

*'Undoing all, as all had never been':
The Play of Violence in Henry VI*

But if your desire of fame and glory makes your present inactivity irksome to you, place before you the example of the old Chandoses and Talbots; you will obtain greater honour and glory by following their steps, than if you could obtain all the wealth which the Spaniards have brought over from their new world, on the strength of which they have insulted all the nations of Europe, and so disgusted them with their insolence, that they now feel and perhaps will soon feel still more that they have erred in their reckoning.¹

In the late 1570s, when Raleigh joined Champernowne's company across the Channel, Hubert Languet was writing thus to the young Philip Sidney, impressing upon his protégé the models (models unexpectedly espoused by a humanist scholar) of warrior patriots from medieval scenes of conflict. In their different ways, all three men sought to promote the Reformist cause in Europe in the final decades of the sixteenth century, but, as we have seen, Raleigh would be particularly exercised by the far-flung possessions of Spain and the riches they surrendered to their colonial masters across the Atlantic. Leading Elizabethan figures, such as Sidney, Raleigh and Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, would enter the fray against Catholic forces on the battlefields of Western Europe as the Tudor century drew to a close. Sidney met his death at Zutphen in the Low Countries in 1586. Conversely, both Raleigh and Essex survived their service in the Protestant cause in the French Wars of Religion.

When the author of *The History of the World* came to consider, much later in life, the demise of the Roman commander Aemilius in the field against his Punic adversaries, he could not refrain from returning attention to 'the *English* vertue of the Lord John Talbot' which was 'more highly to be honoured'.² Indeed, if Thomas Nashe is to be believed, the charismatic appeal of Talbot continued to stir the imaginations of a goodly number of those who packed the London playhouses. In *Pierce Penniless* (1592), he enthused

How would it haue ioyed braue Talbot (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lye two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, and haue his bones new embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least.³

The present discussion reflects upon the ways in which Shakespeare's (and his collaborators') *Henry VI* plays of the 1590s, plays which seek at the outset to heroise the martial exploits of Talbot, may be seen to engage more broadly with lively contemporaneous debates concerning the call to arms, both past and present.⁴ These dramatic narratives unmask the terrifyingly indiscriminate manner in which brutality pollutes everyday lives and selves and lays waste to any remains of human dignity to which those locked within these flux-ridden worlds still aspire. As we have seen, the promotion of the combatant's trade remained a thorny undertaking in this period. If, in *The arte of warre* (1591), William Garrard concluded 'a Souldier must be as well acquainted, and as able to beare continual trauail, as a Bird can endure to flie, yea and to put on a resolute minde to beare all the miseries and hazardes of warlike affaires',⁵ others might share Raleigh's sometimes doleful accounts of English soldiery witnessed in the previous chapter. Indeed, the queen's godson, Sir John Harington, noted in his recollections of the 1599 Irish campaign that the English cavalry was not supported by 'Roman citizens, but rascal soldiers, who, so their commanders had been saved, had been worthy to have been half hanged for their rascal cowardliness'.⁶

The *Henry VI* plays concentrate squarely upon the ways in which violence not only corrupts all forms of social exchange, but blights the ethical potential to which the human subject might lay claim. Forsaking his mourning garb at the opening of *1 Henry VI*, Bedford proclaims, 'Wounds will I lend the French instead of eyes,/To weep their intermissive miseries' (*VI*: I.i.87–8); and Talbot himself barks at the French, 'Your hearts I'll stamp out with my horse's heels/And make a quagmire of your mingled brains' (*VI*: I.iv.107–8). In this anguished dramatic vision extending over three plays, all human life is remorselessly *made flesh*. Furthermore, we are urged to attend to the ways in which slaughter (the politics of control in extremis) comes to monopolise the imaginative existence and affective allegiances of anyone wishing to secure the power of command. Indeed, by *3 Henry VI*, this irrepressible appetite to communicate human creativity (in thought, word and deed) with a stunted vocabulary of blood sports is still very far from being exhausted. Richard of Gloucester submits, 'Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile'

(*VP*: III.ii.182), and Clifford confides to his victim, the Yorkist child Rutland, 'if I digged up thy forefathers' graves/And hung their rotten coffins up in chains,/It could not slake mine ire, nor ease my heart' (*VP*: I.iii.27–9).⁷

Shakespeare's dramatised investigations into the power to excite violence run the length of the *Henry VI* plays – plays which may be seen to describe a striking narrative arc from the political demise of one warlord in the shape of Henry V to that, *not of his son*, but of one whom Warwick terms, as the cycle nears its conclusion, 'our quondam queen', Margaret of Anjou (*VP*: III.iii.153). In these dramatic worlds of collapsing governance, the only means by which to affirm selfhood, to win political recognition and to subjugate others is through the perplexingly creative power to violate, to unpick hitherto prevailing constructs of *vis* and *virtus*. Fully acknowledging these debased conditions of existence (in which he has participated so vigorously), the doomed Suffolk rails before his killers, 'Come, soldiers, show what cruelty ye can,/That this my death may never be forgot!' (*VP*: IV.i.132–3).

Restoring History to the Nation

At the beginning of *Britannia* (first published in Latin in 1586), William Camden attended to the ways in which his native land had been characterised since antiquity by culturally freighted expectations of excentricity and exceptionalism:

For between the said Fore-land of *Kent* and *Calais* in *France*, [Britain] so advanceth it selfe, and the sea is so streited, that some thinke the land there was pierced thorow, and received the seas into it, which before-time had been excluded. For the maintenance of which their conceit, they allege both Virgil in that verse of his

Et penitus toto divisos orbe Britannos:

And Britans people quite disjoin'd from all the world besides.

Because Britaine, saith Servius Honoratus, was in times past ioyned to the maine. And also Claudian, who in imitation of him wrote thus:

Nostra deducta Britannia mundo.

Britaine, a land, which severed is from this our [Roman] world.⁸

Whilst recognising the seductive mythologies which had grown up around these Fortunate Isles situated initially beyond the orbit of the *Pax romana*, Camden's scholarly endeavours, as was recognised in the previous chapter, concentrated upon recuperating a more substantial, heroic narrative for his nation with the resources of textual and artefactual memory: 'to restore antiquity to Britaine, and Britain to his antiquity'.⁹

Unsurprisingly, *Britannia* chose not to stress unduly indeterminacies in the fate of a weakling nation, frequently located down the centuries on the edge of continental theatres of power and subject to the predatory desires of foreign potentates. Instead, the invasion of the realm and its introduction into Roman *imperium* are endowed with a markedly salvific status:

When Fortitude and Fortune were so agreed, or Gods appointment rather had thus decreed, that Rome should subdue all the earth, Caius Julius Caesar, having now by conquests over-run Gaule, to the end, that by a successive traine of victories atchieved both by land and sea, he might joyne those Lands together which nature had severed (as if the Roman world would not suffice) cast an eye unto the Ocean; and in the foure and fiftieth year before the incarnation of Christ, endeavoured to make a journey into Britaine.¹⁰

Even if, on occasions, the historian concedes that the Roman yoke were 'grievous', the reader is reassured that ultimately it proved a 'saving health' for the island: 'for that healthsome light of Iesus Christ shone withall upon the Britans . . . and the brightnesse of that most glorious Empire, chased away all savage barbarisme from the Britans minds'.¹¹ Thus, rather than emphasising geographical or chronological disjunction, Camden's *Britannia* figured forth a developing narrative of political and spiritual election – and his scholarly undertaking was clearly speaking directly to ideas which had gained currency amongst at least some quarters of the population. When the parson George Owen, for example, reviewed the progress of his own Welsh nation in Tudor times, he confessed 'that if our ffathers weare nowe lyvinge they wovld thinke it som straunge cuntrye inhabited wth a forran nation, so altered is the cuntrye and cuntreyemen . . . from evill to good, and from good to better'.¹²

Camden's endeavours were profoundly humanist in tenor: he committed his scholarship to bridging the intervening centuries between his own time and that of the Romano-British period, and to responding to the voids in his countrymen's knowledge with the nourishing resources of textual and artefactual memory – which is to say, in this instance, with the resources of narrative plenitude: 'in the studies of Antiquity, (which is alwaies accompanied with dignity, and hath a certaine semblance with eternity) there is a sweet food of the minde well befitting such as are of honest and noble disposition'.¹³ In the same period, Shakespeare's history plays similarly reserved particular attention for the rehearsal of the island kingdom's past. However, these plays unearth a specifically fifteenth-century, martial cycle of events for their 1590s audiences in order to disclose

the painfully close proximity of its violence and the fragile, nay illusory, nature of lasting political settlement.

By the sixteenth century, generations of humanist scholars had already ensured that, apart from rhetorical performance, one of the most significant ways in which the intellect might fulfil its ethical potential was through the mediation of *historia*.¹⁴ In a tome to which Shakespeare clearly had recourse, Jacques Amyot had advised in his prefatory discussion to the English edition of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (1579) that history 'is a certaine rule or instruction, which by examples past, teacheth us to iudge of things present, & to foresee things to come: so as we may knowe what to like of, & what to follow, what to mislike, and what to eschew'.¹⁵ Indeed, in post-Reformation England, the widespread commitment to the reading, writing, translation and commentary of historical texts might contribute all too significantly to addressing a keenly felt cultural void: such accounts might acknowledge a profound desire to venerate that which had hitherto been reserved for the ageless relics, sacred spaces and precious rituals of Catholic Christendom. Yet the indomitable fascination and awe shared by Shakespearean characters (*and* audiences) in the Histories for recessive narratives is inevitably accompanied by a keen and growing realisation on- and offstage of the penetrating experiences of lack, loss and absence in the present.

The *Henry VI* plays evoke with graphic assurance what Camden termed 'that wofull war betweene the houses of Lancaster and Yorke',¹⁶ or, what Locke would coin over a century later as 'the wars of the roses'.¹⁷ They portray King Harry's son as a figure bequeathed absolute political priority. However, the vexed dramatic function which reverts to him is ultimately to articulate his power to suffer and his most flawed humanity, unrelieved by even parental tenderness. His subjectivity is wholly communicated on stage in terms of his remorseless experiences of dispossession and his eagerness to bear witness from the margins of a world which should be shaped by his governance. As such, these plays may indeed be scrutinising a version of what, in more recent times, Giorgio Agamben has termed the cultural paradox of the *homo sacer* – 'who may be killed and yet not sacrificed'.¹⁸ In this instance, Agamben focused upon a juridical conundrum taken from Roman law in *De verborum significatione* by Pompeius Festus: the *homo sacer* is recognised as an 'homo malus atque improbus' (a bad or impure man) who is both invested with a sacral character (thus becoming, 'incompatible with the human world') and yet one whose death will go unpunished. Equally strikingly, the extraordinary status of this figure in Agamben's thesis continues to define those who survive him: thus,

perplexingly, in the *homo sacer* 'we are confronted with a residual and irreducible bare life, which must be excluded and exposed to a death that no rite and no sacrifice can redeem'.¹⁹ While Henry VI may not be perceived as wholly *malus atque improbus*, this sovereign is condemned to the unstinting enactment of moral, political and affective failure as the plays unfold. Indeed, he repeatedly unveils for audiences on- and offstage a profound appreciation of his own insufficiency, a rich sensitivity to the staging of his own victimisation and a febrile expectation of his own imminent demise.

Lex Loquens – Speaking and Stifling Sovereignty

Mikhail Bakhtin argued that 'Greatness always makes itself known only to descendents, for whom such a quality is always located in the past (it turns into a distanced image); it has become an object of memory.'²⁰ The emotionally charged quest for heroic transcendence and the unslakeable appetite for violent political mobility remain key mechanisms for narrative progression throughout the *Henry VI* plays. Paradoxically, the very scaffolding of these plays is both built upon and dismantled by 'That ever living man of memory,/Henry the Fifth' (*VF*: IV.iii.51–2). Beaufort praises the late ruler in markedly extravagant terms as one who stood 'Unto the French, the dreadful judgement-day /... The battles of the Lord of Hosts he fought' (*VF*: I.i.29, 31). Ultimately, the shrouded body of Henry V comes increasingly to act onstage as a most eloquent, if forbidding magistrate for the decaying political fortunes of the Lancastrian dynasty.

For the English camp and, at one remove, for the audience, the spectre of the dead king continues to haunt his son's newly inherited kingdom with its newly empowered warlords: the ceaseless regimes of militarised attrition to which the realm is subjected inevitably engender their own coarsened strains of identity and history. Thus, the hyperbolised memory of Henry V (or Richard II in the second tetralogy) is not only repeatedly awarded cultural priority in the political discourse of subsequent generations, it also offers a key vantage point from which to observe the seemingly apocalyptic fracturing of the commonweal. In this context, Mary Warnock remains timely in her reminder that memory is not purely the retrieving of the past, it is also the knowledge brought about by the past.²¹ In the disorderly world of *Becoming* to which the warring parties of the Yorkists and Lancastrians condemn the nation, memory and violence offer precious hermeneutic modes with which to resist the

unremitting experience of marginality and trauma. The determination to think historically, to position (what Bakhtin termed in his account of epic narrative) a foundational or “absolute past” of gods, demigods and heroes’,²² is in this way linked intimately to the desire not to have subjectivity and social discourse wholly defined by the chaos and carnage of the present. Beaufort affirms that the late Henry V ‘was a king blest of the King of Kings’ (I.i.28), and his determination to pay fulsome tribute to the dead king is shared by many of the peers who survive to frame – or, rather, unframe – the English court. At this point, dramatic attention is not monopolised by the unharnessed brutality which the state is enduring (both within and without), but concentrates rather on the painful labours of memory for, what Robert C. Jones wittily identified as, the Shakespearean phenomenon of the ‘lost leader’.²³

The corpse of the fallen ruler may represent political rupture and communicate to the selective meditations of those who remain a fantasied memory of plenitude. However, in a play such as *1 Henry VI*, it also speaks directly to the insatiable appetite within that society for stainless gods as military commanders – an appetite which exploits energetically the narratives of a radically edited past. When Richard Plantaganet strives to have his noble status restored in the wake of King Harry’s death, he reminds his adversaries of the fragility, nay possible erasure, of their own, present political fortunes: ‘I’ll note you in my book of memory/. . . Look to it well and say you are well warned’ (*VI*: II.iv.101, 103). At the opening of *2 Henry VI*, if the beguiled king believes that he has at least secured a strategic advantage in the recent French wars through his alliance with Margaret of Anjou, for his uncle Gloucester the union may be read under quite different terms: it violates England’s abiding commitment to national renewal through foreign conquest and, equally disturbingly, indicates that the court is now governed by a particularly self-serving and most destructive political creed. In the event, few onstage are minded to give credit to the lacklustre renewal of King Harry’s deeds by his son or to stifle their misgivings over the new king’s policies of capitulation and withdrawal. The young Henry is greeted with a profoundly disaffected court on his return to England. Indeed, Gloucester, proposes that, rather than triumphalism, the nation would do well to have recourse to jeremiads.

Thus, if the arrival of this new queen, along with that of the returning native forces, signals a key moment in the dissolution of Henry V’s political legacy, it also points to an equally painful realisation that the new king and his aristocratic company have sought refuge in the consolations of amnesia.

Given this state of affairs, Gloucester is unsurprisingly remorseless in his chastising of an already dejected English court:

O peers of England, shameful is this league,
 Fatal this marriage, cancelling your fame,
 Blotting your names from books of memory, . . .
 Undoing all, as all had never been! (VF: I.i.95–7, 100)

Gloucester's interventions at this juncture serve to chart for audiences the grave shortcomings of the nation's elite and the most limited capacities of a naïve and unremarkable king who has sought to disguise his own failings with extravagant ceremony – a ploy exploited by a far from negligible number of Shakespearean monarchs. In response to the consequent political haemorrhaging, it takes just a short time for the realm to rupture into warring factions led by the ruthless magnates. Nonetheless, the vigorous recourse to civil violence and adversarial politics makes little difference to the collective investment in retrospection. As the realm begins to groan under the inordinate pressures of Yorkist and Lancastrian ambitions, the resources of memory are seen again and again to offer the promise of some kind of dignity of purpose for or verdict upon the commonplace butchery of the present. In such a dramatic world, the law may be spoken from the throne (*lex loquens*), but it is rarely prosecuted from this seat of power.

The acute sense of cultural strain and disorientation at the beginning of *I Henry VI* can only be communicated, it seems, in terms of military inertia ('arms avail not now that Henry's dead') and linguistic collapse ('What should I say? His deeds exceed all speech'; VF: I.i.47, 16). As a result, the young and most errant king is compelled to assume an ever expanding range of identities. On his return from the French wars, this beleaguered Lancastrian tries to affirm his sovereignty by unveiling what he believes to be a guarantor of peace and a valuable trophy: Margaret of Anjou. If, with this alliance, Henry seeks to foreclose contentious debate at his court, he is only exploiting a familiar paradigm inherited from his father who returned to the island kingdom with a new spouse, Catherine of Valois, drawn from the ranks of his French adversaries. Nonetheless, even in the later *Henry V*, audiences are not encouraged by any reassurance of lasting political settlement at the hands of a king who mistakes the exporting of war overseas for the exercise of government: 'Is it possible dat I sould love de *ennemi* of France?' (V: V.ii.163).

René Girard famously argued that 'le sacrifice est une violence sans risque de vengeance',^{24a} and it appears that it is with such sentiments in

^a 'sacrifice is a form of violence with no threat of revenge'.

mind that Henry VI repeatedly enacts the surrender of his royal privilege: 'O that my death would stay these ruthless deeds!' (*VI*^B: II.v.95). His reiterated desires are all too often expressed in terms of *otium* or cultural withdrawal – in this instance, culminating in the death wish. More generally, the young king seeks to mediate between the angry heavens and the blood-lusts of his overmighty subjects by affirming the desire to lead 'a private life/. . . in devotion' (*VI*^B: IV.vi.42–3). In *The Letter of Violence*, a wide-ranging enquiry into the nature of cultural trauma, Idelber Avelar stresses that 'The function of pain in the Bible is to provide the link that ties the subject to belief.'²⁵ Yet, in the context of Shakespeare's Histories, the *Henry VI* plays do not ask their audiences to attend to any agonised commitment of faith on Henry's part or to his deliverance from a fallen world. They depict a human environment (uncannily familiar to many subjects of late modernity) where there is diminishing traffic with the sacred and its claims to the authority of retributive violence have devolved to lesser agents.²⁶ Nevertheless, the narrative function of suffering in the relation of the human condition remains a compelling enquiry, then and now. As Terry Eagleton has underlined, 'suffering is a mightily powerful language to share in common, one in which many diverse life-forms can strike up a dialogue. It is a communality of meaning . . . injury, division and antagonism are the currency you share in common . . . Sorrow implies value.'²⁷

In the case of Shakespeare's plays, the staging of such suffering and pain comes emblematically to represent the bitter experience of failed transcendence. *Henry VI* carefully contrasts the motions of cultural withdrawal on the part of the king with those of the champion of his French antagonists who is 'A holy maid . . ./Which by a vision sent to her from heaven/Ordained is to raise this tedious siege/And drive the English forth the bounds of France' (*VI*^F: I.ii.51–4). The Pucelle, who has been variously construed critically from 'a virtual parody of the Marlovian prototype' to a thinly disguised Morality devil,²⁸ becomes increasingly implicated in the age's appetite for butchery, even offering to dismember her own body before her English captors save her the trouble. She bargains with her fiends, 'I'll lop a member off and give it you' (*VI*^F: V.iii.14). However, her body is not within her gift: it is repeatedly claimed by others. Even her rejected father protests, 'God knows thou art a collop of my flesh' (*VI*^F: V.iv.18). More generally, these history plays repeatedly problematise the political status and dramatic implications of Henry VI's declared piety and its relations with his subsequent psychic unravelling. In *Richard II* the fallen protagonist histrionically declares he would exchange his 'gorgeous palace for a hermitage' (III.iii.147). In both dramatic environments audiences are urged to consider these desires

to withdraw with the utmost seriousness, querying whether they constitute a flawed abdication of political office or a resisting reading of the society's belligerence. Henry VI declares to Warwick and Clarence, 'I make you both Protectors of this land/While I myself will lead a private life/And in devotion spend my latter days,/To sin's rebuke and my Creator's praise' (*VP*: IV. vi.41–4). Whatever the status of this repeatedly voiced piety, we are left in no doubt that it remains wanting as a political endorsement of the Lancastrian cause or the responsible act of a *pater patriae* to a world grown increasingly expert in the art of killing.

Firmly inscribed within a discourse of reassuring polarities, a specially commissioned 'Psalm and Collect of Thanksgiving' in the year of the Armada thundered that the Spanish 'communed of peace, and prepared for most cruel war; for they think that no faith nor truth is to be kept with us, but that they may feign, dissemble, break promise, swear, and forswear, so they may deceive us and take us unawares, and oppress us suddenly'.²⁹ As pamphlet literature, chronicles, martyrologies, epic poems and dramas proliferated during the course of the sixteenth century and continued to recuperate tales of blood-letting for newly minted mythologies of the nation, such evocations of unceasing violence also excited new forms of epistemology. They trained attention upon, what Paul Ricoeur has identified more generally in an account of historiography as 'des possibilités oubliées, des potentialités avortées, des tentatives réprimées (une des fonctions de l'histoire à cet égard est de reconduire à ces moments du passé où l'avenir n'était pas encore décidé, où le passé était lui-même un espace d'expérience ouvert sur un horizon d'attente)'.^{30a} Thus, in the *Henry VI* plays, the unwieldy energies of rebellion, political factionalism or the wavering rhythms of the king's political and mental collapse need not, as many critical studies infer, be driven by an emphasis upon narrative closure, upon political silencing or dynastic consolidation. Indeed, Shakespeare's renewal of fifteenth-century England for late Elizabethan audiences devotes considerably more stage time to the enactment of froward passions than to the stifling of Cade's insurrection in *2 Henry VI*, to the unruly dynamism of Hotspur than to his destruction in *1 Henry IV*. The repeating structures in the performative play of history may direct attention not to the quelling of sedition, but stimulate a reawakened

^a 'forgotten possibilities, aborted potentialities, repressed endeavours in the supposedly closed past. One of the functions of history in this respect is to lead us back to those moments of the past where the future was not yet decided, where the past was itself a space of experience open to a horizon of expectation.' See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. III, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 227.

consciousness of the multiplying possibilities of access to a most slippery political power. Again and again we are urged to concentrate on how competing political bids may be variously justified and heroised – and how the ever-fragile body politic may envisage and negotiate renewal through the terrifying availability of violence. This certainly proves to be an unexpected and bitter lesson for Henry VI when he seeks to respond to the shrill voices of dissent from his peers: ‘Henry the Fourth by conquest got the crown.’ York barks back, ‘Twas by rebellion against his king’ (*VP*: I.i.132–3). For this same generation of late Elizabethan audiences, Oxford’s Professor of Roman Law, Alberico Gentili, had underlined vexingly in *De Iure Belli* (1589), ‘if it is doubtful on which side justice is, and if each side aims at justice, neither can be called unjust’.³¹

After the rigours of parleys between Henry VI and York, royal authority cannot be expressed, only ventriloquised with the rhetorical expertise of a Margaret of Anjou or of a court henchman like Clifford. Yet, by the time these latter agents are called upon to promote the cause of the House of Lancaster in *3 Henry VI*, the governance of England has become little more than a spectator sport for the king himself. Terrifyingly, figures such as Margaret and Clifford are able to match their words with deeds, but Henry VI (prefiguring the later Lear) is reduced to mouthing, rather than imparting his sovereignty. In *1 Henry VI*, when he welcomes Richard Plantaganet back to the company of his lords as Duke of York, the fledgling king announces, ‘my loving lords, our pleasure is/That Richard be restored to his blood’. However, the seemingly unbiddable court requires the force of Warwick’s echoics (‘Let Richard be restored to his blood’) before the authority of the Crown may be confirmed (*VP*: III.i.158–60). By the close of *3 Henry VI* the polity of England is able to support no internal systems of deference or restraint and so Henry’s own ill-fated son, Prince Edward, attempts in vain to have the newly instituted Edward IV ‘[s]peak like a subject’: even this youth acknowledges ‘I am now my father’s mouth’ (*VP*: V.v.17–18). At such moments, audiences may conclude, as Raleigh had advised in the posthumous publication *Instructions to his Sonne and to Posterity* (1632), ‘Speaking much, is . . . a kinde of vanitie; for hee that is lavish in words, is a niggard in deeds, and as SALOMON sayth, the heart of a Foole is in his mouth.’³²

Inheriting the Past

H. M. Richmond contended that ‘The very choice of the weak Henry VI rather than the dashing Talbot as the play’s pivot is curious . . . it is not

a piece of useful political propaganda for the Tudors, like the conventional treatment of Richard III.³³ Indeed, it might be argued that Henry VI remains incapable of assuming this dramatic function – a function more persuasively performed by the potent memory of his father. When Salisbury is slain in action in France, he is remembered by Talbot not only as one who ‘In thirteen battles . . . o’ercame’, but as symbolising a precious link with the heroic legacies of a swiftly receding past: ‘Henry the Fifth he first train’d to the wars’ (*VI*¹: I.iv.78–9). Furthermore, it occurs to Henry VI, himself eclipsed in the presence of Talbot, ‘I do remember how my father said/A stouter champion never handled sword’ (*VI*¹: III.iv.18–19).

In *Temps et récit*, Paul Ricoeur is at pains to stress the wonted motions of the human psyche and how, again and again in our collective dealings, ‘Le temps devient temps humain dans la mesure où il est articulé de manière narrative.’^{34a} In the *Henry VI* plays, the endlessly renewing *narratio* of an absent patriarch not only calibrates all subsequent forms of political agency in the kingdom, it also exposes how an enduring appetite for violence has come to fashion political discourse itself: 1st serving-man – ‘Ay, and the very parings of our nails/Shall pitch a field when we are dead’ (*VI*¹: III.i.102–3). If Paola Pugliatti argues convincingly that ‘Among Shakespeare’s war leaders, Talbot is the one who most nearly approaches the ideals of knighthood’, Alexander Leggatt has concluded more grimly that Talbot is ‘a hero in a practical world in which he is first destroyed and then forgotten’.³⁵ The memories of military commanders such as Henry V, Talbot, Julius Caesar, Old Hamlet and the younger Antony, amongst many others, are often found to haunt Shakespeare’s theatrical worlds. Yet, as the historian Rory Rapple has persuasively underlined, encounters with the past might not be limited to the *wooden O*, or even to the leaves of Hall’s or Holinshed’s chronicles. As was witnessed in the previous chapter, in such publications as Raleigh’s, cultural expectations of retrospection (if not regression) frequently characterised early modern productions of non-European worlds. Nonetheless, these were underpinned by deeply historicised expectations of a land much closer to home where English projects of plantation had been in progress since Anglo-Norman times. In 2 *Henry VI* Beaufort cautions York that ‘The uncivil kerns of Ireland are in arms/And temper clay with blood of Englishmen’ (*VI*²: III.i.310–11); and,

^a ‘time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative’. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 3.

in turn, Rapple stressed that to the minds of many of the English ‘seneschals, constables and captains’ located in early modern Ireland, ‘the way in which factionalism and theft stalked the land was obviously retrograde, a throwback to an English *status quo ante*, the horrors of the Wars of the Roses’.³⁶

Scriptural study among an ever-growing community of readers in post-Reformation England might easily revive the knowledge that kingship had been accorded by Jehovah to nations tainted by spiritual failure:

But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Giue vs a King to iudge vs: and Samuel prayed vnto the Lord. And the Lord said vnto Samuel, Hearken vnto the voyce of the people in all that they say vnto thee: for they haue not reiected thee, but they haue reiected mee, that I should not reigne ouer them. (1 Samuel 8.6–7)

Moreover, the sixteenth century did not lack voices to remind its readers of their moral and devotional shortcomings. The humanist scholar Juan Luis Vives had submitted in *De Tradendis Disciplinis* (1531) that ‘it is not to be doubted that our minds are now less powerful than they were before that first transgression. Now, we are more crafty in our wickedness.’³⁷ A decade later in *The lamentacyon of a Christe[n] agai[n]st the citey of London* (1542), Henry Brinkelow unveiled the Tudor capital in the final years of ‘oure most Soueraygne Lorde Kynge Henry the eight’ as populated with ‘inordinate riche styfnecked Cytezens, [who] will not haue in their howses that lyuely worde of our soules . . . but abhorreth and disdayneth all those which wolde lyue according to the Gospell’.³⁸ Indeed, by the close of the century in John Rainolds’ *The overthrow of stage-playes* (1599), the Oxford printer, John Lichfield, might be found complaining that ‘th’usual flocking and gadding . . . to these Play-Houses and idel places of entercourse . . . doth sufficiently discry a farre off of what mettle we are made, and wherein the treasure of our hart consisteth’.³⁹ In the most fallen world of the *Henry VI* plays, audiences might be repeatedly given to speculate how a political system of monarchical sovereignty (founded scripturally on evidence of decaying faith and human sinfulness amongst God’s chosen people) could not return to its flawed origins. These plays chronicle the plight of a realm imploding as human existence reverts to an orgy of blood-letting. Indeed, as Gregory M. Colon Semenza persuasively argues, ‘Burgundy’s warning that war will become indistinguishable from sport – through a process of emasculation – is merely the most explicit statement of a general concern that runs throughout the entire trilogy. In early modern England it was assumed that sport would turn, or be turned, into war.’⁴⁰

As these plays unfold, solemn exhortations to remember and desperate bids for political ascendancy are articulated repeatedly in terms of a blood-lust – the grossest expression of the drive for social mobility in times of political flux. In the closing scenes of *1 Henry VI*, York threatens to ‘plague’ the French with ‘incessant wars’ if they do not submit to the demands of the English Crown (*VF*: V.iv.154). When we are asked to recall the fields of confused slaughter against what Exeter terms ‘the subtle-witted French’ (*VF*: I.i.25), or those at a more familiar proximity for the London audiences, such as Towton, St. Albans or Tewkesbury, it comes as little surprise that these military crises are being communicated synecdochically onstage as key phases in the dissolution of a failing state. Moreover, at a time when English imperial achievements on the continent are being swiftly consigned to the fastness of memory, Gloucester intones at the heart of the nation’s supposed centre of power, the court, ‘Is Paris lost? Is Rouen yielded up?’ (*VF*: I.i.65). As this study indicates, the armed conflicts conjured up in early modern drama repeatedly offer anatomies of the racially and geographically polarised (as well as psychically transformative) discourses of war circulating more widely at the time. Yet, if in *1 Henry VI*, Warwick prophesies that the ‘brawl . . . / . . . in the Temple-garden’ between Yorkists and Lancastrians ‘Shall send, between the red rose and the white, / A thousand souls to death and deadly night’ (*VF*: II.iv.124–7), the history plays, more generally, often remain remarkably (and, for some critics, perplexingly) even-handed in their identification of cultural alterity.

In his *lives of the III. Norman Kings of England William the first. William the second. Henrie the first* (1613) Sir John Hayward protested, ‘what heart should the Souldiers fight, when they haue not his presence for whom they fight? . . . The presence of the Prince is worth many thousands of ordinarie Souldiers: The ordinary Souldier wil vndertake both labour and danger for no other respects so much, as by the presence of the Prince.’⁴¹ However, in the *Henry VI* plays, the erring king is repeatedly expelled from the proliferating fields of combat and abandoned as a paltry witness to the successive misfortunes of his realm. From this perspective, Henry VI’s feverish observation of the battle of Towton (‘Now sways it this way, like a mighty sea/ . . . Now sways it that way, like the selfsame sea/ Forced to retire by fury of the wind’ (*VF*: II.v.5, 7–8)) intimates a telling instance of our own diminishing abilities to ascribe moral probity or justness of cause to either warring party in this *terra nulla* of anarchic England.

More generally, Shakespeare’s age, like our own, was thoroughly conversant with the regime of ‘incessant wars’, and deeply exercised by the triage of multiple conflicts which might warrant the nation’s attention.

As was witnessed in the previous chapter, Raleigh warned in 1593 that ‘Ther be also others in Irland that lye in waite not suspected, which I most feare . . . Wee ar so busyed and dandled in thes French warrs, which ar endless, as wee forgett the defens next the hart.’⁴² The staging of endlessly duplicating cycles of armed hostilities in *Henry VI* not only urges onlookers to remember what the nation has been, but also how that past bleeds through into the present human continuum of unremitting carnage.⁴³ The evocation throughout *Henry VI* Parts 1, 2 and 3 of political diminution and deterritorialisation inevitably leads to the erosion of the expectations and practices of lordship, service and protection, so central to the feudal functioning of the medievalised polity: ‘Guyenne, Compiègne, Rheims, Orléans,/Paris, Gisors, Poitiers, are all quite lost’ (*VF*: I.i.60–1). In receipt of such constantly updated communications, the English peers are left to contemplate their own incompleteness with a highly charged politicised language of vacating spaces. York laments ‘Anjou and Maine are given to the French,/ . . . ’Tis thine they give away and not their own’ (*VF*: I.i.211, 218). Warwick finally perishes with his thoughts wholly devoted to his own dislocation: ‘My parks, my walks, my manors that I had./Even now forsake me, and of all my lands/Is nothing left me but my body’s length’ (*VF*: V.ii.24–6). At such moments, late Elizabethan audiences might all too easily recall the collective experiences of anxiety and paranoia of a realm which had faced the threat of one Armada and had good reason to suspect that others were in preparation. One John Bonde informed the authorities in London in June 1588 that ‘The best gentlemen in Spain cast lots who shall have England.’⁴⁴

Negotiating Violence and Difference

The brutal factionalisation of the commonweal in the *Henry VI* plays can, as we have seen, be expressed in terms of slippery fealties, changeful topographies and unharnessed violence on and off the field of conflict. Nonetheless, in contrast to the dramatic narratives of the second tetralogy, these earlier plays offer sustained analyses also of the adversarial politics surrounding gendered engagement in the *res publica*. In 1 *Henry VI*, Suffolk declares in summary fashion of Margaret, ‘She’s beautiful, and therefore to be woo’d;/She is a woman, therefore to be won’ (*VF*: V.iii.79–80). Away from the misrule of the battlefield in 2 *Henry VI*, Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester, acknowledges the normative gender codes operating within her society, remarking bitterly, ‘Follow I must; I cannot go before’ (*VF*: I.ii.61).

Early modern print culture offered ample evidence of the gender-marked expectations which conventionally informed any discussion of military combat in this period. In *De Iure Belli*, Gentili stressed that ‘women, because they cannot handle arms, are treated like the clergy and excluded from feudal relations’⁴⁵ – but those who could ‘handle arms’ inevitably became a source of enduring fascination. Raleigh confessed in the *Discoverie* that he arrived (like his Iberian predecessors) in the New World seeking to reproduce Old World knowledge and to query its myths: he was ‘very desirous to vnderstand the trueth of those warlike [Amazons], because of some it is beleued, of others not’.⁴⁶ Shakespeare’s Talbot is bewildered by the cultural inversions in this new military world where ‘A woman clad in armour chaseth men’ (*VI*: I.v.3). Moreover, the Pucelle remains adamant that she will ‘ne’er fly from a man’ in the heat of battle and the Dauphin hails this ‘Amazon . . . [who fights] with the sword of Deborah’ (*VI*: I.ii.103–5). Encounters with what was perceived as culturally deviant excited fierce speculation both on- and offstage in the early modern period, and this fascination is exploited in a systematic manner as the *Henry VI* plays unfold. Indeed, at points, Bedford is left to function onstage as a choric voice, articulating for audiences near and far the perplexing aporia surrounding the *Venus armata* – ‘A maid! and be so martial!’ (*VI*: II.i.21).

A Yorkist chronicle, published in 1485, but with prefatory material dating from the final months of the reign of Edward IV, perhaps unsurprisingly promoted Henry VI’s alliance with Margaret of Anjou as ‘a dere mariage for the realme of england’. The latter had relinquished Anjou and Maine as ‘the keye of Normandie for the frenshmen to entre’:

Lo what a mariage was this . . . [for] brekyng of this promisse [to the Duke of Armagnac] and for mariage of quene margaret what losse hath the realme of england had by losing of normandie and guyan by diuision in the realme . . . the rebelyng of comunes ayenst ther prince & lordis, what diuision among the lordis, what murdre & sleynge of them.⁴⁷

If the Lancastrian cause was to enjoy renewed impetus with the arrival of Henry Tudor at, what Shakespeare terms in *Cymbeline*, ‘blessèd Milford’ (III.ii.59) in 1485, the political legacy of the Lancastrian queen does not appear to have enjoyed any significant rehabilitation at the hands of the Tudor chroniclers. In the *last part of the Mirour for Magistrates* (1578), Edmund, Duke of Somerset, stands accused all too convincingly of conspiring upon the life of the regent, Henry VI’s uncle, Gloucester, but he himself indicts, ‘dame Margaret the Queene,/By whose malice this mischife first began,/Did she (trow yee) her selfe not ouerwene/Death to

procure to that most worthy man?⁴⁸ A few years later, John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1583) bewailed 'the vnprofitable and vnhonourable mariage betweene the kyng & Lady Margaret daughter of y^c Duke of Angeow'. Here, Margaret was extravagantly demonised as a

sore enemy and mortall plague . . . Who being of haute stomach, and all set vpon glory of wit and wilynes lacking nothing, and perceiuing her husband to be simple of wit, and easy to be ruled, tooke vpon her to rule and gouerne both the king & kingdome . . . this manly woman and couragious Queene ceased not by all imaginations and practises possible, to set forwarde [Gloucester's] destruction.⁴⁹

Nina S. Levine's critical study *Women's Matters* (1998) analyses such early modern gender expectations with particular reference to these early 1590s history plays, stressing 'that representations of women in power – whether in the plays themselves, in their chronicle sources, or within Elizabethan society – are shaped not by cultural myths of gender alone but by the intersection of these myths with specific political situations'.⁵⁰ However, Levine's subsequent contention that 'In writing women onto history's stage, Shakespeare's plays invited a scepticism about representations of power, both past and present' engages strategically with the broader exposition in the *Henry VI* plays of the very provisional nature of any attempt at conflict resolution.⁵¹

Both at home and abroad in *I Henry VI*, audiences (on- and offstage) are repeatedly invited to encounter the alien, the potent force of cultural alterity, in the shape of the symbolic challenges posed to English nationhood by foreign, female agency: the Pucelle of Orleans, the Countess of Auvergne, and England's newly adopted French queen, Margaret of Anjou. Nonetheless, unlike the Pucelle, Margaret maintains her own role of *Venus armata* for the length of Henry's reign and demonstrates that she can thrive when her adopted land begins to test the further limits of its appetite for butchery. Margaret is as profoundly stimulated as any of the male adult members of the political elite by the spectacle of savagery and acknowledges that arresting acts of violence may indeed serve to confirm group allegiances. In *De Ira* Seneca reasoned that his understanding of this most unmasterable humour differed little from that of Aristotle, 'iram esse cupiditatem doloris reponendi'.^a Yet the Roman philosopher was also at pains to caution his reader that 'Among the various ills to which humanity is prone there is this besides – the darkness that fills the mind, and not so much the necessity of going astray, as the love of straying.'^{52b} The *Henry VI*

^a 'for he says that anger is the desire to repay suffering'. ^b 'sed errorum amor'.

plays address most specifically this pleasure principle, and Margaret continues to stage-manage her entries into this ruthless world of armed combat (from which the distaff sex is more generally barred in the later, second tetralogy) with carefully rehearsed performances. These performances are clearly executed to tempt the palates of audiences (on- and offstage) and we are left querying our own complicity in these compelling narratives of horror – complicity in what the philosopher R. G. Collingwood later termed a particularly tempting strain of ‘malice’:

the desire that others, especially those better than ourselves, should suffer, is a perpetual source of pleasure to man . . . In Shakespeare and his contemporaries, bullying in its most violent form is so common that we can only suppose the average playgoer to have conceived it as the salt of life.⁵³

In a dramatic world where the profession of killing appears to be the only means by which political players may distinguish themselves, Henry’s queen unsurprisingly refuses to confine blood sports to the battlefield. She reserves the exquisite pleasures of Senecan torment for more intimate encounters with her abject victims:

. . . where is your darling, Rutland?
 Look, York: I stained this napkin with the blood
 That valiant Clifford with his rapier’s point
 Made issue from the bosom of the boy:
 And if thine eyes can water for his death
 I give thee this to dry thy cheeks withal. (VP: I.iv.78–83)

Baited by his captors, York insists that even ‘the hungry cannibals/Would not have touch’d’ his boy Rutland (VP: I.iv.152–3). Yet he has strategically forgotten that Margaret, like himself, exploits the spectacular power of violence to command attention when she finds herself unable to wield political *auctoritas*. In these dramatic worlds, the persecutor determines to deny victims any form of agency, insisting that they warrant no further response from the surrounding society than the discipline of brutality. Thus, in the context of early modern terrorism, Robert Appelbaum has underlined that ‘violence operates not only by destroying or harming, but also by communicating’.⁵⁴ Equally solemnly, the jurist Alberico Gentili concluded for his own sixteenth-century readers that

an expedient cause for making war will be the right of taking vengeance for a wrong which one has suffered. . . . Now this is a just cause, since our own rights have been interfered with, which we ought not to allow to be infringed. Every one is justified in maintaining his rights. There is

a natural impulse which prompts self-protection and the right to avenge oneself.⁵⁵

As Gail Kern Paster has demonstrated, men's bodies opened and wounded were frequently gender-marked as feminine in the early modern period.⁵⁶ In direct comparison with the actions of many of her male counterparts in these plays, Margaret's interventions, here as York's tormentor, are not designed to produce legitimacy or truth. Her words are the verbal counterpart of Clifford's rapier, an instrument of pain, a closing down of York's subjectivity to that of superlative victim, robbed of human status. In her endeavour to divest her prey of any autonomy, she constructs him as culturally illegible in the power games of her caste – and, thus, as violable. Earlier, the bereaved York had argued that women should be 'soft, mild, pitiful and flexible' (*VP*: I.iv.41), and in this way sought to contain his adversary within language, to reduce her to a controllable stereotype. Nevertheless, the inadequacy of these stratagems soon becomes evident. The beleaguered Duke has failed to recognise that the hitherto inviolable laws of cultural difference have collapsed in the radical disordering of the nation, and that those seeking the very highest social advancement have an irrepressible need to spawn impotent subordinates, to coerce others into being eligible victims. Gentili contended in *De Iure Belli* that 'we are treating the laws of men, and we here follow the ways of men', but vexingly begged the question 'If a woman fights, why should she not allow war to be made upon her?'⁵⁷ One of the final acts of revenge of the Yorkists in 3 *Henry VI* is to visit epistemic violence upon Margaret of Anjou, to consign her to the past, to stunted forms of political intervention, indeed to the silent limits of language itself. Richard of Gloucester queries, 'Why should she live, to fill the world with words?' (*VP*: V.v.44).

Maurice Charney argued persuasively that 'Violent scenes in Elizabethan drama have a shock effect that forces us to draw immediate conclusions. Murders on stage, for example, are often used to shift our sympathies toward the victim, even if he [sic] has consistently alienated our sympathies during the play.'⁵⁸ Yet, in the *Henry VI* plays, audiences may be swiftly drawn to question the very efficacy of human sympathy itself as a viable response to trauma in a world given over to the gruesome festivities of a moral holiday. With a tenacious investment in normative gender codes, the grieving York unleashes an arresting *vituperatio* directed at the murderous queen, 'How couldst thou drain the life-blood of the child [?]' (*VP*: I.iv.138) – a *vituperatio* suggestive, perhaps, of the fact that even if the dramatic world has exhausted its capacity for *pathos*, this may not be the

case beyond the stage. The father has been publicly unmanned by Margaret's ambition to sound the uttermost depths of his anguish, to annul his future, to stage his own particular Day of Judgement while still in the company of mortals. In these endeavours of the Lancastrians to secure a monopoly of violence, the Yorkists are compelled to reassume their status as irrational political subjects, as amateurs in slaughter, as indulging in specifically private grievances. For the entertainment of the general company, the Queen is now bent on affirming that York has been conclusively (and creatively) eclipsed in his own chosen vocation of killing. As Garrard affirmed in *The arte of warre*, 'Experience of late daies hath taught vs, that those Nations which follow the warres, inuent euerie way how they may endamage the enemie in all their enterprises.'⁵⁹

Earlier, in *The Discourses*, Machiavelli had repeatedly invited his reader to meditate the instrumentality of violence, arguing that although

many peradventure will think this a matter of evil example, that the ordainer of a civil Government, as was *Romulus*, should first have taken his brother's life from him . . . It holds well together, though the act accuse him, that the effect excuse him; and when that is good, as it prov'd to *Romulus*, it will alwaies excuse him; for he that uses violence to waste, is blameable, not he that uses it for redress and order.⁶⁰

Even more grimly in the *Henry VI* plays, the promise of redress and order ever exceeds the grasp. Thus, audiences may be less inclined to award any performance of violence a degree of legitimacy when neither party has earned ethical priority on stage. Both factions are passionately devoted to brutal, partisan courses. If Margaret's zealous attempts to whet the Duke's suffering clearly move some of her fellow combatants (Northumberland – 'hardly can I check my eyes from tears', *VP*: I.iv.151), it seems that these peers were not alone amongst Elizabethan audiences. Famously, such was the arresting stature of Shakespeare's Margaret and the verbal pyrotechnics of his verse in the early 1590s that Robert Greene was able to parody York's outburst against his tormentor ('O tiger's heart wrapt in a woman's hide!', *VI*³: I.iv.137) in his own invective against the 'upstart' dramatist 'with *his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*'.⁶¹

As the *Henry VI* plays succeed one after the other, the war-seasoned, like Margaret of Anjou, York and Warwick, seek out conclusive statements of violence on and off the battlefield to communicate in metaphoric terms the unassailable nature of their grip on power. In the event, it soon becomes evident that their acts are partial, metonymic in nature, denoting episodic supplements in an unending narrative of retaliatory politics. In the brutish

world of Shakespeare's Histories, Margaret can secure no more lasting advantage than any of the other players and her political fortunes are irrevocably crippled when her own son, Edward, endures the same fate as York's child, Rutland. The duke's sons stab Prince Edward to death, and so ensure that Margaret does not bring her career at court to a close without being held in subjection by this grisly entertainment.

War and its Mythologies in *Henry VI*

In the final years of the sixteenth century, Henri IV's envoy to Elizabeth's court, André Hurault de Maisse, duly noted in his more general observations of the English court that the queen

scait toutes les histoires anciennes et ne luy peut on rien dire qu'elle n'en dise quelque mot à propos. Elle me dit que l'on disoit qu'elle n'avoit jamais rien sceu que les livres de Calvin, elle me jura n'en avoir veu aucun, mais qu'elle avoit veu les Pères anciens et y avoit pris grand plaisir d'autant que ces derniers sont pleins de disputes de contentions et les autres n'ont que bonne intention de servir à Dieu et de proffiter.^{62a}

Whatever the depth of knowledge that Elizabeth had gained of the Church Fathers, it was clear that they were continuing to hold a significant influence over many of the leading intellectuals amongst her subjects, such as Donne, Foxe, Hooker and Raleigh. In the *Confessions*, Augustine famously promoted memory as a key axis along which to plot the formation of subjectivity, declaring, 'It is I who remember, I who am mind . . . Indeed the power of memory is something I do not understand when without it I cannot speak about myself.'⁶³ Nonetheless, if the English court at the beginning of *1 Henry VI* is notable for its excessive investment in recalling the past to restore a fragile, if diminishing link with an age of human greatness (read, military triumph), audiences quickly become aware that this realm's irrepressible appetite to remember is accompanied by a corresponding loss in cultural momentum. The inability on the part of the English peers to forget, or innovate, can render them hostages to

^a 'She knows all the ancient histories, and one can say nothing to her on which she will not make some apt comment. She told me that it was reported that she had never read anything but the works of Calvin. She swore to me that she had never seen one, but that she had seen the ancient Fathers, and had taken great pleasure in them; all the more because later writers are full of disputes and strivings, and the others have only the good intent of rendering service and profit to God.' See De Maisse, *A Journal of All that was accomplished by Monsieur de Maisse, Ambassador in England from King Henri IV to Queen Elizabeth Anno Domini 1597*, ed. G. B. Harrison and R. A. Jones (London: Nonesuch Press, 1931), p. 59.

outdated information and wholly limited by the contingencies of prior experience. In such a context, we may be reminded, as Jacques Le Goff has argued, that ‘Trop privilégier la mémoire c’est s’immerger dans le flot indomptable du temps.’^{64a} Indeed, Michel de Montaigne revisited this debate inherited from antiquity on numerous occasions in his *Essais*, and provocatively submitted in ‘Des menteurs’ that ‘il se veoid par expérience . . . que les memoires excellentes se joignent volontiers aux jugements debiles’.^{65b}

As we have witnessed, recollections of King Harry’s sovereignty dominate the beginning of *1 Henry VI*, but they are soon forced to compete for their place against earlier medieval precedents of the exercise of power. At Rouen, Talbot’s thoughts are monopolised by the memory that ‘in this late-betrayed town/Great Coeur-de-lion’s heart was buried’ (*VF*: III.ii.82–3), whereas in *3 Henry VI*, Oxford is prompted to remind his auditors of ‘great John of Gaunt,/Which did subdue the greatest part of Spain’ (*VF*: III.iii.80–1). In Shakespeare’s recoveries of a fifteenth-century England, the warlords may mourn the hero of Agincourt, yet they never fail to proffer their own accounts of a profoundly tractable medieval past. Moreover, in a further recessive plane in this intertextual *mise-en-abîme*, we are urged to invest in ever more distant mythologies of belonging. Warwick may become a Ulysses or a Hector (*VF*: IV.ii.19, IV.viii.25), and Talbot, an ‘Alcides’, in the company of his son becomes Daedalus supported by his Icarus (*VF*: IV.vii.60, IV.vi.54–5). Fleeing the Lancastrian cause, Clarence declares that ‘To keep that oath were more impiety/Than Jephthah’s, when he sacrificed his daughter’, while Richard of Gloucester acknowledges his role as Judas at the heart of Edward IV’s court (*VF*: V.i.93–4, V.vii.33). The very *varietas* of this collective, feverish exploitation of proliferating antiquities unmasks the pervasive cultural quest to secure inviolable political authority by rehearsing its hallowed origins from the earliest records.

Confronted with the triumphing English armies in *1 Henry VI*, Alençon acknowledges that ‘Froissart, a countryman of ours, records,/England all Olivers and Rowlands bred’, but now they appear on the battlefields as ‘none but Samsons and Goliases’ (*VF*: I.ii.20–30, 33). Elsewhere, the hounded players in the *mêlée* of England’s politics take refuge in

^a ‘To privilege memory excessively is to sink into the unconquerable flow of time.’ See Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. xii.

^b ‘it is commonly seene by experience, that excellent memories do rather accompanie weake judgements’. See ‘Of Lyers’, in Michel de Montaigne, *Essayes or Morall, Politike and Militarie Discourses* (London: Melchior Bradwood for Edward Blount and William Barret, 1613), p. 15.

mythologies of heroic origins. In the company of Richard Plantagenet, the dying Mortimer confesses himself 'Nestor-like', held captive by a past of political failure (*VF*: II.v.6). York casts himself as 'Ajax Telamonius' (*VF*: V.i.26), and Suffolk emerges for his enemies as 'ambitious Sulla' (*VF*: III.ii.117, IV.i.84). Margaret heroises herself as Dido (*VF*: III.ii.117), and if the Pucelle's gifts of prophecy, we are told, excel those of 'the nine sibyls of old Rome', she reputedly drives back the English troops 'like Hannibal' (*VF*: I.ii.56, I.v.21) – yet for York this 'ugly wench' appears more like Circe (*VF*: V.iii.34–5). Henry bids farewell to Warwick, celebrating 'my Hector, and my Troy's true hope' (*VF*: IV.viii.25), and styles himself as Daedalus at the end of the play imprisoned by a Minos-like Richard of Gloucester (*VF*: V.vi.21–2).

Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin argue that 'although the early plays tend to demonise female characters, they also record women's power as orators, as warriors, as custodians of dynastic legitimacy. Institutions often depend on the very elements they feel compelled to dismiss or derogate, such as women's labour.'⁶⁶ Like the Pucelle and Margaret of Anjou, the Countess of Auvergne seeks to enter the one significant field of cultural intervention for her nation: that of Mars. In this instance, she aims to capture the celebrated warrior Talbot by spectacularly violating her own sacred act of hospitality. In the attempted execution of this daring act, the Countess proclaims she 'shall as famous be by this exploit/As Scythian Tomyris by Cyrus' death' (*VF*: II.iii.5–6). The constant iteration of all these competing narratives of antique heroism bequeathed from the past not only demonstrates the multifarious exempla which this dramatic community may deploy in the assertion of its many and various political ambitions, but how remote these heroic agents now appear in the midst of the grubby realities of an ailing state. The extravagant and yet endlessly fracturing allusiveness of the *Henry VI* plays is in many ways symptomatic of the anxiety-ridden investment its subjects have in the past, but also of the desperate urgency with which they seek out some form of political justification for their sordid acts of slaughter and betrayal.

More generally, the most unheroic dramatic worlds of the *Henry VI* plays are obsessively interested in analysing how their communities of persecutors seek to stage-manage the deaths of others. If the dramatic emphasis frequently falls upon how warlords, such as Suffolk, Clifford, York and Warwick, are robbed of any semblance of *dignitas* at their own destruction, Henry VI is singular onstage in his potent desire, repeatedly articulated, to become a fugitive from a hostile reality – a reality which acknowledges both his exceptional office and his exceptional unworthiness

to occupy that office. The distinctly materially minded York spurns Henry's commitment to piety as symptomatic of a flawed exercise of power, having earlier condemned his centripetal sovereignty in more profane terms as a 'bookish rule [which] hath pull'd fair England down' (*VF*²: I.i.256). Leggatt argues persuasively that 'the first half of *1 Henry VI*, like the Roman plays, is set in a kingless world'.⁶⁷ However, this state of affairs is never remedied. In fact, it is only further aggravated as the plays succeed one another. In the political vacuum generated by the waning authority of this 'easy-melting king' (*VF*³: II.i.171), each of the warring parties comes to express its ambitions through a discourse of *substitution*. In a world unable to nourish lasting hopes of political settlement, there is perhaps inevitably little attention reserved for a commitment to spiritual transcendence. Instead, desire is excited in its inhabitants by the rather more earth-bound, rhetorical possibilities of *ethopoeia* – the redemptive ideal of assuming (or, rather, of violently appropriating) the identity of another extends even to figures beyond the pale of the stage: Talbot declares of Falstolf that he 'Doth but usurp the sacred name of knight' (*VF*¹: IV.i.40). Thus, if in *2 Henry VI* the reluctant monarch confesses 'I do long and wish to be a subject', his desires for transformation are widely confirmed by the unruly band of political players who surround him: 'Were I a man, a duke, and next of blood,/I would remove these tedious stumbling-blocks' protests Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester (*VF*¹: IV.ix.6, I.ii.63–4). Subsequently, the cornered Suffolk rails, 'O that I were a god, to shoot forth thunder/Upon these paltry, servile, abject drudges!' (*VF*¹: IV.i.104–5). Such extravagant performances of self-drama are facilitated in the plundered realm of a king who eagerly seeks to have himself impersonated by others: 'My lords, what to your wisdoms seemeth best,/Do or undo, as if ourself were here' (*VF*¹: III.i.195–6). Indeed, his own followers advise him to 'depart the field:/The queen hath best success when you are absent' (*VF*¹: II.ii.73–4). By *3 Henry VI*, 'the easy-melting king like wax' is characterised all too plausibly by his detractors as one who 'silly stole away and left his men' (*VF*¹: I.i.3).

After the fainthearted Henry has stripped his own son of his birthright in their favour, Warwick and Clarence unite (albeit provisionally) in defence of the Lancastrian cause and rejoice in their new-found roles as 'Protectors' of the realm. Prefiguring the dramatic crisis occurring in the later *King Lear*, Warwick resolves with Clarence to

. . . yoke together, like a double shadow
To Henry's body, and supply his place –

I mean in bearing weight of government,
While he enjoys the honour and his ease (VF: IV.vi.49–52)

In both of these plays from very different phases of Shakespeare's career, we are asked to ponder the efflorescence of violence in a realm where a king seeks a 'kind nursery' away from the duties of governance and leadership – 'while we/Unburdened crawl toward death' (*King Lear* I.i.122, 38–9). Moreover, in direct comparison with other Shakespearean creations such as *Richard II* and *Hamlet*, *Henry VI* may be seen to warrant our attention most of all for the manner in which he remains acutely receptive to his own supersession. Thus, in many ways, his greatest dramatic achievement becomes the forensic interrogation of his own political displacement and of his impermanent status in the affections of others: 'I know not what to say, my title's weak' (VF: I.i.134).

The Sons and Daughters of Mars

At the dawn of the modern period, Marx evoked the cumulative pressure of historical precedent in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) as 'The tradition of all the dead generations weighing like a nightmare upon the brain of the living.'⁶⁸ This sense of the foundational weight of the past pressing down upon those who survive is remorselessly figured forth in the *Henry VI* plays. In direct comparison with *Old Hamlet*, King Harry's principal legacy to surviving generations is that the efficient art of governance is inextricably linked to the profession of violence and that the proliferation of conflict zones abroad may be usefully sought out to exhaust the blood-lust of companies at home.⁶⁹ While, in the theatre, audiences are transported back to the deadly contests of the Wars of the Roses, those onstage find themselves compulsively resurrecting the knowledge of earlier medieval divisions to understand the trajectory of their own lives. The English peers constantly urge audiences to look beyond the living memory of Henry V to stress their own superior bloodlines and claims to cultural priority. Somerset, for example, is hastily reminded by Warwick that Plantagenet's 'grandfather was Lionel Duke of Clarence,/Third son to the third Edward King of England' (VF: II.iv.83–4). Serving a similar cause (read, the legitimization of future violence), Mortimer reminds auditors on- and offstage that 'Henry the Fourth, grandfather to this king,/Deposed his nephew Richard, Edward's son,/The first-begotten and the lawful heir' (VF: II.v.63). In short, the English camp is deeply exercised by the attempts of its own warring elites to lay claim to the future of the nation

through editorial violence enacted on the past. Warlords, like York, Somerset, Clifford and Warwick, remain eager to attend to the exemplars lifted from clan memory and to police rigorously any attempts by rival factions to appropriate national histories for present emergencies.

If Shakespearean history returns attention again and again to the stress-ridden politics of a kingdom wracked by remorseless violence (both epistemic and material), it concentrates equally vigorously upon the exchanges of meaning which may be enacted across wonted principles of cultural difference. Initially, it may seem that the habitual codes of social priority and power transferral are radically scrambled in *1 Henry VI*. Sir William Lucy disdains the terms advanced by the enemy commander: 'Submission, Dauphin! 'tis a mere French word;/We English warriors wot not what it means' (*VI*: IV.vii.54–5). The desperation of Lucy's embassy to maintain linguistic distinction feeds into a much larger, feverish dramatic debate concerning what English political subjectivity might be: 'my lords, remember where we are', cautions the Lancastrian monarch: 'In France, amongst a fickle wavering nation' (*VI*: IV.i.138–9). Such experiences of hostility and estrangement were certainly uppermost in the mind of Robert, Lord Rich, when he wrote to the Earl of Essex from Rouen in 1596 during the English campaign to assist Henri IV in the French Wars of Religion:

We are here come into a pestilent country both for soul and body, and full of excellent words and accomplements of courtsey which, together with chopt and larded meat, we are fed withal, reported to be of the King's charge, but the burghers of the town wish all our throats cut and gone, because they fear it must fall to their share to pay for it: and we that are but bad travellers can be content to hasten our retreat as soon as the King's patience will us.⁷⁰

Yet, in the dramatic worlds of *Henry VI*, as we travel through foreign lands and uncharted political crises, the conditions of human existence remain eerily comparable.

The bitter reality occasioned by Henry V's death, that of England's collapsed *imperium* abroad and political insufficiency at home, can only be masked provisionally with fugitive memories of heroic authority – memories such as those revived on the battlefield by Talbot. His very name ('*"A Talbot! a Talbot!" They fly*', *VI*: II.i.78) appears to have a talismanic, apotropaic quality which seeks to keep destruction at bay for the nation. The iteration of the warrior's name not only transforms the signified, but also the signifier, and each political faction competes for a stake in his warrior mythology. Such is the lavish cultural capital associated with Talbot that it may even be

renewed, nay ventriloquised, on the lips of a common soldier: 'The cry of "Talbot" serves me for a sword' (*VF*: II.i.79). However, as one cycle of the nation's tribulations succeeds the next, the moral or political distinctions that the characters wish to affirm evaporate in this vision of universal carnage. The profoundly changeful environment inhabited by 'Pucelle or puzzel, dolphin or dogfish' (*VF*: I.iv.105) is rendered all the more unmasterable in the misrule of battle when the invading forces meet with 'A woman clad in armour [who] chaseth men' – a woman who has herself already claimed 'I exceed my sex' (*VF*: I.v.3, I.ii.89).

Crucial to narratives of cultural indiscipline (then and now) is the frightening inability to locate or predict violence – most especially at a time when the relatively formalised arena of the battlefield was (and is) no longer monopolising the wider theatre of conflict. This question of the defendability, or porosity, of any community haunts the first tetralogy as much as it characterises the condition of late modernity. At the opening of *1 Henry VI*, a play which Maurice Morgann dismissed in the eighteenth century as 'that Drum-and-trumpet thing',⁷¹ the ultimately hopeless endeavour to establish some fixity of purpose (and allegiance) at the heart of the English court swiftly buckles as the besiegers are besieged at Orleans, and back across the Channel we move from the vicissitudes of *imperium* to those of most ungoverned *urbs*. Thus, at a moment of acute political crisis for the English nation across the Channel, at the Tower of London the armed companies of Winchester and Gloucester are discovered in violent disorders. Gloucester's retainers thunder, 'Open the gates unto the Lord Protector,/Or we'll burst them open if that you come not quickly' (*VF*: I.iii.27–8). At such points, we are urged to question the status and function of these privileged sites of supposed cultural opposition (sieges at Orleans or the city of London) – to question the precise *locus* of the adversarial threat, the very identity of a barbaric Other and, for that matter, the validity of any form of violent intervention.

On Shakespeare's many and various stages, at the Tower of London, in the *mise-en-abîme* of the besiegers besieged at Orleans, beneath the walls of Ang[i]ers in *King John*, or in the initial blood-letting at Corioli in the company of Caius Martius, the hitherto reassuring oppositionality between native/foreign, allegiance/ambition, Self/Other becomes vexed, perplexingly imbricated. We are compelled to engage in interpretative strategies of analogy, rather than difference. In being asked to recall erstwhile enemies in the shape of French forces in *1 Henry VI*, *King John* or *Henry V*, London playhouse audiences were not plunged into the

oppositional politics of war with its familiar discourses of cultural belatedness and demonic agency. Instead, in the frenzied exchanges of invective, the various strains of enmity are evenly weighted and only serve to indicate that in this dramatic world we are navigating a complex cultural environment subject to terms of troubling similitude. The Bastard of Orleans thinks Talbot 'a fiend of hell', whereas Talbot himself dismisses the Pucelle as 'that railing Hecate' (*VI*: II.i.46, III.ii.66).

When, in 2 *Henry VI*, York intones for audiences on- and offstage the meandering genealogies of the royal line of kings with a litany of Edwards, Richards and Henrys (*VI*: II.ii.), or when in 1 *Henry IV* the battlefield of Shrewsbury spawns seemingly endless versions of the usurper Bolingbroke/Henry IV with which to bewilder enemy forces, audiences are alerted forcefully to the very aleatory nature, the sobering reversibility with which the narrative of history may be configured: 'Another king! They grow like Hydra's heads', protests Douglas in 1 *Henry IV* (*IV*: V.iv.24). After the slaughter of Clifford in 3 *Henry VI*, Warwick instructs Richard of Gloucester 'From off the gates of York fetch down the head,/Your father's head, which Clifford placed there;/Instead whereof let this supply the room' (*VI*: II.vi.52–4). Indeed, similarly trapped within duplicating conditions of existence, Shakespeare's Richard rails at the close of his own reign: 'I think there be six Richmonds in the field:/Five have I slain today instead of him' (*Richard III*: V.iv.11–12).

In the English camp, the loss of Henry V is followed by the brutal sacrifice of Talbot, whose ideals of service no longer bear relevance or meaning in a world where the resources of government (indeed, self-government) have been squandered. In the French camp, the Bastard of Orleans seeks to remedy the 'cheer appalled' of his dispirited confederates by producing a rival form of legitimacy, one worthy of devotion: 'A holy maid' who 'by a vision sent to her from heaven,/Ordained is to raise this tedious siege/And drive the English forth the bounds of France' (*VI*: I.ii.51–4). As we have seen, this desperate (and, clearly, universal) search for a military saviour excites the meditations and imaginative life of the combatants much more powerfully than any profession of religious faith or commitment to the ever-dwindling territory of the realm. Excited by the spirit of victory which appears to attend on the Pucelle, Charles exclaims, 'Was Mahomet inspirèd with a dove?/Thou with an eagle art inspirèd then' (I.ii.140–1). However, such references prepare Elizabethan audiences for the seemingly irrevocable alien-ness, the perceivedly unnatural presence of this woman who will ultimately be discovered communing with fiends. France is limned in terms of a growing integrity as it builds allegiances with

such diverse, fickle figures as the Pucelle, the Countess of Auvergne and, eventually, Burgundy. However, the island kingdom, abandoned to a youth, is characterised by a beleaguered hero such as Talbot or, conversely, corrosive forces of self-interest expressed by its warlords. Thus, the dramatic world tilts back and forth precariously in cycles of violence: Dauphin – ‘Late did [Mars] shine upon the English side;/Now we are victors; upon us he smiles’ (*VI*: I.ii.3–4).

In their vigorous evocation of conflicted nation-building, the *Henry VI* plays constantly remind us that the early modern battlefield remained an arena in which religious professions, territorial acquisitiveness, trading ambitions as well as the defence (and the coveting) of regal power might be regularly set in play. For Elizabeth’s own Accession Day festivities of 1595 an oracle was erected and, amongst the verses with which it was inscribed, the onlooker was informed: ‘No nation breeds a warmer bloud for warre.’ However, directly after, s/he was promptly reassured, ‘And yet She calmes them with her Majesty.’⁷² The presence of the spirit of Mars amongst England’s political elite warranted, it seems, regular comment. Thomas Churchyard looked forward to Essex’s arrival in Ireland, ‘When MARS shal march, with shining sword in hand.’⁷³ However, such guardian spirits of war might be fickle, as Essex learned in 1599, and as Shakespeare’s Antony discovers when the ‘music i’th’air’, or the passing of ‘the god Hercules’, signals the waning of his authority in the Eastern empire (*Antony and Cleopatra*: IV.iii.10, 14).

In *1 Henry VI* the Dauphin proclaims by way of tribute to the victorious Pucelle, ‘A statelier pyramid to her I’ll rear/Than Rhodope’s or Memphis’ ever was’ (*VI*: I.vi.21–2). Equally anxiously, Walter Benjamin contended four centuries later that ‘every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably’.⁷⁴ As this discussion has sought to indicate, the *Henry VI* plays recreate, rather than recount, a highly selective account of the nation’s narrative in order to engage specifically with representations of cultural experience which had currency with late-sixteenth-century audiences. If M. M. Reese insisted that the *Henry VI* plays were ‘essentially didactic’, offering ‘a straightforward moralising of the Tudor pattern of history, with only an occasional glimpse of real people and recognisable human predicaments’, Robert Ornstein reprised the discussion, insisting more persuasively that the plays’ ‘concern with the flesh and blood reality of politics and history is contrary to the conceptualistic and allegorical impulse of the Moralities’.⁷⁵ On further examination, it may prove that more urgent cultural pressures are shaping these dramatic narratives for

a nation which Sidney allegedly believed was 'apt . . . to corrupt with peace'.⁷⁶

The longevity of Talbot, his son and Margaret of Anjou on Shakespeare's stage far exceeds that of their historical lives. Talbot never met the Countess of Auvergne, and the siege of Orleans did not coincide historically with the demise of Henry V. Acknowledging the tensions released when we excavate the past, Pierre Nora has identified an attritional relationship between Memory and History in which 'L'histoire est la délégitimation du passé vécu':

Car notre rapport au passé, tel du moins qu'il se déchiffre à travers les productions historiques les plus significatives, est tout autre que celui qu'on attend d'une mémoire. Non plus une continuité rétrospective, mais la mise en lumière de la discontinuité.^{77a}

Nonetheless, it might be argued that such a 'continuité rétrospective' always exceeds our grasp, whether we deal with the grand narratives of revolution and empire or the memorial distillations of our daily lives. Surely, nowhere is this more apparent than in the textual recuperation of the intensely volatile, partisan and fragmented environments of human warfare evoked in the first tetralogy. Henry VI himself declares, 'my state, 'twixt Cade and York distressed,/Like to a ship that, having scaped a tempest,/Is straightway calmed and boarded with a pirate' (*VP*: IV.ix.31–3).

The fine operations of selection, ellipsis, erasure and supplement, to which Shakespearean history is subject, may be found to shadow the arresting practices of acceleration, imposition, enhancement, excision, fragmentation and disjunction all too frequently evident in the narrativisation of the nation. The artfulness, or creative forgetfulness, invested in the narrative editing of Henry VI's reign for the Elizabethan stage allows for a questioning and insistent re-questioning of the political values of *natio*, *patria*, *pater* and *gens* which chronicles espoused with such regularity. Shakespeare's Histories exercise a power of intervention in late Elizabethan cultural debates in a highly strategic manner by invoking the civil disorders of the earlier century. Concertina-ing in inventive and provocative ways the narratives inherited from earlier sources, these plays stretch and compress the lives and ambitions of the political players who shape these dramatisations of the national life.

^a 'History is the delegitimation of past experience'; 'Because our relationship with the past, at least such as it is represented in the most important historical narratives, is quite different from that which one expects from a memory. No longer a continuum receding back, but the revelation of discontinuity.'

In his own introductory discussion to Shakespeare's 'play of History', John Turner argued tellingly that 'in all the plays, whatever their genre, the imperfect cadences of their endings serve to create the imperfection of the world that has survived, and help us to articulate the sense of loss by which it may be judged'.⁷⁸ It is this relentless narrativisation of cultural dissonance which continues to speak so urgently to twenty-first century audiences. At the heart of the dramatic experience of the *Henry VI* plays lies the interpellation, the problematisation of the spectator: *we* are called into question. Addressing precisely these moral protocols of human exchange, Emmanuel Lévinas contended that 'Le spectateur est acteur. La vision ne se réduit pas à l'accueil du spectacle; simultanément, elle opère au sein du spectacle qu'elle accueille.'^{79a} Such contentions lead irrevocably in his philosophical discourse to an ethical undertaking: 'Je suis en principe responsable . . . Autrui nous engage dans une situation où vous êtes obligé sans culpabilité mais votre obligation n'en est pas moindre. C'est en même temps une charge.'^{80b} The crises of interpretation in the *Henry VI* plays are excited by the very congested nature of the vicious acts depicted. Then as now, the harried onlooker all too often finds precious little time or opportunity to articulate resisting readings of what human life might constitute. Instead, in the theatre and beyond, we are condemned to bear witness to conditions of existence which sustain only radically imbalanced power relations and the terrifying availability of violence.

Yea and it is better to have a tyraunte vnto thy kinge then a shadow, a passive kinge y^f doth nought hiselfe but sofre other to doo with him what they will and to leade him whither they lyst. (William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christen Man* (1528))⁸¹

^a 'The spectator is actor. This vision is not confined to engagement with performance; simultaneously, [the spectator] operates at the heart of the performance with which s/he engages.'

^b 'I am in principle responsible . . . The Other engages us in a situation where you are implicated without any mark of blame, but your implication is no less for that. At the same time it is a commitment.'