

The First Part of the Contention

(HENRY VI)

INTRODUCTION

WHEN Shakespeare's history plays were gathered together in the 1623 Folio, seven years after he died, they were printed in the order of their historical events, each with a title naming the king in whose reign those events occurred. No one supposes that this is the order in which Shakespeare wrote them; and the Folio titles are demonstrably not, in all cases, those by which the plays were originally known. The three concerned with the reign of Henry VI are listed in the Folio, simply and unappealingly, as the *First*, *Second*, and *Third Parts of King Henry the Sixth*, and these are the names by which they have continued to be known. Versions of the *Second* and *Third* had appeared long before the Folio, in 1594 and 1595; their head titles read *The First Part of the Contention of the two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster with the Death of the Good Duke Humphrey* and *The True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York, and the Good King Henry the Sixth*. These are, presumably, full versions of the plays' original titles, and we revert to them in preference to the Folio's historical listing.

A variety of internal evidence suggests that the Folio's *Part One* was composed after *The First Part of the Contention* and *Richard, Duke of York*, so we depart from the Folio order, though a reader wishing to read the plays in their narrative sequence will read *Henry VI, Part One* before the other two plays. The dates of all three are uncertain, but *Part One* is alluded to in 1592, when it was probably new. *The First Part of the Contention* probably belongs to 1590±1.

The play draws extensively on English chronicle history for its portrayal of the troubled state of England under Henry VI (1421±71). It dramatizes the touchingly weak King's powerlessness against the machinations of his nobles, especially Richard, Duke of York, himself ambitious for the throne. Richard engineers the Kentish rebellion, led by Jack Cade, which provides some of the play's liveliest episodes; and at the

play's end Richard seems poised to take the throne.

Historical events of ten years (1445±±55) are dramatized with comparative fidelity within a coherent structure that offers a wide variety of theatrical entertainment. Though the play employs old-fashioned conventions of language (particularly the recurrent classical references) and of dramaturgy (such as the horrors of severed heads), its bold characterization, its fundamentally serious but often ironically comic presentation of moral and political issues, the powerful rhetoric of its verse, and the vivid immediacy of its prose have proved highly effective in its rare modern revivals.