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William Shakespeare

**HENRY VI,
PARTS ONE, TWO,
and THREE**

**Edited by
David Bevington**

**David Scott Kastan,
James Hammersmith,
and Robert Kean Turner,
Associate Editors**

**With a Foreword by
Joseph Papp**



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Foreword

It's hard to imagine, but Shakespeare wrote all of his plays with a quill pen, a goose feather whose hard end had to be sharpened frequently. How many times did he scrape the dull end to a point with his knife, dip it into the inkwell, and bring up, dripping wet, those wonderful words and ideas that are known all over the world?

In the age of word processors, typewriters, and ballpoint pens, we have almost forgotten the meaning of the word "blot." Yet when I went to school, in the 1930s, my classmates and I knew all too well what an inkblot from the metal-tipped pens we used would do to a nice clean page of a test paper, and we groaned whenever a splotch fell across the sheet. Most of us finished the school day with ink-stained fingers; those who were less careful also went home with ink-stained shirts, which were almost impossible to get clean.

When I think about how long it took me to write the simplest composition with a metal-tipped pen and ink, I can only marvel at how many plays Shakespeare scratched out with his goose-feather quill pen, year after year. Imagine him walking down one of the narrow cobblestoned streets of London, or perhaps drinking a pint of beer in his local alehouse. Suddenly his mind catches fire with an idea, or a sentence, or a previously elusive phrase. He is burning with impatience to write it down—but because he doesn't have a ballpoint pen or even a pencil in his pocket, he has to keep the idea in his head until he can get to his quill and parchment.

He rushes back to his lodgings on Silver Street, ignoring the vendors hawking brooms, the coaches clattering by, the piteous wails of beggars and prisoners. Bounding up the stairs, he snatches his quill and starts to write furiously, not even bothering to light a candle against the dusk. "To be, or not to be," he scrawls, "that is the—." But the quill point has gone dull, the letters have fattened out illegibly, and in the middle of writing one of the most famous passages in the history of dramatic literature, Shakespeare has to stop to sharpen his pen.

Taking a deep breath, he lights a candle now that it's dark, sits down, and begins again. By the time the candle has burned out and the noisy apprentices of his French Huguenot landlord have quieted down, Shakespeare has finished Act 3 of *Hamlet* with scarcely a blot.

Early the next morning, he hurries through the fog of a London summer morning to the rooms of his colleague Richard Burbage, the actor for whom the role of Hamlet is being written. He finds Burbage asleep and snoring loudly, sprawled across his straw mattress. Not only had the actor performed in *Henry V* the previous afternoon, but he had then gone out carousing all night with some friends who had come to the performance.

Shakespeare shakes his friend awake, until, bleary-eyed, Burbage sits up in his bed. "Dammit, Will," he grumbles, "can't you let an honest man sleep?" But the playwright, his eyes shining and the words tumbling out of his mouth, says, "Shut up and listen—tell me what you think of *this!*"

He begins to read to the still half-asleep Burbage, pacing around the room as he speaks. "... Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune—"

Burbage interrupts, suddenly wide awake, "That's excellent, very good, 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,' yes, I think it will work quite well. . . ." He takes the parchment from Shakespeare and murmurs the lines to himself, slowly at first but with growing excitement.

The sun is just coming up, and the words of one of Shakespeare's most famous soliloquies are being uttered for the first time by the first actor ever to bring Hamlet to life. It must have been an exhilarating moment.

Shakespeare wrote most of his plays to be performed live by the actor Richard Burbage and the rest of the Lord Chamberlain's men (later the King's men). Today, however, our first encounter with the plays is usually in the form of the printed word. And there is no question that reading Shakespeare for the first time isn't easy. His plays aren't comic books or magazines or the dime-store detective novels I read when I was young. A lot of his sentences are complex. Many of his words are no longer used in our everyday

speech. His profound thoughts are often condensed into poetry, which is not as straightforward as prose.

Yet when you hear the words spoken aloud, a lot of the language may strike you as unexpectedly modern. For Shakespeare's plays, like any dramatic work, weren't really meant to be read; they were meant to be spoken, seen, and performed. It's amazing how lines that are so troublesome in print can flow so naturally and easily when spoken.

I think it was precisely this music that first fascinated me. When I was growing up, Shakespeare was a stranger to me. I had no particular interest in him, for I was from a different cultural tradition. It never occurred to me that his plays might be more than just something to "get through" in school, like science or math or the physical education requirement we had to fulfill. My passions then were movies, radio, and vaudeville—certainly not Elizabethan drama.

I was, however, fascinated by words and language. Because I grew up in a home where Yiddish was spoken, and English was only a second language, I was acutely sensitive to the musical sounds of different languages and had an ear for lilt and cadence and rhythm in the spoken word. And so I loved reciting poems and speeches even as a very young child. In first grade I learned lots of short nature verses—"Who has seen the wind?," one of them began. My first foray into drama was playing the role of Scrooge in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* when I was eight years old. I liked summoning all the scorn and coldness I possessed and putting them into the words, "Bah, humbug!"

From there I moved on to longer and more famous poems and other works by writers of the 1930s. Then, in junior high school, I made my first acquaintance with Shakespeare through his play *Julius Caesar*. Our teacher, Miss McKay, assigned the class a passage to memorize from the opening scene of the play, the one that begins "Wherefore rejoice? What conquest brings he home?" The passage seemed so wonderfully theatrical and alive to me, and the experience of memorizing and reciting it was so much fun, that I went on to memorize another speech from the play on my own.

I chose Mark Antony's address to the crowd in Act 3,

scene 2, which struck me then as incredibly high drama. Even today, when I speak the words, I feel the same thrill I did that first time. There is the strong and athletic Antony descending from the raised pulpit where he has been speaking, right into the midst of a crowded Roman square. Holding the torn and bloody cloak of the murdered Julius Caesar in his hand, he begins to speak to the people of Rome:

If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.
You all do know this mantle. I remember
The first time ever Caesar put it on;
'Twas on a summer's evening in his tent,
That day he overcame the Nervii.
Look, in this place ran Cassius' dagger through.
See what a rent the envious Casca made.
Through this the well-belovèd Brutus stabbed,
And as he plucked his cursèd steel away,
Mark how the blood of Caesar followed it,
As rushing out of doors to be resolved
If Brutus so unkindly knocked or no;
For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel.
Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him!
This was the most unkindest cut of all . . .

I'm not sure now that I even knew Shakespeare had written a lot of other plays, or that he was considered "timeless," "universal," or "classic"—but I knew a good speech when I heard one, and I found the splendid rhythms of Antony's rhetoric as exciting as anything I'd ever come across.

Fifty years later, I still feel that way. Hearing good actors speak Shakespeare gracefully and naturally is a wonderful experience, unlike any other I know. There's a satisfying fullness to the spoken word that the printed page just can't convey. This is why seeing the plays of Shakespeare performed live in a theater is the best way to appreciate them. If you can't do that, listening to sound recordings or watching film versions of the plays is the next best thing.

But if you do start with the printed word, use the play as a script. Be an actor yourself and say the lines out loud. Don't worry too much at first about words you don't immediately understand. Look them up in the footnotes or a dictionary,

but don't spend too much time on this. It is more profitable (and fun) to get the sense of a passage and sing it out. Speak naturally, almost as if you were talking to a friend, but be sure to enunciate the words properly. You'll be surprised at how much you understand simply by speaking the speech "trippingly on the tongue," as Hamlet advises the Players.

You might start, as I once did, with a speech from *Julius Caesar*, in which the tribune (city official) Marullus scolds the commoners for transferring their loyalties so quickly from the defeated and murdered general Pompey to the newly victorious Julius Caesar:

Wherefore rejoice? What conquest brings he home?
What tributaries follow him to Rome
To grace in captive bonds his chariot wheels?
You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless
things!

O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome,
Knew you not Pompey? Many a time and oft
Have you climbed up to walls and battlements,
To towers and windows, yea, to chimney tops,
Your infants in your arms, and there have sat
The livelong day, with patient expectation,
To see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome.

With the exception of one or two words like "wherefore" (which means "why," not "where"), "tributaries" (which means "captives"), and "patient expectation" (which means patient waiting), the meaning and emotions of this speech can be easily understood.

From here you can go on to dialogues or other more challenging scenes. Although you may stumble over unaccustomed phrases or unfamiliar words at first, and even fall flat when you're crossing some particularly rocky passages, pick yourself up and stay with it. Remember that it takes time to feel at home with anything new. Soon you'll come to recognize Shakespeare's unique sense of humor and way of saying things as easily as you recognize a friend's laughter.

And then it will just be a matter of choosing which one of Shakespeare's plays you want to tackle next. As a true fan of his, you'll find that you're constantly learning from his plays. It's a journey of discovery that you can continue for

the rest of your life. For no matter how many times you read or see a particular play, there will always be something new there that you won't have noticed before.

Why do so many thousands of people get hooked on Shakespeare and develop a habit that lasts a lifetime? What can he really say to us today, in a world filled with inventions and problems he never could have imagined? And how do you get past his special language and difficult sentence structure to understand him?

The best way to answer these questions is to go see a live production. You might not know much about Shakespeare, or much about the theater, but when you watch actors performing one of his plays on the stage, it will soon become clear to you why people get so excited about a playwright who lived hundreds of years ago.

For the story—what's happening in the play—is the most accessible part of Shakespeare. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, you can immediately understand the situation: a girl is chasing a guy who's chasing a girl who's chasing another guy. No wonder *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the most popular of Shakespeare's plays: it's about one of the world's most popular pastimes—falling in love.

But the course of true love never did run smooth, as the young suitor Lysander says. Often in Shakespeare's comedies the girl whom the guy loves doesn't love him back, or she loves him but he loves someone else. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia loves Proteus, Proteus loves Sylvia, and Sylvia loves Valentine, who is Proteus's best friend. In the end, of course, true love prevails, but not without lots of complications along the way.

For in all of his plays—comedies, histories, and tragedies—Shakespeare is showing you human nature. His characters act and react in the most extraordinary ways—and sometimes in the most incomprehensible ways. People are always trying to find motivations for what a character does. They ask, "Why does Iago want to destroy Othello?"

The answer, to me, is very simple—because that's the way Iago is. That's just his nature. Shakespeare doesn't explain his characters; he sets them in motion—and away they go. He doesn't worry about whether they're likable or not. He's

interested in interesting people, and his most fascinating characters are those who are unpredictable. If you lean back in your chair early on in one of his plays, thinking you've figured out what Iago or Shylock (in *The Merchant of Venice*) is up to, don't be too sure—because that great judge of human nature, Shakespeare, will surprise you every time.

He is just as wily in the way he structures a play. In *Macbeth*, a comic scene is suddenly introduced just after the bloodiest and most treacherous slaughter imaginable, of a guest and king by his host and subject, when in comes a drunk porter who has to go to the bathroom. Shakespeare is tickling your emotions by bringing a stand-up comic on-stage right on the heels of a savage murder.

It has taken me thirty years to understand even some of these things, and so I'm not suggesting that Shakespeare is immediately understandable. I've gotten to know him not through theory but through practice, the practice of the *living* Shakespeare—the playwright of the theater.

Of course the plays are a great achievement of dramatic literature, and they should be studied and analyzed in schools and universities. But you must always remember, when reading all the words *about* the playwright and his plays, that *Shakespeare's* words came first and that in the end there is nothing greater than a single actor on the stage speaking the lines of Shakespeare.

Everything important that I know about Shakespeare comes from the practical business of producing and directing his plays in the theater. The task of classifying, criticizing, and editing Shakespeare's printed works I happily leave to others. For me, his plays really do live on the stage, not on the page. That is what he wrote them for and that is how they are best appreciated.

Although Shakespeare lived and wrote hundreds of years ago, his name rolls off my tongue as if he were my brother. As a producer and director, I feel that there is a professional relationship between us that spans the centuries. As a human being, I feel that Shakespeare has enriched my understanding of life immeasurably. I hope you'll let him do the same for you.



The three parts of *Henry VI* are interesting for their history alone; Shakespeare wrote them before he wrote the *Henry IV* plays, which precede them chronologically. And so there's an intriguing contrast between the history *in* the plays and the history *of* the plays. Once you've started reading these plays, it's hard to put them down, because you get caught up in the whole sequence of English history that leads up to Richard III and ends with the beginning of the Tudor dynasty after him.

There's a lot of historical meat in these plays, and I'd be curious to do them all, one after the other, in their proper sequence, just to follow the development of the kings and other characters, the squabblings and usurpations, and the various factions. In what other plays besides Shakespeare's can you find history treated in such an interesting way?

As I think back over these three plays in particular, what I recall are the lovely little touches scattered throughout them—specific scenes, or stage directions, or speeches, or characters. The first scene that comes to mind, one of the most moving in the trilogy, is the death of the noble English hero Talbot in Part One. Throughout the play Shakespeare has portrayed him as brave, valiant, and unstoppable against the French—such a remarkable figure that he wins praise even from his French enemies. In a sense, the whole play builds remorselessly toward his downfall in Act 4, scene 7, where, wounded in battle, he dies with his young son dead in his arms. Knowing he is dying, he bids farewell to the soldiers gathered around him, saying, “Come, come, and lay him in his father's arms. / My spirit can no longer bear these harms. / Soldiers, adieu! I have what I would have, / Now my old arms are young John Talbot's grave.” It's an incredibly moving moment.

I've always found Shakespeare's treatment of Joan of Arc, or Joan la Pucelle as he calls her, to be very interesting. He completely abandons fairness in his portrait of her, unabashedly taking the English side. Though history knows her as a shining heroine who was a scourge to the English and later a saint, this play shows her to be a whore, sharp-tongued and ambitious, a shrew who doesn't inspire a jot of sympathy in the audience. Her character tells us more about Shakespeare's interest in catering to English patrio-

tism than it does about who she actually was, but that's precisely what's fascinating about it.

There is another strong-willed Frenchwoman in the *Henry VI* plays—Margaret of Anjou, who enters the story at the end of Part One, when she becomes the wife of King Henry VI. She quickly establishes herself as a force to be reckoned with, and through the rest of the sequence we see her relentlessly building up her role as the power behind the weak-willed Henry, who is totally incapable of dealing with the infighting of the English nobles.

Margaret has a great scene in Part Three, Act 1, scene 4, where she confronts the captured Duke of York, a claimant to the throne, and utterly humiliates him. She sits him on a small mound, puts a paper crown on his head, and waves a handkerchief dipped in the blood of his slaughtered young son in his face. It's a powerful piece of writing and a heart-wrenching scene when played on the stage, as the defeated and sorrowful York suffers Margaret's cruel taunts:

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.
Alas, poor York, but that I hate thee deadly,
I should lament thy miserable state.

As usual, Shakespeare doesn't neglect the ordinary people, no matter how many kings and princes are in the play. This leads to a marvelous scene in Part Three (2.5) where the stage directions say "*Enter a Son that hath killed his father, at one door,*" and then "*Enter at another door a Father that hath killed his son.*" What's terrible in this scene is that neither the father nor the son knows who it is he's killed—until it's too late. The father says, "But let me see. Is this our foeman's face? / Ah, no, no, no, it is mine only son! / Ah, boy, if any life be left in thee, / Throw up thine eye!" Shakespeare is illustrating the enormous price of civil war, which pits members of the same family against each other. It's an unbearably sad scene, and unforgettable.

And finally, one of the greatest characters in all of Shakespeare—in all of English history, for that matter—

makes his diabolical entrance in Part Three: Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who will take over the stage in the next play as Richard III. Very few people know that he appears at the end of the *Henry VI* sequence, but he's worth looking at. He is depicted at first as a fierce fighter, but Shakespeare also gives a few clues about what this schemer has in store for us.

Though Richard has several good speeches in the play, my favorite is the one he makes at the end of Part Three as he is stabbing King Henry VI to death: "Down, down to hell," he cries, "and say I sent thee thither, / [*Stabs him again*] I, that have neither pity, love, nor fear." He goes on to describe his monstrous birth—feet first, and with teeth—and his hunchback. He reasons, with words that are heavy with omen, "Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so, / Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it."

And he concludes with a warning to all those who may stand between him and the crown of England, beginning with his brother Clarence, "I am myself alone. / Clarence, beware. Thou keep'st me from the light. . . . Clarence, thy turn is next, and then the rest, / Counting myself but bad till I be best." It's a marvelous speech, and looks straight ahead to the plots and schemings this hunchbacked duke will carry out in the play that bears his name.

JOSEPH PAPP

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The *Henry VI* Plays

Among Shakespeare's ten plays on English history, the best known are the four plays (c. 1595–1599) from *Richard II* through *1* and *2 Henry IV* to *Henry V*, in which Shakespeare follows the maturation and career of Prince Hal, the future Henry V. This sequence of four plays was actually Shakespeare's second such sequence, for he had begun, in the years from about 1589 to 1594, to write on English history with three plays on the reign of Henry VI and a fourth on the reign of Richard III. Together these four plays told the agonizing and eventually triumphant story of England's civil wars in the fifteenth century, concluding at last in 1485 with the victory of Henry Tudor over Richard III at Bosworth Field. Henry Tudor, thereupon King Henry VII, was to become Henry VIII's father and Queen Elizabeth I's grandfather. These four plays thus dramatized a conflict in which England's very identity as a nation, having been tested in extremity, was restored by the Tudor dynasty that was still in power when Shakespeare wrote. The political relevance of such an account to Elizabethan spectators must have added greatly to their pleasure in the spectacle of sieges, confrontations, and bloodshed. There is good evidence that Shakespeare's first historical plays, though seldom read or seen today, were very popular in his own time.

Together, the three plays about the reign of Henry VI offer a paradigm of civil conflict. (*Richard III*, though last in the series, takes place after the actual civil wars have ceased.) Shakespeare is deeply interested in the causes and evolution of civil war. His villains are, especially at first, not the lower classes but the aristocrats of England bickering among themselves. Because Henry V has died an untimely death in 1422, leaving an infant son on the throne and a disputed claim originating in Henry IV's seizure of the throne from Richard II, a struggle for power is inevitable. Shakespeare depicts Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, one of young Henry's uncles, as virtuous in his attempts to serve as Protector, but unable to cope with Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester and later Cardinal, a great-uncle of

the King. Though barred by his illegitimate birth from claiming the crown for himself, Winchester is ready to foment all the strife he can in an effort to gain political control of the kingdom. The Duke of Somerset joins in a conspiracy to get rid of Gloucester so that the ambitions of the various challengers will be unchecked by the one remaining proponent of honest government. The most dangerous intriguer is Richard Plantagenet, later Duke of York, whose claim to the English throne goes back to Edward III through two grandfathers, Edmund Langley, Duke of York, and Lionel, Duke of Clarence, and is arguably stronger than that of King Henry VI. Richard is the scion of the Yorkist claim, soon to challenge that of the Lancastrian King Henry (so named for his title derived from his grandfather, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster).

Faction of this sort naturally leads to divided authority on the battlefield. The English quickly begin to lose their territories in France, owing in part to the baleful rise of a (as the English see her) witch, Joan of Arc, who dons man's warlike attire and dominates the effete French aristocrats whom she seduces one by one. Still, the main cause of the English failure in France is division at home, and its chief victim is the valiant Lord Talbot, betrayed by lack of English reinforcement at Bordeaux. His death, in company with his son, signals the end of English ascendancy in France. When the Earl of Suffolk cynically negotiates an end to hostilities in terms outrageously favorable to the French and especially to Margaret of Anjou, with whom Suffolk has fallen in love, the capitulation is complete. Margaret is brought back to England, where she will dominate her new husband, King Henry, much as Joan of Arc dominated her French lovers, and where Suffolk can have his adulterous way with her. This yielding to the enervation of erotic passion is symptomatic of the decline into which England continues to plunge.

Once the aristocrats of England have succeeded in betraying their nation by their self-interested grasping, the commoners are not slow to emulate the factionalism of their social betters. 2 *Henry VI* gives a significantly increased role to commoners, who turn against one another (1.3), promote themselves through sham miracles (2.1), buzz

with restive anger at the suspicious death of their beloved Duke of Gloucester (3.2), and take justice into their own hands by seizing and summarily executing the hated Duke of Suffolk (4.1). These protestations and acts are at least directed against aristocratic villains, but the precedent of popular unrest is an unnerving one, and it soon erupts into a full-scale, if abortive, popular rebellion (4.2-10). Jack Cade and his cohorts ape political ambition in such a way as to render it mordantly amusing, but the Cade rebellion also dismays and threatens those who cling to a hope of public calm. Not the least threatening aspect of this rebellion is that it has been secretly fomented by Richard of York, who sees anarchy as a way to bring down established authority and thereby clear the way for his challenge. He is right, and by the end of this play the country is divided into two warring camps.

Richard of York dies in *3 Henry VI*, in a bloody and revengeful ritual slaughter on the battlefield, but he is succeeded like a many-headed Hydra by his three sons, Edward, Clarence, and Richard of Gloucester. The Yorkist side ultimately achieves victory, after much uncertain shifting back and forth in the fortunes of war, and yet victory is achieved at a terrible cost to England. The struggle has become a feud in which a Yorkist must pay for the blood of a Lancastrian, son for son, brother for brother, until there are few survivors. The conflict is all the more horrible in view of the fact that the two sides are closely bound by the ties of kinship. Emblematically, on the field of battle a father discovers he has killed his own son, while another son discovers he has killed his father. In the family of the new King Edward IV, as well, brother turns against brother: Clarence, offended by his brother's surrender to women (so reminiscent of Henry VI before him), changes sides more than once.

The only person to profit from all this division is Richard of Gloucester, the youngest of the three Yorkist brothers, whose plan is to cut his way to the throne by whatever murder and deception will prove necessary. Richard is the genius of faction and discord, the perfect embodiment and product of the long and enervating wars now drawing to a close. The final scenes of *3 Henry VI*, though offering a

seeming hope of peace, are devastated by the contrary perception that Richard is only biding his time until he can seize power. His murder of Henry VI in the Tower of London (5.6) is only a promise of what will follow.