

NODES AND LINKS IN THE *HENRY VI*-TRILOGY

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Shakespeare's *Henry VI*-trilogy is usually regarded as a not very successful attempt by an inexperienced young playwright learning his trade, to convert the chronicle material dealing with the Wars of the Roses into historical dramas in which the war clamour supposedly dominates the whole action.

But a careful reading of the trilogy reveals that, apart from the great battle scenes for which the plays have become duly famous, they contain a lot of dramatic material which, to a certain extent, prefigures particular scenes and themes in the later history plays and in the tragedies. Moreover, particular characters figuring more or less prominently in this early trilogy, will resurge in a more sophisticated form in later plays. These prefigurations occur in the scenes involving human suffering. Consequently, it seems worthwhile to transfer the focus of attention from the war clamour and the jingoistic hero-worship to the more intimate level of pain and sorrow, thus approaching the plays from a completely unorthodox angle.

The first part of this talk will be devoted to what I call the nodes appearing in the *Henry VI*-trilogy.

It also seems worthwhile to compare Shakespeare's treatment of pain and sorrow in these plays with the handling of the same theme in a number of roughly contemporaneous, related works - i.e. written in the same heroic-historical vein - to establish whether or not this trilogy, certainly written 'in the workshop', is an example of inferior Shakespearean craftsmanship, as many renowned critics have led us to believe. This means that these plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries will also be approached from the same unorthodox angle. What I want to stress in this connection is that my aim is not to establish mutual influences, nor to investigate the source problem. Neither will it be necessary to prove that Shakespeare's trilogy is superior to roughly contemporaneous plays belonging to the same genre. This has since long and universally been accepted. What I want to investigate is whether Shakespeare's superiority is due to the fact that his approach to the pain and sorrow theme testifies to a fundamentally different psychological attitude and world view, or whether, although he is as deeply rooted in his own time as any of his contemporaries, it is by sheer force of his extraordinary imaginative, creative or inventive capacities, that he surpasses them all.

The second part of this paper will deal with the links between Shakespeare's trilogy and a number of plays roughly contemporaneous with it, in which can be discovered the characteristics of heroic history as set forth in Thomas Heywood's *An Apology for Actors* (written about 1607-8): "worthy and memorable acts personated with lively and spirited action". Although I am fully aware of the fact that any play is an invitation to performance and that Shakespeare wrote his dramas for the theatre and not for the study, I have chosen to approach them as texts. Today, so much attention is given to Shakespeare in performance, that I took the liberty of indulging myself in this.

Let me begin by looking at the man who gave his name to Shakespeare's early trilogy, Henry VI. Contrary to other characters in these plays, Henry is not a type. It is impossible to catch him in a straight formula. He is the virtuous, saintly king, but he is also the weak, inefficient ruler, a man of books and prayers unfit to cope with the machinations of his courtiers and his Queen. His desire for a private life springs directly from his awareness of his shortcomings as a monarch. He is like a miscast actor in a play. Shakespeare has created here his first tragic king. He has succeeded in picturing Henry as a suffering man, a victim of events and circumstances for which he is totally unsuited. Preordained to lose a kingdom unlawfully gained by his grandfather Henry IV - according to the well-known Elizabethan maxim 'of evil gotten good the third should not enioice', mentioned for instance in John Hardyng's *Chronicle* written between 1446 and 1457 for Henry VI - he is endowed with a number of qualities and defects which will hasten his downfall. His religiosity is the shield between him and the outside, hostile world. It is worth mentioning here that the historical Henry VI was much less virtuous than Shakespeare makes him appear.

Henry's suffering is closely associated with the cares and woes of the ruler. His attitude towards kingship is summarized in his answer to the gamekeepers who ask him where his crown is:

My crown is in my heart, not on my head;
Not decked with diamonds and Indian stones,
Nor to be seen. My crown is called content -
A crown it is that seldom kings enjoy.

(3 *Henry VI*, III, 1, 62-65)

The crown is a burden, the bringer of great cares and much sorrow to him that wears it. Moreover, he knows that he is a bad king; he realizes that his kingship causes much suffering to his subjects. In the famous molehill scene (II,5) Henry muses on the

differences between the life of a shepherd and that of a king and he clearly prefers the former. The scene develops into a symbolic tableau when a nameless Son enters who has unwittingly killed his Father and a nameless Father who has likewise killed his Son. The king joins in their laments and all blame the unnaturalness of civil war.

This passage proves that, like his opponent York, whose mock-crowning took place on a molehill, Henry too is but a molehill king. But while the former dies in his attempt to become king, the latter who is king, would gladly die to be freed from these kingly cares and woes. The irony of this situation is glaringly apparent. It has often been claimed by critics - by Douglas Cole in his work *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Princeton, 1962), to mention one example - that Marlowe always works for irony, not sympathy in the depiction of his protagonists' sufferings. If this is true, Shakespeare distinctly shows here a Marlovian trait. Henry's own suffering is directly linked to that of his country and subjects; the molehill scene takes place in the midst of a battle that is raging in the distance; it is immediately followed by the symbolic tableau illustrating the horrors of civil war.

The theme of the cares and woes of the ruler figures prominently in two later history plays, *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*. Let us compare the relevant scenes.

In the famous speech at the beginning of act three of *2 Henry IV*, ending with the words "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" (1, 31), the king, in a rare moment of introspection, complains about the burdens his office brings with it and which deprive him of sleep, "Nature's soft nurse", as he calls it; he envies the poor, calling them "happy low". But unlike his grandson, who would willingly part with the crown, Henry IV clings to his kingly power.

A similar attitude is to be found in his son. In IV, 1 of *Henry V*, on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, with the English greatly outnumbered by the French, the king, in disguise, walks about the camp and argues with one of the soldiers about his responsibility for his subjects. In the soliloquy following this conversation, Henry first quotes his subjects' words: "Let us our lives, our souls, our debts, our care-full wives, our children and our sins, lay on the King" (213-214) and then comments:

We must bear all. O hard condition,
Twin-born with greatness; subject to the breath
Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel
But his own wringing. What infinite heartsease
Must kings neglect that private men enjoy?
And what have kings that privates have not too,

Save ceremony, save general ceremony?
And what art thou, thou idol ceremony?

(IV, 1, 215-222)

In spite of everything, Henry V too, will not renounce his office. On the contrary; to the English crown, he will add the French.

When we compare Henry VI's attitude with that of his grandfather and father, it becomes clear that they only share their envy of the poor and simple. Henry VI, however, is not only aware of the suffering of his subjects, he recognizes his own responsibility and even guilt in this. Both Henry IV and Henry V are oblivious of the pain and sorrow endured by their subjects. Those who die on the battlefield in the king's cause, do not even know whether this cause is just or not, as Henry V's interlocutor points out to his disguised king (*Henry V*, IV, 1, 123). Moreover, instead of realizing his own self-centredness, Henry V projects this attitude onto "every fool, whose sense no more can feel/But his own wringing' (=pain), blaming them for it."

The relevant scenes in the two later history plays are clearly different in content from the one in *3 Henry VI*, but the latter is certainly not inferior, neither in psychological acceptability nor in poetic diction. The molehill soliloquy is a popular anthology piece.

The second scene I have selected for discussion is the parting-scene between Queen Margaret and her lover Suffolk in *2 Henry VI*, III,2. Though conventional in setting - two lovers who cannot envisage life without each other's company - and exhibiting a certain preciosity in style, reminiscent of Ovid's *Tristia*, the scene is undoubtedly one of the purple patches in the play and the most important passage in connection with the rendering of personal feelings of grief. When king Henry has left, after having banished Suffolk for his part in the murder of Henry's uncle, Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, the two lovers utter the fiercest execrations. Then the tone becomes more lyrical. Margaret wishes that her tears may never be washed off from her lover's hands and that her lips might make an everlasting impression on them. As separation from the beloved pains the lover most cruelly, she wants to impress as it were her presence on his hands. She promises to repeal him or to join him in banishment. She assures him that to be away from him *is* to be banished. Echoes from *Romeo and Juliet* spring to mind: "There is no world without Verona walls" (III, 3, 17) and "Tis torture and not mercy: heaven is here/ Where Juliet lives" (III, 3, 29-30), Romeo exclaims when he is banished. Margaret bids her lover go and prays him to stay. Again, the similarity with *Romeo and Juliet* (III, 5) is striking. In both cases the lovers try to put off the moment of separation as long as possible.

Suffolk, like Romeo, is willing to stay in spite of the death threat; Romeo's words: "Let me be ta'en, let me be put to death" (17) echo Suffolk's less poetic "O, let me stay, befall what may befall" (405). And Margaret, like Juliet, wants to hear from him constantly. Her "Let me hear from thee./ For wheresoe'er thou art in this world's Globe/ I'll have an Iris that shall find thee out." is, again more poetically rephrased by Juliet: "I must hear from thee every day in the hour./ For in a minute there are many days" (44-45).

The passage has all the characteristics of the love lament: life is not worth living if one is bereft of the beloved and to die is better than to be parted. What lends the lament a tragic dimension is the fact that, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, the lovers will never meet again; one of them in *2 Henry VI* and both in *Romeo and Juliet*, will die in the course of the play. Suffolk will be beheaded at sea by pirates, and Margaret appears on scene to mourn his death, pressing his head against her breast (IV,4), an unmistakably Senecan trait in the young Shakespeare.

Conventional as the scene may be, it nevertheless bears a Shakespearean stamp: it is endowed with an extra tragic dimension. Unlike Romeo and Juliet, Margaret and Suffolk are not star-crossed lovers but they themselves have inadvertently worked their own wretchedness. The carefully planned crime - the murder of Gloucester - which had been devised as the finishing touch to crown their ambition, triggered off a series of events, resulting in Suffolk's banishment and the bitter separation of the lovers. That Shakespeare wanted his audience to be aware of this causal link is clearly indicated by the interruption of the parting-scene: a messenger passes by on his way to the king to inform him about Winchester's death-bed delirium, Winchester, the third person responsible for Gloucester's murder. By introducing this incident, Shakespeare has brilliantly combined two things: he has reminded the audience of the fact that the two lovers have only themselves to blame for their misfortune, and he has succeeded in putting this idea across without the faintest trace of moralization. This is, so early in his career, a proof of his superior craftsmanship as a dramatist and of his characteristic unconcern with didactic and moralistic issues. The interruption is certainly not a clumsy shortcoming on the part of an inexperienced young playwright. I wish to stress the fact that the Margaret-Suffolk love affair is unhistorical and is mentioned neither by Hall nor by Holinshed, the chroniclers Shakespeare used as his main sources. He elaborated on a hint given by Hall that Margaret "entirely loved the duke" and that he was "the Queens dearlynge". So, the Margaret-Suffolk liaison is entirely Shakespeare's creation.

The parting-scene between Margaret and Suffolk shows a close resemblance to that between Richard II and his Queen in the play that bears his name. The actual

circumstances are different: Richard and his Queen are lawfully married, it is she who is banished to her native France, he will be put in prison and murdered, there being little else to do with a deposed medieval king. But for them too, it will be a final parting and their feelings of pain and sorrow are very similar to those of the adulterous couple, although expressed in much finer language. But let us not blame this entirely on Shakespeare's artistic inexperience. His *Richard II* has generally been recognized as one of his most, if not the most, poetical play(s).

Let me briefly mention a number of other themes touched upon by Shakespeare in this early trilogy which will reappear in later plays. Shakespeare's contempt for the unconstant rabble and his condemnation of the fickleness of the common multitude found in 2 and 3 *Henry VI* - particularly in the Jack Cade-scenes - will reappear in full force in *Julius Caesar* and in *Coriolanus*. To state, however, that Shakespeare through the Cade character, wanted to discredit popular rebellion, is a gross oversimplification. It may very well be that he wanted to draw attention to the rightful grievances of the common people. Moreover, I quote from Jean Howard's introduction to the Norton edition of the play: "Jack Cade is not synonymous with 'the commons'". Michael Hattaway, in the introduction to his edition of 2 *Henry VI* (for the New Cambridge Shakespeare, CUP, 1991) mentions that "Shakespeare defined a distinct group or even class consciousness for his rebels" and in his article "Rebellion, class consciousness, and Shakespeare's *Henry VI*" in *Cahiers élisabéthains*, 33 (1988), he dealt extensively with this complex problem.

The theme of hateful revenge taken on an innocent child to punish the father, found in Clifford's barbarous butchering of York's young son Rutland in 3 *Henry VI*, recalls Macbeth's slaying of Macduff's wife and children.

The theme of suffering that redeems is found in the trilogy only in the character of Henry VI. He is most impressive in his death scene, when he pardons his murderer, Richard of Gloucester, and prophesies the nameless woe that will befall the country when this same Richard will be king. He has earned his "supreme crown of grief" - the term is used by Horst Opper in "Shakespeare und das Leid", *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, XCIII (1957) - and he has gained an inner nobility which he never possessed when he still had his crown. He shares his "supreme crown of grief" with Shakespeare's deposed kings: John, Richard II and Lear, as the major example.

If with Henry VI Shakespeare has created his first tragic king, Margaret is without any doubt his first tragic queen. Like other important characters, she is portrayed both as a public and as a private person, but unlike them - and this turns her into the real protagonist of 2 and 3 *Henry VI* - her character is diversified in both

roles. As a queen she is not only a plotting and scheming intriguer, but also a brave, undaunted military leader. As a mother the determination with which she fights to keep the kingdom for her son matches her despair when he is killed before her eyes. In York's death scene, she appears in her full stature as "she-wolf of France" and "tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide", a thoroughly vicious woman, incapable of pity, almost inhuman in her vindictiveness; she inspires in the spectator horror and dismay at so much relentless cruelty. It is interesting to note, that, according to the chronicles, Margaret was not present at the killing of York; consequently, the "tiger's heart" is Shakespeare's creation. After she has witnessed her son's murder, she is the bereaved mother who inspires pity. It is as if Shakespeare, in his apprenticeship, tried his hand at various types of women, even in his portrayal of the same character. With Margaret we perceive that, very early in his career, he was interested in the character of the wicked, cruel queen.

Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* is another example. Shakespeare will come back to this motif in *King Lear*, with Goneril and Regan, and achieve a proper climax with Lady Macbeth. Margaret resurges in a variety of females and even in one male. After Gloucester's murder, when the king blames Suffolk for it, she takes up his defence, playing Desdemona to their Othello and Cassio. Although Gloucester was murdered at her instigation and with her full consent, she pretends to be deeply grieved by his death. In an emotional speech, recalling her hopes and fears when she first came to England, she adds her master's touch by turning the tables upon Henry and accusing him of having been false to her. Here she is the other Gloucester, the future Richard III, and, she is the forerunner of Cressida, that epitome of female deceit. When her lover is banished, she is a Juliet. When she is mourning her son's death, she is a Constance, the grieving mother from the later history play *King John*.

This brings me to another reincarnation. Constance laments the killing of young Arthur, whose only crime it was to be the son of Geoffrey, the king's dead brother, and so a threat to John's throne. He is prefigured in Rutland, who was vengefully slaughtered by Clifford, only because he was York's son, York who had killed old Clifford.

Let us now turn to a few examples of links between Shakespeare's trilogy and related plays by his contemporaries.

1 Henry VI has often been called a Talbot-play. The weak king is indeed eclipsed by the brave warrior. As I have extensively dealt with Talbot in a former article, proving that he is not only the heroic warrior, but also a bloodthirsty tyrant, vindictive and cruel, I limit myself to mentioning here that he shows a strong kinship

with Marlowe's Tamburlaine. I argued that Shakespeare, who certainly knew the play, wanted to invest his Talbot with a number of Tamburlaine's qualities, in an attempt to capitalize on the immense popularity of Marlowe's hero. This would be the natural thing to do for an inexperienced young playwright, learning his trade. That Shakespeare's dependence upon his famous predecessor is much stronger in *1 Henry VI* than in the two later parts, strengthens my conviction that the three *Henry VI*-plays were written in chronological order, a thesis not universally accepted.

A comparison between Tamburlaine and Talbot reveals, that whereas the former is, with rare exceptions in his relationship with his wife Zenocrate, the never relenting, never repenting tyrant, the latter is endowed with such simple human emotions as a father's solicitude for his son and a father's pain and sorrow when he holds the latter's dead body in his arms.

The warrior falling in love with his fair captive and its corollary, the pangs of (unrequited) love, rendered in the last scenes of *1 Henry VI*, is an event that occurs twice in *Tamburlaine* (1587-8; Tamburlaine/Zenocrate and Theridamas/Olympia). It is also found in George Peele's *Edward I* (1591; Mortimer/Elinor), in the anonymous *Lochrine* (1591; Lochrine/Estrild) and in Richard Farrant's *The Wars of Cyrus* (1588; Araspas/Panthea). But it is Shakespeare, and he alone, who transforms this stock situation into a more complex happening. Suffolk's motives in *1* and *2 Henry VI* are a mixture of passionate amorous yearning and coldblooded political plotting. His double role, as a private and as a public character, makes him much more interesting than his non-Shakespearean analogues.

III, 2 of *3 Henry VI* contains the wooing scene in which King Edward IV, Henry's successor on the English throne, tries to win the Lady Grey, who refuses to become the king's paramour. The scene is similar to one in the anonymous play *Edward III* (1590). In II,1 Edward tries to seduce the Countess of Salisbury and fails in his attempt, thus experiencing the pangs of thwarted love. What is interesting here is that it is precisely on account of this episode that it has been claimed Shakespeare may very well have been the author of this play, or that, at least, he had a hand in the writing of it. In Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1589) and in the anonymous *The True Tragedy of Richard III* (1591), the tyrant's corpse is cruelly mutilated, in an attempt to inflict pain and sorrow beyond death. In *1 Henry VI* Shakespeare handles this motif in his own way: the Bastard of Orleans proposes to hew the bodies of the two Talbots to pieces but is stopped by the Dauphin in deference to the elder Talbot's reputation of heroic warrior. So, Shakespeare has used an allusion to a barbarous custom, to vilify one Frenchman, to enoble another and, most importantly, to celebrate once more the glorious deeds of a national hero. That the coarse cruelty

of mutilating an enemy's corpse did not appeal to Shakespeare is proved by his own treatment of Richard III in the play that bears his name: the tyrant is allowed an honourable death, fighting bravely on the battlefield.

Tamburlaine, responsible for inflicting so much pain and sorrow not only on his opponents but also on his own close relatives, is given such honorific titles as "terror of the world" and "scourge of God". They are inherited, in a slightly altered form, by a number of characters in other plays: the old king Brute in *Lochrine*, Scilla in Thomas Lodge's *The Wounds of Civil War* (1588), Talbot in *1 Henry VI*, Joan of Arc in the same play, Margaret in *2 Henry VI* and Richard of Gloucester in *3 Henry VI*. In *2 Henry VI* Shakespeare uses the concept in an original way. In young Clifford's words, war is personified and appears as 'Scourge of God'. What is in the other instances a mere ornament, a kind of *epitheton ornans*, has been raised by Shakespeare to a higher level. The notion that war in general and civil dissension or rebellion in particular, bringing so much pain and sorrow to so many innocent sufferers, is God's punishment for a nation's sins, is the corner stone of Tudor political doctrine. In this way Shakespeare has succeeded in turning a fashionable title into an effective means to emphasize the conception that is said - by those critics who share E.M.W. Tillyard's very influential view on Shakespeare's history plays - to underlie and to unify his whole trilogy.

Contrary to the other writers of history plays - Marlowe, Greene, Peele, Lodge and a host of anonymous dramatists - Shakespeare nowhere in the trilogy, makes use of the fickle Fortune-theme to account for the suffering of his protagonists. To explain certain happenings and vicissitudes, his fellow-playwrights choose the easy way, while Shakespeare concentrates on the human agent. His superior psychological insight in the characters of his plays, enables him to discard the fickle Fortune-theme as a worthless *deus ex machina*. Apparently, he was even at this early stage in his career, more interested in the unreliability of human beings than in the capriciousness of blind fate. His later plays bear witness to this.

This brief survey brings me to the somewhat paradoxical statement that, with regard to the treatment of pain and sorrow, Shakespeare was at the same time very much a child of his own age *and* a highly original playwright. He is concerned with the same problems his contemporaries are interested in. The brickwork he uses to construct his plays is the same as theirs. He, however, is the superior architect; The originality of his vision and his superior craftsmanship as a playwright - qualities which will be fully recognized with regard to his later works but which are already present *in nucleo* in his early trilogy - establish him on a lonely height, above his fellow playwrights. Shakespeare, like Richard of Gloucester, was himself alone.