Resurrecting Silences: Henry VI and his Afterlives

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by

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Synopsis of thesis:

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The world of lay medieval devotion was murky and complicated. The famines, plague, wars, and misery triggered a scramble for salvation. Soteriology is almost a synonym for medieval philosophy, and the discourse on salvation was all-consuming. But, as Victoria Blud put it, 'alongside everything that is spoken (or written), there also exists the unspoken.' For all the church's decisiveness, its leaders were unsure about very important issues: how is one to ascertain that a miracle is not the work of the devil? What separates material-worship from heresy? Can healing be problematic? *Resurrecting Silences: Henry VI and his Afterlives* begins by placing the late medieval English king Henry VI squarely in the midst of this angst-ridden world of medieval piety. Franciscan and Cistercian meditations are silent and wholly good; witches' communion with their leader is secret and wholly negative. But where do we place the unexplained speechlessness of a meek and mild-mannered monarch who lost the ability (or withheld his own ability) to talk for months at a stretch? Or is it better to read Henry VI's character on his own terms, without resorting to 'failure of communication', 'crises of communication', or 'breakdown of language' responses? Henry VI was the unfortunate son of the warrior king Henry V. Recognised as the dual monarch of England and France when he was a nine-month-old baby, Henry received a first-rate religious and political education as he was growing up. But Henry V had died without a concrete plan to hold on the conquered territory and the campaigns he had planned further were going to be expensive. To quote John Gillingham and Ralph A. Griffiths, 'The English were in a military as well as a financial trap - and without the genius of Henry V to direct them'. When Henry VI promised to give up territory in Maine, England descended into chaos. On July 17, 1453, French armies won a decisive victory in the Battle of Castillon. The king suffered from a series of mental breakdowns and became completely unresponsive

to everything going on around him. He lost sense, reason, and what feeble hold he had on the government of his country. When his new-born son was presented to him, he looked away. Doctors treated this puzzling condition with as many safe treatments as possible, but nothing seemed to make a difference.

In the meantime, York (who also had a claim to the throne) and Warwick (an influential magnate) were gathering their forces. The king recovered in the last few days of 1454, but the damage was done. Mismanagement and corruption had already fuelled the Wars of the Roses. There was a temporary cessation of hostilities when Edward IV deposed Henry VI in 1461, but he regained his throne on 3 October 1470. This victory, however, was short-lived. On May 21, 1471, he was bludgeoned to death in his prison cell in the Tower of London. It is possible Richard III was involved in the actual assassination, but it's unlikely Edward was unaware of this plan. Rumour was that Henry VI had bled on the stairs at Chertsey - this was an indication that he had been murdered. Soon, there were pilgrims travelling to Chertsey to venerate (but not worship) his resting place. An unofficial cult grew around his weak, but kindly figure. Edward IV discouraged his subjects from undertaking the difficult journey to this rather out-of-the-way place, but local cults had tremendous power. These communally-organised affairs held sway over France, Italy, and Germany. This was the age of worshipping materiality. Saintly icons and remnants of the Crucifixion (the True Cross, Precious Blood, and the Shroud) attracted numerous travellers. Perilous pilgrimages were undertaken to adore these reminders of divinity. Henry VI's cult flourished, and grew enough to rival that of Thomas Becket's, England's favourite martyr saint. Richard III transferred Henry's remains to Windsor, and the cult remained. When Henry Tudor defeated Richard III in Market Bosworth and confronted an uncertain Parliament, the cult came to his urgent rescue. Although he was only a distant relation of Henry VI, sanctity was a powerful tool of legitimacy and consolidation. He began a quest to get his great uncle canonised, and this might have happened, had Henry VIII not broken off with Rome.

This study explores the literary afterlives of this elusive almost-saint. Although he has a substantial presence in literature (from medieval prayers to modern historical romances), scholarly research around Henry VI is limited. This is surprising, if only because he was interesting enough for Shakespeare to begin his dramatic career with. Although there are a number of perspectives we can use to approach Henry VI, this thesis

focuses on his religious (and religio-political) significance. The theology underlying each depiction of this remarkable personality is ironclad, and is our main concern. When it comes to the unspeakable and unsayable, theorists like Agamben and Derrida are unavoidable. Yet, the current work concentrates on tracing the Christomimetic pattern of the life of Henry VI and turns to Kierkegaard and modern theologians for help. The texts studied are literature produced by the cult, Shakespeare's *Henry VI* trilogy, Alexander Pope's *Windsor Forest*, Philippa Gregory's *The Cousins' War*, the TV series *Game of Thrones*, and Conn Iggulden's *Wars of the Roses*.

Chapter One

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

‘There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.’ Foucault’s words hold true for anyone venturing into the history of this centuries-old cult. The silent periods of this martyred king cannot be mentioned by his admirers, and even if they could, it would be a dangerous act. Sanctity has a long and troubled history because it is so malleable, and the combination of royalty, sanctity, and silence would have been too unorthodox and disturbing for the Holy See. As long as cults were not too close to heresy, Rome allowed them to thrive. The Henry VI cult began spontaneously, and that was emblematic of the kind of lay appeal this figure had. To a nation (and a continent) grown weary of the *Miles Christi* figure, Henry’s approachability could reconfigure these tired theological/sociological models. It would be wrong to suggest that Henry’s mental illness is a ‘textual void’ in their prayers and devotions. Quietness in the face of extreme hardship is a recognisable Christian attitude.

There is a real need for a complete book-length work on the rise and fall of the Henry VI cult, but Eamon Duffy’s recent study in his book *Royal Books and Holy Bones: Essays in Medieval Christianity* might be a precursor to exactly that. Although the Henry VI cult cannot be called ‘unusual’ in any way, it was, perhaps, one of the final pre-Reformation saintly cults in England that reached the heights of the Canterbury cult. Chapter One contains an exhaustive survey of the cult, with an in-depth look at Henry’s posthumous miracles and the Life purportedly written by John Blacman, precentor of Eton College and one who knew Henry VI intimately. There is a difference between the humiliated and abased saint that was venerated in the years following Henry’s martyrdom and the Tudor religious authority who was called upon to establish Henry Tudor on the English throne. Tudor propagandists were urban, Latin-speaking, courtly gentlemen who knew how wary Rome would be of the kind of veneration Henry symbolised. Henry’s sanctity underwent a transformation within the first few decades of the cult, and this was achieved by invoking many dead and forgotten traditions of early medieval devotion. Representing Henry as a suffering, miracle-working royal was one of the many methods available to Tudors, but they executed it successfully.

In spite of a definite military victory and propagandists building a canonisation mission, nothing in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries could actually guarantee a revenue-yielding saintly cult. The requirements for canonisation changed fast, and so did the requirements for being considered 'safe to venerate'. Henry's cult represented how the 'fear-inspiring' face of cults (like Charlemagne's cult) was changing to accommodate humility and piety. At least, that is the impression we get from the memoir written by John Blacman. As Henry's biographer Bertram Wolffe says, it is impossible to be certain if the Life was the work of someone who knew Henry or it was a clever concoction by educated theologians trying to ingratiate themselves with Henry VII. But the Henry VI of Blacman's study is a character close to St Edmund or even Becket himself. Humiliation has always been redemptive; but never more so than in this pre-Reformation martyr cult. Combining these several sub-traditions within medieval Christianity (early medieval martyr cults, high medieval cults of royal martyrs, adoration of redemptive humiliation, and a genuine reverence for divine kingship) was a genuine Tudor achievement.

Chapter Two:

‘The Field of Golgotha’: Shakespeare and Henry VI

We next encounter Henry VI in Philip Henslowe’s diary. A young playwright had written a commercially successful play with strong characters like Talbot and Joan, the witch. *The First Part of Henry the Sixth* established Shakespeare’s reputation in London as a dramatist, but it has been understandably relegated to ‘minor Shakespeare’. But even minor Shakespeare has had its moments of glory; Margaret of Anjou and Joan, for instance, have attracted feminist critics. The Duchess of Gloucester is interesting to scholars of the Inquisition. The character of Henry VI, howver, has been passed over for Henry IV and Richard III. Chapter Two, therefore, tries to fill that vacuum with an extensive discussion of Shakespeare’s re-telling of his life. As an Elizabethan, Shakespeare was not at liberty to directly refer to Henry’s periods of mental instability, so he was dependent on very furtive glances at this Lancastrian king’s ‘insanity’.

My treatment of Shakespeare’s Henry VI expands on Margreta de Grazia’s and Katherine E. Maus’ understanding of ‘possessions’ by inquiring if it’s possible for their theories to accommodate the concept of divine kingship If being is having, then the political and religious office of monarch is a possession, and it is Henry’s inability to properly possess what he is called on to that matters. There are parables that represent divine grace as a kind of property transaction, like the parable of talents and the prodigal son. The silence we have here, therefore, is more sinister - because once the deposed king has no property, the ruler-ruled relationships are non-existent and no communication is possible.

Chapter Two begins with a short overview of Renaissance conceptions of sacrality, primogeniture, and kingship, it’s quite short because Shakespeare cannot be squarely placed within these pedagogic traditions, although most scholars (Ornstein and Ribner, for instance) believe he exalted private virtue over princely virtue. Primogeniture was the English custom, but theorists from Cicero to Erasmus preferred virtue as the true origin of kingship. Shakespeare’s Henry VI may be a deliberate contrast to the ‘deformed, unfinish’d’ hunchback Richard III: Henry’s humility and piety might be imagined as a counterpoint to Richard’s pathological ‘determination to prove a villain.’ Shakespeare's belief in the Tudor myth, his usage of Tudor imagery and symbol, and the

Tillyardian interpretation of the myth have also been explored. Choosing Henry VI as his first dramatic study seems like a huge gamble, but it paid off. Greenblatt, in fact, thinks Christopher Marlowe paid the *Henry VI* plays a tribute by writing Edward II. Germaine Greer compared the unprecedented success of *1 Henry VI* with huge cinema blockbusters of our time.

The death of Henry IV changes Henry V into a warrior king who can no longer scorn the state because he is the state. 'Presume not that I am the thing I was,' says the young Hal to Falstaff. Richard II says 'I must nothing be' just after he has been deposed, very reminiscent of 'Edgar I nothing am' - both coronation and deposition fundamentally alter the state of the soul and de Grazia also says that not having is tantamount to non-being. But Henry is quite unlike other Shakespearean exiles because there is no recognisable shift in his personality after he loses everything and has to run away to Scotland. There is no immediately recognisable epiphany, which leads us to question exactly how epiphany functions in the trilogy. But this detachment - beautifully romanticised in the molehill speech - co-exists with a sense of deprivation; he sways between piety and inertia. Henry's speech on the molehill has been compared with Lear's heath scene but Lear's suffering is on a grander scale, and there is an amount of healing and restoration in Lear that we don't find in Henry, at least while he's alive.

Chapter Three

'Is God Speaking to Him?':

Henry's Sacred Silences in Pope's *Windsor Forest* and Philippa Gregory's *The Cousins' War*

Chapter Three begins with a short discussion of why, over the next three centuries the play saw less than fifteen productions, and why the twentieth century 'rediscovery' of Shakespeare's earliest plays hasn't instigated scholarly interest in Henry's role. We can ask why, despite Christian theology's renewed interest in practices of silence, scholarly research on the historical Henry VI or his literary representations remains surprisingly rare. Elie Wiesel called his record of his experiences at Auschwitz '*And the World Remained Silent*' - the church has been silent on most political and religious upheavals of the twentieth century. Pope Pius XII remained silent during the systematic obliteration of six million Jews, as his predecessor Pope Benedict XV had during the first world war - this is part of the reason why we view all political silences as evasion of actual fact like the cult transforming it into a divine silence and Shakespeare never directly referring to it.

There is also an important issue to consider: by the time Alexander Pope started composing *Windsor Forest*, the political choices of Henry VI had ceased to directly influence the lives of people in England. It was less problematic for Pope to treat Henry as a sorrowful reminder of the brutal past than for Shakespeare. I have taken the help of multiple editors and critics to analyse Pope, but the ones worth mentioning here are Howard Erskine Hill and Juan Christian Pellicer. Pope's martyr kings are in a dialogue about justice, peace, and victory - standard Christian topics, and Pope's Henry VI is a standard Catholic martyr. His interest in Henry VI may have been personal because Pope was brought up by a devout Catholic household near Windsor. But Queen Anne 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 reign anticipates the divine revenge of Henry VII, the golden age of Elizabeth and the peaceful reign of Queen Anne. 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' sleeps

beside him. The grave unites martyr and murderer - this does not seem to suggest any divine punishment for warmongers and creates tension within this narrative because peace is impossible to maintain. 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. But it is heartening to find that Henry has a renewed relevance before and during the Stuarts.

This is followed by a segment on the desacralisation of monarchy in Europe (although we have already established that few kings actually depended solely on divine rights for legitimacy). And because we are moving towards literature that openly considers Henry's silence as insanity, there is an analysis of how piety and insanity intersect in the concept known as 'thea mania'. I use Kierkegaard's and Foucault's understanding of the incarnation as the central paradox within Christianity and question if it's possible for the Passion to sanctify all kinds of madness, with reference to Saul, Nebuchadnezzar, Simeon Stylites, and Job. Kierkegaard's understanding of the *Akedah* is used to approach Philippa Gregory's idea of Henry VI: these are two dissonant experiences of fathers being forced to sacrifice their children to appease God, but the theology of the *Akedah* complements the horrors of the Wars of the Roses beautifully. Many strands of Christian mysticism feed into the 'silence of a king' narrative, and that has also been given due consideration.

Chapter Four

'Yet He did not open His mouth': Henry VI in the Digital Age

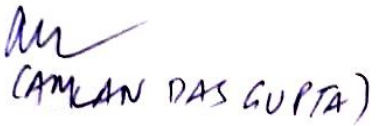
'The fourth, and final, chapter of the study examines how twenty-first century films, television series, and popular fiction construct and manipulate the fictional identities of Henry VI. The texts in consideration are the popular TV series called *Game of Thrones* and the *Wars of the Roses* tetralogy by bestselling British author Conn Iggulden.

As an introduction to *Game of Thrones*, David Michôd's *The King* (with Timothee Chalamet playing King Henry V) has been briefly discussed. Henry's Westerosi counterpart is Aerys II Targaryen, also called the Mad King and King Scab, who used to be a peaceful ruler but then went mad and burnt his own capital. Martin reduces multiple ethical discourses to a straightforward moral question - isn't the effect of obsessive piety the same as murderous insanity? 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 his essay 'Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices'. This is also a complete inversion of theological order: piety is an illness and religious observances are manifestations of said illness.

My discussion of Iggulden begins with another theological commonplace - that of holy contemplation. Iggulden gives us an origin story for his silence - Henry falls silent after his wife forces herself on him and what supports this 'story' is a series of allegorical parallels we find within European cinema, especially 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.) My explanation of Iggulden's radically innovative understanding of Henry's sleep draws upon the concept known as theosomnia and tries to problematise the Biblical idea of sleep being a hallowed and hallowing activity. The literal translation of theosomnia is God-sleep and by it Rev. Andrew 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. Theosomnia is possible because God never sleeps,

as asserted by Psalm 127: 'The Lord who watches over Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.'

To briefly summarise, we may notice a gradual whittling away at Henry's sacrality over the course of this study. 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 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 a metaphor for exile, alienation, loss, and grief. Silence in the face of all questions is itself an important Christomimetic act. The three Synoptic Gospels emphasise that Jesus kept silent at key moments during his trial, and this is an important reminder of the fact that Christ's life is a model for perfect political behaviour because he is the King of Kings. It is interesting to think of Henry's silence conversing with other narratives of silence and mental incapacity in the scriptures. There are inherent tensions in the foundations of each representation, and there is no reason to try and reconcile conflicting theologies because this conflict between different characterisations of holiness is inevitable and necessary.

Signature of supervisor: 

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