

Henry VI, Part One

INTRODUCTION

THE play printed here first appeared in the 1623 Folio, as *The First Part of Henry VI*; it tells the beginning of the story that is continued in *The First Part of the Contention* and in *Richard Duke of York*. Although in narrative sequence it belongs before those plays, there is good reason to believe that it was written after them. It is probably the 'new' play referred to as 'harey the vj' in the record of its performance on 3 March 1592 by Lord Strange's Men. The box-office takings of #3 16s. 8d. were a record for the season, and the play was acted another fifteen times during the following ten months. Its success is mentioned in Thomas Nashe's satirical pamphlet *Piers Penniless*, published later in 1592. Defending the drama against moralistic attacks, Nashe claims that plays based on 'our English chronicles' celebrate 'our forefathers' valiant acts' and set them up as a 'reproof to these degenerate effeminate days of ours'. By way of illustration he alludes specifically to the exploits of Lord Talbot, the principal English warrior in *Henry VI Part One*: 'How would it have joyed brave Talbot, the terror of the French, to think that after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb he should triumph again on the stage, and have his bones new-embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least, at several times, who in the tragedian that represents his person imagine they behold him fresh bleeding!' Nashe may have had personal reasons to puff this play: a variety of evidence suggests that Shakespeare wrote it in collaboration with at least two other authors; Nashe himself was probably responsible for Act 1. The passages most confidently attributed to Shakespeare are Act 2, Scene 4 and Act 4, Scene 2 to the death of Talbot at 4.7.32.

A mass of material, some derived from 'English chronicles', some invented, is packed into this play. It opens impressively with the funeral of Henry V, celebrated for unifying England and subjugating France; but his nobles are at loggerheads even over his coffin, and news rapidly arrives of serious losses in France. The rivalry displayed here between Humphrey,

Duke of Gloucester±±Protector of the infant Henry VI±±and Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester, plays an important part in both this play and *The Contention*, as does the conflict between Richard, Duke of York, and the houses of Somerset and Suffolk; in the Temple Garden scene (2.4), invented by Shakespeare, York's and Somerset's supporters symbolize their respective loyalties by plucking white and red roses. Their dissension weakens England's military strength, but she has a great hero in Lord Talbot, whose nobility as a warrior is pitted against the treachery of the French, led by King Charles and Joan la Pucelle (Joan of Arc), here±±following the chronicles±±portrayed as a witch and a whore. Historical facts are freely manipulated: Joan was burnt in 1431, though the play's authors have her take part in a battle of 1451 in which Talbot's death is brought forward by two years. The play ends with an uneasy peace between England and France.