

The Composition of *Henry VI, Part 1*

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THE first part of *Henry VI* has probably given rise to more—and more complicated—theories of authorship than any other play of the canon, though the causes for this are at bottom the same that have led to needless complications with many of the other early plays: unwillingness to admit that Shakespeare even as a beginner could ever produce poor work, and over-eagerness to establish as many fixed data as possible about his works. This led to the identification of the play with Henslowe's "Harey the vj" of 3 March 1592 on very insufficient grounds, but with a unanimity that is somewhat surprising. For if Peele referred to a Talbot play in the following summer, Greene at about the same time indubitably quoted from the third part. By now the general opinion seems to have veered away from the identification, and to regard Henslowe's as a different play altogether.¹ With this a secondary complication has also been cleared away, and there is no longer any special reason for regarding the play as an afterthought produced in order to round off the other two parts with an introduction. And this in its turn cuts away a good deal of ground from under the theory that it was an old play that was tinkered to rights for this purpose, though it does not refute it altogether. For even when these red herrings have been disposed of, one great problem does remain, and that is that the play—on the stylistic level—does not seem to be of one piece, and lacks the complete homogeneity of *Part 3* or *Richard III*, and the practical homogeneity of *Part 2*, where only the scenes of the artisans and of Cade's rebellion stand apart—and naturally so—from the rest. And even on the level of contents there are certain episodes that seem out of keeping with the pattern and structure of the play as it now stands. The episode of the gunner's boy (I. iv) is a piece of detail that would not strike one if it had been supported by other such vignettes, but standing by itself it seems to arrogate to itself a significance it does not possess. And that is even more true of the much more fully developed anecdote of the Countess of Auvergne (II. ii f.), a pointless excrescence that concentrates far too much light on Talbot, and, together with the much more justifiable stressing of his death, does seem to make of him the hero of the play. The now fashionable horror at anything that smacks of disintegration, a natural reaction against the extremes into which too many disintegrators have fallen in the past, encourages a tendency to hurry by such difficulties with averted eyes. Yet the difficulties do exist.

Chambers,² driving things to a logical extreme, notes six different levels of style, in only two of which—the scene in the Temple gardens (II. iv), and the first of the scenes of Talbot's death (IV. ii)—does he recognize Shakespeare's

¹ Cf. Cairncross, *The First Part of King Henry VI* (London, 1962), p. xxxiii.

² *William Shakespeare* (London, 1930), I, 290 f.

Gunner

Countess

hand beyond any doubt. The remaining four levels are represented by: (a) the scenes of the English court, which with the squabbles of the various factions prepare for *Part 2*, (b) the wars in France, centering in Joan of Arc, (c) the scenes of Talbot's death, marked by the preponderance of rhyme, and (d) the Margaret-and-Suffolk scenes at the end, which are the strongest link with *Part 2*. A division into hands by subject matter is always somewhat suspect, partly because, though it may seem the most natural method of collaboration to us, it was not the most usual Elizabethan method, and partly because one cannot always be certain that objective differences in the treatment of contrasting lines of action are not due to a deliberate contrast elaborated by the same author rather than to a multiplicity of authors. In the two succeeding parts the thematic variety is not so great, and their greater homogeneity might be simply due to that. Yet it is hard to see why the (a) and the (b) matter here should have been differentiated in style, or to believe that such differences as occur are in any way deliberate. In any case it seems to me that, though the two styles denoted by Chambers as (a) and (b) do exist, the distribution does not coincide with the division into English and French matter.

- Court
- Wars
- Talbot
- Margaret

Criteria for Shakespeare's hand are also hard to fix. There is a sort of basic, undifferentiated blank verse underlying the style of most writers of the period, which only begins to assume a more marked individuality when it rises to more decorative heights, i.e. it is mainly in the imagery and the other rhetorical colors that clearer differences begin to appear; and this type of undifferentiated verse is perhaps especially frequent in history plays like *The Famous Victories* or *Edward I*, which seem to have been regarded as a genre less appropriate to decoration than true tragedy. One very characteristic mark of Shakespeare's style at this period, not found as far as I can see in any other writer, is the use of extended nature imagery that seems to be based on direct observation.³ Two characteristic examples of this occur in the second half of V. iii—the capture of Margaret:

So doth the swan her downy cygnets save,
Keeping them prisoners underneath her wings. (l. 56 f.)

As plays the sun upon the glassy streams,
Twinkling another counterfeit'd beam. (l. 63 f.)

Nobody else formed images of this type.⁴ Moreover they are taken from two of Shakespeare's favorite spheres—bird-life and rivers.⁵ Also there is in this scene a cliché that Shakespeare uses two more times in other plays:⁶

She's beautiful and therefore to be woo'd,
She is a woman, and therefore to be won. (l. 78 f.)

These passages fit perfectly into their surroundings, and if there is little else that speaks very definitely for Shakespeare, there is nothing either that speaks against him. The general effect is on a level with *Parts 2* and *3*, and there seems no reason to deny section (d) to Shakespeare.

³ Cf. Chambers, I, 287, who finds it only in *Parts 2* and *3*.

⁴ Peele's "as the serpents fold into their nests in oblique turnings" (*D. and B. I*) is e.g. exceptionally circumstantial, but much less luxuriant.

⁵ Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery* (Cambridge, 1935), pp. 16, 91.

⁶ *Titus* II.ii.82 f., *Rich. III*, I.ii.229 f.

A distinctly different style appears in IV. ii, the first of the sequence of Talbot's death. It is in pure blank verse with a high frequency of feminine endings (20%, against 4% in V. iii), and very clearly Shakespearian—Chambers put it in a special category by itself. Here—and practically speaking only here—we find such contrasting pairs of epithets as “stately and air-braving towers” (l. 13, *air-braving* is in itself typical); “thou ominous and fearful owl of death” (l. 15); “negligent and heedless discipline” (l. 44); such knotty expressions as “wall thee from the liberty of flight” (l. 24), “ere the glass that now begins to run Finish the process of his sandy hour” (l. 36), and a long-drawn metaphor of deer and hounds growing by association out of the initial metaphor “How are we park'd and bounded in a pale” (l. 45). This would seem to be comparatively ripe Shakespeare, considerably later than the scene just discussed, and belongs in all probability to a later revision.

Yet a third type of style appears, e.g., in I. ii—a typical representative of Chambers' “very inferior” (b) style, “with many flat and some absurd lines, much tautology, and a tendency to drag in learned allusions.” Here the very opening lines strike one with a kind of shock:

Mars his true moving, even as in the heavens
 So in the earth, to this day is not known.
 Late did he shine upon the English side;
 Now we are victors; upon us he smiles.
 What towns of any moment but we have?
 At pleasure here we lie near Orleans;
 Otherwise the famish'd English, like pale ghosts,
 Faintly besiege us one hour in a month—

where only the two closing lines drop into a somewhat more familiar Shakespearian cadence. But the rest of the speech is in its way extremely characteristic of the scene, and I think we may add to Chambers' description some more objective features—a rather contorted sentence structure with, above all, an excess of inversions, a certain tendency towards compression, avoidance of long sequences of thought, the sentence only seldom exceeding two or three lines at most, and a staccato abruptness of transition from line to line or phrase to phrase:

Let's raise the siege: why live we idly here?
 Talbot is taken, whom we wont to fear.
 Remaineth none but mad-brain'd Salisbury,
 And he may well in fretting spend his gall;
 Nor men nor money hath he to make war. (13 ff.)

Whoe'er helps thee, 'tis thou that must help me:
 Impatiently I burn with thy desire;
 My heart and hands thou hast at once subdu'd.
 Excellent Pucelle, if thy name be so,
 Let me thy servant and not sovereign be;
 'Tis the French Dauphin sueth to thee thus. (107 ff.)

If this is Shakespeare at all—and one may well be forgiven for doubting it—it is Shakespeare from a period with which we are not familiar. At least it

seems absolutely impossible that this scene could have been written by the same man at the same time as IV. ii.

Stylistically these three scenes or part scenes are the key scenes of the play, in that they reflect three different styles at their clearest. Round them we can group a number of further scenes. To the Talbot scene we should add the two following scenes (IV. iii, iv), in which York and Somerset are shown leaving the hero of the wars in the lurch out of mutual jealousy, and probably the whole sequence in a lump. These two scenes were given to (c) and (a) respectively by Chambers, the separation being due presumably to a short sequence of rhymes that appears in the first of them. There are rhymes however in the other, too; they both have—in spite of the rhymes, which are not conducive to them—exactly the same percentage of feminine endings as ii, and belong closely together with it. There is also an unusual amount of run-on—17 and 20% respectively, which would speak for a comparatively late period—and if in this they differ not only from all the rest of the play, but from IV. ii also, which has only 7%, the low figure there may be explained by the stateliness of the tone. It is true there is nothing very remarkable in the imagery of these scenes—a high degree of poetry would indeed be out of place here—but the personifications, one of the basic forms of Shakespeare's minor imagery, are both more frequent and more vividly rendered through the addition of a pregnant adjective than in the first three acts:

Who now is girdled with a waist of iron
And hemm'd about with *grim* destruction. (IV. iii. 20 f.)

Sleeping neglection doth betray to loss
The conquest of our scarce cold conqueror. (IV. iii. 49 f.)

Ring'd about with *bold* adversity. (IV. iv. 14)

To beat *assailing* death from his weak legions. (IV. iv. 16)

Against nine personifications in almost exactly 100 lines, the whole of Chambers' (a) up till here—637 lines, comprising nearly all the better-written scenes—has only some 13 personifications to show, most of them with so little life that one may sometimes even hesitate to include them in the count as being so little poetic: "Death's dishonourable victory" (I. i. 20), "make all Europe quake" (I. i. 156), "Friendly counsel cuts off many foes" (III. i. 184), "When envy breeds unkind division" (IV. i. 193), "the duke Hath banish'd moody discontented fury" (III. i. 123 f.—where the adjectives do not help to call forth a picture but belong to the mood that is described), "Your discretions better can persuade" (IV. i. 158), etc. If a more poetic level is achieved, it is not by giving life to the abstraction itself: "Let not sloth dim your honours new begot" (I. i. 79), "Which obloquy set bars before my tongue" (II. v. 49). Only Mortimer's death, one of the most poeticized scenes in the play, offers a fully developed personification, but again of a different type:

But now the arbitrator of despairs,
Just death, kind umpire of men's miseries,
With sweet enlargement doth dismiss me hence. (II. v. 29 f.)

In their concentrated technique the personifications of IV. iii and iv resemble those of the preceding scene:

You tempt the fury of my three attendants,
Lean famine, *quartering* steel, and *climbing* fire. (10 f.)

But death doth front thee with apparent spoil,
 And *pale* destruction meets thee in the face. (26 f.)

It may be that parts of an earlier version have been preserved in these scenes—I am thinking of IV. iii. 1-16 in particular—but they belong in the main with IV. ii.

Talbot's death itself (v-vii) is difficult to assess, for the style of heroic meter and that of blank verse are incommensurable. Prosodically, with their fairly frequent run-ons and medial pauses, these scenes represent quite a remarkable feat for the period. Poetically they are, even at their weakest, no worse than a large proportion of the concluding couplets of the sonnets, to which many of the antithetic rhyme-pairs bear a distinct resemblance; Shakespeare never attempted anything of quite the same kind elsewhere, though he comes very near to it in *Richard II*, V. iii. 70-136, with which again it compares not at all unfavorably. It may sound like heresy to say so, but Shakespeare never really mastered the couplet form; the fact that, outside the comedies, the rhyming passages in Shakespeare's plays down to *Macbeth* and *Cymbeline* are so frequently rejected as spurious should give one pause; it would be a strange coincidence that additions to his plays by other men should almost invariably have been in rhyme, and we should bear that in mind before allowing our personal tastes to decide in questions of authorship. Chambers was inclined to give the rhymed scenes to the author of (b), because of the "tasteless" comparisons to Icarus (vi. 54 f., vii. 6)—the very same comparison is used however, and again by a father lamenting for his son, in *Part 3*, V. v. 21. It seems most probable that if Shakespeare revised the play somewhere about 1594, and I agree with Chambers that IV. ii can hardly be any earlier, he rewrote the whole Talbot sequence then, and Nashe's reference is actually to an earlier version of it.

The scene in the Temple gardens (II. iv) is generally considered the most ripely Shakespearian of all, though this is due rather to the ease and vividness of the dialogue than to any outstanding poetic virtues; actually it has surprisingly little that one could point to as specially characteristic of Shakespeare's manner. It is a quarrel scene, like so many of the other English scenes, yet not a full-dress quarrel before the court or between established leaders, but between comparatively young and untried men, and that might be enough to explain the more natural, less hyperbolic tone of the whole. The high frequency of feminine endings (24%) seems to link it to the Talbot sequence, though that again may be due to its greater informality; and the run-ons (5%) do not support the idea. More important pointers are perhaps the double-barrelled epithet "this pale and maiden flower" (l. 47), and the personification "blood-drinking hate" (l. 108), especially considering the general lack of decoration. Otherwise, though the scene in its naturalness may seem beyond the scope of *Parts 2* and *3*, it is not beyond that of the earliest comedies. And if it belongs to a late revision it must, like the Talbot sequence, have replaced existing material, for it is presupposed by the following scene of Mortimer's death and the later episodes of Vernon and Basset. But unlike the Talbot scenes, which mark the climax of

the play and were one of its greatest attractions, there seems no conceivable reason why such a scene should have been rewritten. It probably belongs with the Margaret-and-Suffolk scenes, and with it go Mortimer's death, which corresponds to the latter both in its imagery and the feminine endings (4%), and, at any rate, the part scenes with Vernon and Basset (III.iv b and IV.i b), which are stylistically indifferent and have similar percentages (0 and 4).

The third group comprises the whole of Act I, not merely the French scenes, and nothing definitely outside that act. Throughout the whole act runs the same type of inversion—I give the more characteristic examples from the first three scenes, of which only the second belongs to Chambers' (b):

Me they concern; Regent I am of France. . .
Wounds will I lend the French instead of eyes. (I.i. 84-87)

An army have I muster'd in my thoughts. (101)

His ransom there is none but I shall pay;
I'll hale the Dauphin headlong from his throne;
His crown shall be the ransom of my friend;
Four of their lords I'll change for one of ours.
Farewell, my masters; to my task will I;
Bonfires in France forthwith I am to make,
To keep our great Saint George's feast withal:
Ten thousand soldiers with me I will take,
Whose bloody deeds shall make all Europe quake. (148-156)

(an excellent example of the staccato abruptness of the (b) style)

To Eltham will I, where the young king is. (170)

The king from Eltham I intend to steal. (176)

Him I forgive my death that killeth me. (I. ii. 20)

rather with their teeth
The walls they'll tear down than forsake the seige. (39 f.)

The spirit of deep prophecy she hath. (55)

Her aid she promis'd and assur'd success. (82)

My courage try by combat, if thou dar'st. (89)

My heart and hands thou hast at once subdu'd. (109)

Assign'd am I to be the English scourge. (129)

Thy scarlet robes as a child's bearing-cloth
I'll use to carry thee out of this place. (I. iii. 42 f.)

Under my feet I stamp thy cardinal's hat,
In spite of pope or dignities of church,
Here by the cheeks I'll drag thee up and down. (49 ff.)

Thee I'll chase hence, thou wolf in sheep's array. (55)

Thy heart-blood I will have for this day's work. (84)

It is not that inversion in itself is remarkable, though outside of Act I and—to a lesser extent—II. i, it is not very frequent here; it is the high concentration that

is characteristic, and especially the type with pre-position of the object in threats, which is so frequent as to amount to a stereotype. Then also, the "learned" images come thickest, it is true, in the passages of exultation in two of the French scenes (I. ii and vi)—the sword of Deborah, Saint Philip's daughters, Mahomet's dove, Rhodope of Memphis, Darius' jewel-coffer, etc., etc.—most of them from spheres that Shakespeare did not exploit, in his later work at least; but there is also Julius Caesar turned into a star (I. i. 55 f.), and "This be Damascus, be thou cursed Cain" (I. iii. 39) with its reference to the legendary scene of Abel's death. After Act I we have only "Scythian Tomyris" (II. iii. 6), and:

for once I read
That stout Pendragon in his litter, sick,
Came to the field and vanquished his foes. (III. ii. 94)

with its reminiscence of:

Froissart, a countryman of ours records,
England all Olivers and Rowlands bred. (I. ii. 29 f.)

I. vi concludes with a pastiche of Marlowe's style (ll. 17-31), just as I. i opens with one—in a rather different vein, it is true. And it is probably the echoes of *Tamburlaine* here, together with the deliberate narrative of the third messenger's speech, that obscured the strong marks of the (b) style in this scene for Chambers and others. The only other one of Shakespeare's plays in which such pastiches of Marlowe's style occur is *The Taming of the Shrew* (Ind. ii. 37-62, II. i. 340-356). The figures for feminine endings are comparatively high throughout the whole act, running for the six scenes: 5, 6, 11, 11, 17, 16, and giving an average of 8.3—again no differentiation by the matter is suggested. In short, the whole of Act I bears traces of the same primitive style, there is no question of a contrast between Chambers' (a) and (b) scenes, and, however we interpret the facts, it is clear that the quarrels between Gloucester and Winchester formed part of the play from the first. An interesting point is that in I. iii (but not in I. i, where his rank is not specified) Winchester is not only referred to as Cardinal, but his scarlet robes and broad hat are clearly envisaged by the author. After that he is merely bishop in the following acts, as indeed he is in the stage direction to I. i, until in V. i his advancement to Cardinal is underlined both by Exeter's exclamation and by his own mention of the bribe by which he gained the title. Cairncross (p. xiv) incorrectly regards V. i (not I. iii) as the inconsistent scene, and makes light of the slip altogether. Personally I cannot imagine the man who had so vividly imagined to himself the cardinal in his scarlet robes in I. iii dropping by inadvertance into the "bishop" of III. i. 53, 132, and IV. i. 1, and I believe the scene was in fact deleted and replaced by III. i. And finally we may mention one typical Shakespearian image—Joan's "Glory is like a circle in the water" (I. ii. 133 ff.), which might however be a later insertion—it could at least be omitted without making the style any jerkier than it is.

So far we have stood on the comparatively firm ground of more or less measurable facts. And that is perhaps as far as the facts will take us. There are three distinct styles apparent in the play, two of which are fairly clearly Shake-

speare's, though of different periods. The third may also be his, but, if so, from a period so early that we have nothing with which to compare it. And the remaining scenes, representing over 1000 lines and well over a third of the play, offer very little foothold for inquiry. My impression is that the primitive style of Act I does not disappear abruptly. Inversions still continue in II. i, though most of them are less forced than in the preceding act:

If any noise or soldier you perceive. (l. 2)

Now, Salisbury, for thee, and for the right
Of English Henry, shall this night appear
How much in duty I am bound to both. (l. 35 ff.)

At all times will you have my power alike? (l. 55)

Bookish images occur, as we have seen in II.iii and III.i. And though the feminine endings suddenly drop to 2% in II. i and ii, they rise again to 10% in iii, the Countess scene. But it does not seem possible to distinguish with any real certainty between the primitive style of Act I shorn of its mannerisms, and the middle style of the Margaret-and-Suffolk scenes shorn of its decorations, and one might even say that the one style merges into the other by a process of gradual improvement. Yet the middle style makes its appearance quite suddenly in II. iv and v in the midst of considerably poorer stuff. And a rather important point is that if we imagine away the sequence of York scenes (II. iv-III. i)—and even the last of them is not incompatible with the middle style—the episode of the Countess, instead of being an excrescence, becomes a functional necessity by providing a point of rest and contrast between the battles of Orleans and Rouen. III. i, besides the matter of York, also contains what is virtually a repetition of I. iii—the quarrel of Gloucester and Winchester with a skirmish between their followers and the interference of the Lord Mayor. It was almost certainly intended as a substitute for that scene, which would provide a bad headache for the producer, and indeed simply could not have been played together with V. i. For though the reader may glide over the inconsistency without noticing it, Winchester's robes would, on the stage, be bound to make sheer nonsense of either the one scene or the other. Possibly even the two part-scenes with Vernon and Basset were later insertions, and Talbot's reception by the King in III. iv passed over without a break into the coronation—a pointer in that direction is that the pair are not included in the stage directions to III. iv. And if the scope of the play as originally planned was somewhat narrower, there would have been more room, and even need, for such genre episodes as that of the gunner's boy.

My suggestion would be then that the play represents Shakespeare's first successful attempt at drama; that he intended it as the first part of a series, but, though he began his planning with an eye to the future duel between Gloucester and Winchester, he had not originally intended to introduce York and his ambitions—or not so early on in the play at least. By the time he reached the second act his mastery over his medium was improving, and he was beginning to overcome some of his worst faults, also to tighten up his metre. And in this way he continued down to about III. iii at least, and possibly considerably beyond. Conceivably, even, it was the need to provide judges for Joan's execution after all

the English leaders had been killed off that suggested the introduction of York and Warwick and the need to provide them with a background. That would allow us to refer all the weaker scenes to the first draft. At any rate, at some stage in the writing no longer exactly specifiable the original plan was modified, the sequence of York scenes was introduced at a point where there was already a break in the action, and the play was then brought to a conclusion. The task may even have been abandoned for a time while these readjustments were being thought out, and work was begun on *The Taming of the Shrew*. Finally at a revival of the play sometime about 1594 the crowning scenes—the sequence of Talbot's death—were rewritten, much as the highlights of *The Spanish Tragedy* were later refurbished, to provide a fresh attraction.

No doubt this is all extremely hypothetical, but it accounts for a number of facts that any theory of the play's origin will have to explain, and for which I see no other acceptable explanation. These facts are:

(a) The play is not stylistically of one piece.
 (b) The main body of the play, especially the opening act, is in a style unlike anything of Shakespeare's that we know. But that style develops fairly rapidly in the succeeding acts, and there is no clear break in its continuity, except for a sequence of clearly Shakespearian scenes (II. iv—III. i) that bear all the marks of a later insertion and to some extent replace matter already dealt with, but the treatment of which clashes with facts introduced later on. If we exclude Shakespeare as author we should have to postulate another beginner in his place, and one at that with exceptional powers of rapid development.

(c) The main body of the play lays considerable stress from the first on the quarrels of Gloucester and Winchester, and seems to cry out for the culmination of those quarrels given in Part 2. As an independent play it is not only very inconclusive (which, when one thinks of plays like *Edward I*, is not perhaps of much weight), but deals with a section of history strangely lacking in patriotic and most other kinds of appeal. It is only as a prologue to the theme of Henry's disastrous reign that the play with its ambivalent attitude towards the fiasco in France—both underlining it and glossing it over in almost the same breath—makes any sort of sense.

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