is the face of Christian suffering and Christian guilt over their complicity in the Holocaust. The Jewish theologian Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Rebbe of Chabad Lubavitch stated that suffering was a result of Jews having deviated from the standards endorsed by the Torah. The Shoah was divine retribution or divine gift.²⁹

It is not difficult to understand why this reading infuriated scholars and survivors, but it was in accordance with the very basic ways Jews and Christians rationalised suffering. It is in complete alignment with the several theologies of suffering (the *Akedah*, Job, the Suffering Servant, the Crucifixion, the martyrdom of St Thomas of Canterbury, the death of Edward during the battle of Tewkesbury, and Henry's murder) that we have used in this study.

Theologians like Paul Fiddes, Marcus Braybrooke, Franklin Sherman, David Tracy, and Marcel Jacques Dubois suggest that atonement theology can make sense of the Holocaust, and the idea of a God suffering alongside Jewish people is a strong theological response.³⁰ But Elie Wiesel doesn't speak of a suffering God; God is dying in Auschwitz. Does Death of God theology replace traditional theodicy, therefore? Many years after publishing his initial thoughts on the holocaust, Schneerson said that no

²⁹ Wayne Allen, *Thinking about Good and Evil: Jewish Views from Antiquity to Modernity* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2021), 189-90.

³⁰ Ulrich Simon, survivor of the Holocaust and eminent theologian, wrote a book titled *A Theology of Auschwitz* which may act as a comprehensive guide to this vast subject. All theological pursuits post-Auschwitz attempt to find spiritual sense in meaninglessness, and several Holocaust theologians have changed their minds and inferences throughout their careers. There is also a well-summarised study of the many branches of Holocaust theology on the website of the Dallas Baptist University, which can be accessed on <https://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/christiansholocaust.htm>.

theodicy could explain what happened at Auschwitz.³¹ Professor Richard Rubenstein held that Death of God was the only intellectually honest response to the Holocaust, only to change his mind decades later and say that, truly, how could one ever know that God was dead?³²

Whether in response to the Wars of the Roses, the Holocaust, 9/11, or Covid-19, Death of God theories do not cohere with theological reality. It is obvious that many good people suffer, and many evil people prosper, but the rewards of religion are always otherworldly. The righteous are promised victory and divine justice in heaven. Another philosophical problem with this thought is that it's a dead end. From a sacerdotal perspective, sheer suffering lacks sacramental meaning. But this theory and its proponents (many of whom we have touched upon) remain universally popular.

Let us return to the Clarendon hunting lodge with which this study began. Much like the memory of Henry VI and the cult that spontaneously grew in his honour, it was quite derelict by the time Elizabeth I ascended the throne.³³ It is quite ironic that we have often de-prioritised the master narrative in order to focus on the 'story' of a monarch. Watching politically glorified persons uncreate themselves has always been fascinating. In Henry's case, his silence simultaneously pushes his identity to the brink and acts as a structure to keep his identity safe. Certainly a suggestion of self-fashioning emerges from the many Christian texts we have used to explain his silence and redefine it. Self-fashioning explains why being a fugitive doesn't have the same effect on Henry as it does on Romeo, or Macduff, or even Oedipus and Orestes (to refer to major literature written before Shakespeare). His essential being is that of the outsider; kingship is only a role he plays. The structure of the *Henry VI* trilogy does not quite allow Shakespeare to dramatise Henry's 'withdrawal', but this study has treated the rather slender thread in the plot with importance. It is also only within Shakespeare that Henry's renunciation of centrality can

³¹ Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Sefer HaSiḥot* 5751, Vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1992), 233–234.

³² Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz* simply said that the Holocaust proved that there was no divine plan to purpose. He wrote this: 'No man can really say that God is dead. How can we know that? Nevertheless, I am compelled to say that we live in the time of the "death of God". This is more a statement about man and his culture than about God. The death of God is a cultural fact ... When I say we live in the time of the death of God, I mean that the thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth, has been broken ...'

³³ A full history of the lodge can be found in *Clarendon Palace: The History and Archaeology of a Medieval Palace and Hunting Lodge Near Salisbury, Wiltshire* written by T. B. James, Anne M. Robinson, and Elizabeth Sara Eames.

be celebrated. Henry's mind is the fantasy world of Arden, where the shepherd is of more importance than men in power.³⁴ When the tetralogy ends, Henry's ideals have been valorised.

With Gregory and Iggulden, Henry remains on the periphery and his values are impossible to assimilate into the normal order. Iggulden especially rejects any possibility that his silence could have had a consolatory angle. Henry's silence is emblematic of a cruel alienation and the result of sexual trauma. It seems significant that all powerful women in Gregory's trilogy sympathise with Henry, and reinforce each other's belief that his condition was a divine one. This is not surprising, since the women are on the periphery themselves, and constantly trying to break into the mainstream. This creates solace and pity, but no hope for the silent king. The feminine perspective is an effective context within which to read his silence, and the third chapter traces similarities between Henry's 'trance' and medieval mystical encounters. Gregory excludes Henry from the rational world of courtly politics, but Iggulden places him outside the scope of civil life. Iggulden's Henry undergoes spectacular suffering; he would have been an object of wretchedness and misery without the self-consciously Christomimetic pattern that the author draws our attention to:

Henry considered, looking aside as he judged his own strength. He was appalled at the weakness that beset him, but if he had judged the lost time correctly, he was thirty-three years old. The realization that he was the same age as Christ at his crucifixion hardened his will. He had woken on Christmas Day, at the age of Christ at his death. It was a sign, he was certain. He would not wilt, or spend one more moment in his sickbed, no matter what it cost him...

He had no choice but to push on and ignore the fluttering heart in his chest as well as the pain in every joint and sinew. He could not recall such physical exhaustion before, but he reminded himself over and over that Christ had fallen three times on his way to Calvary. He would not fall, he told himself, or if he did, he would rise and mount.³⁵

But, as Iggulden would remind us in the 'Historical Note' attached to the trilogy, 'Richard was not a saint, any more than his brother Edward was. Henry VI could well

³⁴ The wise shepherd is a pastoral 'type' with definite religious undertones. Corin in *As You Like It* is influenced by Virgil, Ovid, and Spenser. Elizabethans would have understood and appreciated the layers of meaning to this character.

³⁵ Iggulden, *Wars of the Roses*, 531-532

have been, but history is not kind to saints.³⁶ Post-Holocaust death of God theology is deeply relevant to the way this work views the trials of Henry VI. A theistic God may indeed be absent in this war-torn hellscape, though this absence is undercut by Henry's intense piety. The memory of a saintly Henry VI is always on the brink of ruin, nevertheless. Veneration of his saintly status was fading before the Reformation. Shakespeare and Iggulden are aware of how uncomfortably he wore his sanctity. He demonstrates the inherent contradictions in the notions of Christian violence and pacifism.

Perhaps these contradictions expose his limitations as a royal saint and martyr. Medieval notions of religious authority might not have been as flexible as we seem to think, and Henry's silence bent it out of shape. Yet Shakespeare's reimagination of his story or Gregory's portrayal of his meditative mortification are ideal companions for modern readers looking for some kind of a sympathetic, contemplative space in the face of remorseless positivity. Much like the tiny figurines in late fifteenth-century churches, they give dignity and legitimacy to our own inglorious difficulties.

³⁶ Ibid., 1638

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