

Thesis title: Resurrecting Silences: Henry VI and his Afterlives

ABSTRACT:

In August 1453, the 31-year-old Lancastrian king Henry VI descended into a catatonic stupor and became completely unresponsive. When his first-born son was handed to him, he looked away. He recovered after a year, but it wasn't permanent. While the Wars of the Roses destroyed England, he suffered from a series of breakdowns that almost rendered him unable to rule. After being vilified for decades on account of his excessive piety, mental illness, and pacifism, his violent martyrdom (Edward IV's agents bashed his skull in) gave him a chance at redemption. For over five decades, he was venerated as a healing saint.

This thesis examines how Henry's 'silence' (and the humiliation and death he suffered because of it) is treated in his *Vita*, Shakespeare's *Henry VI* trilogy, Alexander Pope's *Windsor Forest*, the *Cousins' War* series by Philippa Gregory, Conn Iggulden's *Wars of the Roses* series, and George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (more popular as the HBO TV series *Game of Thrones*). Biographies of Henry VI, minor works that mention him, and various modern philosophies of silence/humiliation are referenced wherever necessary. Because Henry VI's significance is primarily religio-political, I also study the (overwhelmingly Christocentric) theology underlying each depiction of the royal martyr. I consider a number of historical and literary sources to understand the polysemous nature of this silence: Nebuchadnezzar, Saul, Charlemagne, Becket, Abraham, St Jerome, and the American underground hero are all examples of the archetypes against which the several 'Henries' are fashioned. Each representation reveals certain central tensions within Christian theology and moral/theological anxieties of the author(s)' times. By tracing these tensions (often the result of conflicting theologies), my study also attempts to discover if Henry's 'sleep' can function as a consolatory space in a post-Holocaust and post-9/11 world.