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“Unkind Division”: The Double Absence of Performing History in *1 Henry VI*

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THE EMERGENCE OF THE HISTORY PLAY as a significant dramatic genre is one of the defining features of the Elizabethan stage. Scholars often point to Thomas Nashe’s famous remarks about the dramatization of Talbot’s death in Shakespeare’s *1 Henry VI*, in which Nashe claims that “ten thousand spectators at least (at severall times) . . . imagine they behold him fresh bleeding” as broadly indicative of both the popularity of such plays and their potential to edify audiences.¹ The particular place of *1 Henry VI* in the story of the history play’s development has received less consideration. An early reflection on its genre, the play deserves attention for addressing the relation between history and performance. As theoretical approaches to performance gain critical ground, and as they complement and vie with various modes of historicism in analyses of the Elizabethan theater, *1 Henry VI* becomes a vehicle for exploring the provocative play of pastness on the late-Elizabethan stage.²

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¹ Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse his Svypplication to the Divell* in *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Ronald B. McKerrow, rev. F. P. Wilson, 5 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 1:212. It cannot be stated with certainty that Nashe is referring to *1 Henry VI*. Nashe’s description is connected with Shakespeare’s play only through the figure of Lord Talbot and some verbal echoes of Shakespeare’s language in Nashe’s prose. Owing to the nature of company repertories and the known existence of multiple plays on similar subjects in the period, it is possible that another play with Talbot as its hero, or as a major character, was Nashe’s reference point. However, no credible candidate other than Shakespeare’s *1 Henry VI* has been suggested as the inspiration for Nashe’s remarks, and for the purposes of this essay, I will assume that Nashe refers to Shakespeare’s play.

² I am speaking here of performance studied on ontological and phenomenological grounds, that is, consideration of performance *qua* performance, as seen in the work of such theorists as Herbert Blau, Elin Diamond, Peggy Phelan, Joseph Roach, and Bert O. States (each cited in specific contexts elsewhere in this essay). For some recent examples of what might be loosely and nonpolemically termed *theoretical performance criticism* in studies of early modern drama, see W. B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003); Robert Weimann,

In this essay I consider how history and performance are characterized in 1 Henry VI as fraught, mutually destabilizing concepts. This joint destabilization is most evident in the rhetoric of succession. Performances of the past on the early modern stage invariably engage issues of biological, political, and cultural succession, the means by which temporal continuity is promised despite human mortality. *Henry VI, Part 1* conflates disruptions in succession with the inability to sustain historical representation in performance. Both lineal succession, as a mode of organizing historical narrative, and performance, as a form of presenting the past, break down throughout the play. *Henry VI, Part 1* proposes that to perform history in the Elizabethan popular theater is not to render the past more accessible but to stage a confrontation with the past's elusiveness that is both troubling and teeming with possibility. The play of history opens a space in which the players and the audience, the totality of the transient theatrical event, are left continually to signify and resignify the past as "material for labor" in the present.³

Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre, ed. Helen Higbee and William West (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000); *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, James C. Bulman, ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 1996); Meredith Anne Skura, *Shakespeare the Actor and the Purposes of Playing* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993); Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin, *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare's England: A Collaborative Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001); Harry Berger Jr., *Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989); and Harry Berger Jr., "The Prince's Dog: Falstaff and The Perils of Speech-Prefixity," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49 (1998): 40–73. Earlier theoretically-oriented examinations of performance in the Elizabethan era can be seen in the work of Anne Richter [Barton], *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962); and Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978). I see this strain of criticism as different from, but by no means at odds with, the long-standing and vigorous performance criticism of Shakespeare's drama that takes technical staging issues and particular productions and adaptations of plays as its objects. For a forceful articulation of this latter type of performance criticism, see J. L. Stryan, *The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977). Aspects of this critical tradition are represented in collections such as *Shakespeare and the Sense of Performance: Essays in the Tradition of Performance Criticism in Honor of Bernard Beckerman*, Marvin and Ruth Thompson, eds. (Newark: U of Delaware P; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989), which contains an attempt to define the aims of performance criticism in ways that are geared toward the historical and the technical (13–23). More recent examples of this type of criticism can be seen in *Shakespeare in Performance: A Collection of Essays*, Frank Occhiogrosso, ed. (Newark: U of Delaware P; London: Associated University Presses, 2003); and *Shakespeare Performed: Essays in Honor of R. A. Foakes*, Grace Ioppolo, ed. (Newark: U of Delaware P; London: Associated University Presses, 2000). These two branches of performance criticism are not necessarily distinct so much as they are inflected to different degrees by their concern with the philosophical inquiry into the status of theater production.

³ I borrow this phrase from W. B. Worthen, who writes that performance "relocate[s] the function of the text . . . as material for labor" ("Drama, Performativity, and Performance," *PMLA* 113 [1998]: 1093–1107, esp. 1098).

I. "OPEN PRESENCE" IN THE "WOODEN O"

The temporality of the theatrical event, what may be called the "performative present," was an emergent field of cultural production in the Elizabethan era. The popular, commercial theaters that developed in the latter part of the sixteenth century generated new spaces and contexts in which to activate the mimetic impulse and engage the telling of history through performance. New forms of history writing and, more broadly, new forms of historical consciousness were emerging. D. R. Woolf has noted that "the period between 1590 and 1620 can be considered . . . an important turning point in the ways in which history was presented to, and perceived by, the public."⁴ Providential and teleological views of history were increasingly juxtaposed with more open-ended ideas of human action, while stories about the past proliferated in various print forms, from chronicles to poetry. With regard to the burgeoning printed histories there was much discussion and little consensus on matters of narrative style and form. Some humanist writers, for instance, objected to the rambling chronicles, favoring more concise and rhetorically polished narrative prose histories such as Sir Thomas More's *The History of King Richard III* and Francis Bacon's *History of the Reign of King Henry VII*.⁵ Skeptics like Sir Philip Sidney were meanwhile questioning the value and even the possibility of history, potentially dependent as it is on "hearsay" and "old mouse-eaten records."⁶

The plays about the English past that held a prominent place on the Elizabethan stage embodied these tensions over the forms and viability of telling history. Theatrical performance emerged as a unique locus of historical work. In a sense, history plays were parasitic on written histories, but they simultaneously broke from those sources to enable new modes of historical presentation, conjecture, and interpretation. The genre has received a great deal of critical attention, signaling its importance for our attempts to understand Renaissance culture. In approaches to the history play, Shakespeare's narrative departures from his historical source materials—what was left out and what was rearranged or invented outright—have been

⁴ D. R. Woolf, "The Shapes of History" in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, David Scott Kastan, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 186–205, esp. 187.

⁵ For a summary of humanist calls for decorum in the writing of history, see Woolf, "The Shapes of History," 191–99. For in-depth discussions of this and other controversial issues in early modern historiography, see Woolf's *Reading History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) and his *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England: Erudition, Ideology, and 'The Light of Truth' from the Accession of James I to the Civil War* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1990), as well as Arthur B. Ferguson's *Clio Unbound: Perception of the social and cultural past in Renaissance England* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1979).

⁶ Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J. A. Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1966), 30.

well documented.⁷ Meanwhile, a massive amount of twentieth-century scholarship devoted to the Elizabethan history play has discussed the theatrical representation of kingship and its political ramifications.⁸ Critics of the history play have shown less interest in reading the genre as an exploration of the very concept of playing the past. I wish to emphasize here the temporal and phenomenological conflicts of performing history which operate in the dramatic historiography that was born on the Elizabethan popular stage.

It is in *Henry V* that Shakespeare most stridently makes an issue of such tensions. In the Prologue, the Chorus famously calls attention to the specifically theatrical problems of performing history by questioning the status of the bodies that perform and of the "wooden O" in which plays are put on:

But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that hath dar'd
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O, pardon!

(Pro.8–15)⁹

⁷ See, for instance, Peter Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings: History, Chronicle, and Drama* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977). Saccio discusses Shakespeare's manipulation of source material in 1 *Henry VI* on pages 104–13.

⁸ See, for example, E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's English History Plays* (New York: Macmillan, 1946); Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's "Histories": Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1947); and M. M. Reese, *The Cease of Majesty: A Study of Shakespeare's History Plays* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962). These three mid-twentieth-century studies helped to inaugurate an intense interest in Shakespeare's history plays and, in particular, the representations of kingship found there. More recent work on the subject belongs to the new-historicist and cultural-materialist schools. For influential studies of kingship in early modern drama, especially history plays, see Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983); Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, "History and ideology: The instance of *Henry V*" in *Alternative Shakespeares*, John Drakakis, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), 210–31; Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare's History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985); Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The politics of Shakespeare's genres* (New York and London: Methuen, 1986); Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988); Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1990); Christopher Pye, *The Regal Phantasm: Shakespeare and the Politics of Spectacle* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); Louis Adrian Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1996); Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A feminist account of Shakespeare's English histories* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); and David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

⁹ Quotations of Shakespeare follow *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2d ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

The Chorus troubles dramatic historiography through a devastating exposure of the theater's representational inadequacy. Here and elsewhere the choral voice in *Henry V* crystallizes the tension between the desire to act out the past and the difficulty—even, perhaps, the absurdity—of doing so. But to pair history and play is less of a *discordia concors* than it might appear. Richard Palmer, in thinking about the staging of history in the twentieth century, remarks: "If one takes R. G. Collingwood's definition of history as the reenactment of past events, history emulates theatre."¹⁰ Conceptually, history and theater share a reliance on referring, and in each the referent is dubious and unstable. Ruled by a tense logic of substitution and replacement, performance in theater "stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace."¹¹ Historiography and historical consciousness are similarly predicated on a sense of distance between the immediate moment and the inaccessible past, the reconciliation of which always involves degrees of remove from any platonic ideal of perceiving history "as it really was."¹² Theater elicits and foregrounds the absences at the heart of historical thinking while never fully suppressing the representational gaps that its own form generates. On a more literal level, as *Henry V* reminds us, theatrical performances of history reinforce a sense of distance between the *now* of performance and the *then* of what is being performed, for the spatiotemporal site of the stage and the live audience it implies necessarily prescribe limits on presentational capacity and focus attention on the "presentness" of the performance event that constitutes the play.

Despite the apologies that precede *Henry V*, a play is indeed put on. The play's existence in the face of the Chorus's comments affirms that the desire to play with history is stronger than the problems such playing entails. The triumph of this desire over the poverty of theatrical representation is not unique to *Henry V*. Radical as it appears, *Henry V*'s metatheatrical energy is not so much a departure from Shakespeare's method in previous histories as it is the accumulated sum of his engagement with the medieval English past. The Chorus's bald pronouncements are subtly and thematically present in earlier histories. Indeed, a sense of deep ambivalence toward the prospect of telling history pervades the eight English history plays that precede *Henry V*, which itself points back to the earliest of those plays.¹³ While

¹⁰ Richard H. Palmer, *The Contemporary British History Play* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 7.

¹¹ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 3; for an elaboration on this idea, particularly in relation to what Roach calls "surrogation," see 1–31.

¹² This much-maligned phrase ("*wie es eigentlich gewesen*" in the original) is Leopold von Ranke's aspiration for historical objectivity, from his *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations from 1494 to 1514* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1887).

¹³ The date of *1 Henry VI* is controversial. The composition and performance dates of *1 Henry VI*, even in relation to the other *Henry VI* plays are unknown; most scholars date the play somewhere

Henry V stands today as one of Shakespeare's best-known history plays, and the *Henry VI* plays among his least-known, this discrepancy did not obtain in Shakespeare's lifetime. *Henry V* closes with a sonnet that sketches out the demise of the victories just depicted by alluding to the Wars of the Roses and the *Henry VI* plays, which were popular enough in their own time to warrant the reference:

Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crown'd King
Of France and England, did this king succeed;
Whose state so many had the managing,
That they lost France, and made his England bleed;
Which oft our stage hath shown. . . .
(Epi.9-13)¹⁴

There is a deliberate circularity to the Chorus's epilogue. Calling attention to the *Henry VI* plays ensures that the spectacle of King Henry V's triumphs will end on a note of loss, reminding audiences of the corrupt and chaotic world depicted in those early plays. The closing words highlight the failure of Henry V's line of succession as a cause of that chaos. *Henry V* invokes the specter of the *Henry VI* plays to deepen its own explicit metatheatrical commentary on loss in performing the past.

Henry V ends by reminding audiences of what's to come, and *1 Henry VI* begins by reminding audiences of what's already happened. At the funeral of King Henry V which opens *1 Henry VI*, Gloucester recalls an idealized age when England's Henry V "ne'er lift up his hand but conquered" (1.1.16). *Henry VI, Part 1* continually diverts our attention from the past that is being enacted to a further past that is out of reach for both theater audiences and the characters onstage. The Elizabethan audiences attending performances of *1 Henry VI* watched enactments of an absent history that was itself infused with nostalgia for an absent past.¹⁵

This perhaps gloomy aesthetic of longing did not deter audiences from enjoying *1 Henry VI*. Philip Henslowe's theatrical records confirm the suggestion in the

between 1590 and 1592. For a recent argument for 1591 as the earliest composition date, see B. J. Sokol, "Manuscript Evidence for an Earliest Date of *Henry VI, Part One*," *Notes & Queries*, n.s. 47 (March 2000): 58-63. Gary Taylor makes a convincing case for locating the first performance precisely at the date Philip Henslowe first names "hary the vj," 3 March 1592; see Gary Taylor, "Shakespeare and Others: The Authorship of *Henry the Sixth, Part One*," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 7 (1995): 145-205, esp. 186. See also *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1961), 16-20.

¹⁴ The Chorus's lines in *Henry V* did not appear in print until the First Folio in 1623. It is unclear when these lines were composed, or when they were first performed as part of *Henry V*. My point here depends on an assumption that the Chorus's lines were performed sometime before they were printed and can thus be read as an instance of *metadramatic* reflection on the earlier *1 Henry VI*.

¹⁵ On the play's shifting temporal perspective, see David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time* (Hanover, NH: U of New England P, 1982), 23-24.

Henry V Epilogue that *1 Henry VI* was a commercial success.¹⁶ In addition to these business records for *1 Henry VI*, there is the previously mentioned reference by Nashe to its performance. Given the paucity of materials that document contemporary response to Elizabethan plays, Nashe's account in *Pierce Penilesse His Supplication to the Divell* points to this play as an important site for considering issues of performance in Shakespeare.¹⁷ In a section devoted to an apology for the stage, Nashe emphasizes that plays took place in "open presence" and claims that theatrical engagements with history were a means of teaching virtue, asking what, besides history plays, "can be a sharper reproofe to these degenerate effiminate dayes of ours?"¹⁸ *Pierce Penilesse* moves from this general defense of staging history to particular citation of Talbot's end in *1 Henry VI*. Nashe's enthusiastic praise of Talbot's valiant stage death suggests that Shakespeare's play affected audiences by vividly "reviving" the past, showing the brave Talbot "fresh bleeding" as he dies at the hands of the French.¹⁹

The play itself, however, renders the idea of "revival" through performance highly problematic, as does Nashe's own description if considered fully. I will return to a longer consideration of Nashe's comments on *1 Henry VI*. For now I want simply to suggest that in the practice of mounting stage histories, and in particular *1 Henry VI*, this contemporary reference locates a hope for salutary revival tintured with the sense of history from which it supposedly breaks free—the history recounted in the "rustie" and "worme-eaten" sources of history plays.²⁰ This idea of history as fragmentary and threatened by, rather than conquering, oblivion is at work in both Nashe's prose and Shakespeare's play. *Henry VI, Part 1* implicates the performance of history in an occluded idea of pastness and vexes the notion that performance can enable the past to emerge in Nashe's patriotically transparent "open presence," leaving us to look beyond this explanation for a fuller sense of the pleasure history plays afford and the power they exert.

II. SUCCEEDING HENRY

Succession is nearly always a problem in Shakespeare and is not an issue confined to the history plays. From the riotous dispute over the imperial diadem that opens

¹⁶ See the numerous entries for "hary the vj," traditionally presumed to refer to Shakespeare's play, in Foakes and Rickert, eds., 16–20. Most theater historians, following E. K. Chambers, interpret Henslowe's records of the gate receipts for *1 Henry VI* as unusually high; see Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 2:122.

¹⁷ On the connection between Nashe's remarks and *1 Henry VI*, see note 1, above.

¹⁸ Nashe, 1:212.

¹⁹ Nashe, 1:212.

²⁰ Nashe, 1:212.

Titus Andronicus to the ducal usurpation in *As You Like It* and *The Tempest* to the double displacement of both young and old Hamlet by Claudius, Shakespeare shows a preoccupation with problematizing the smooth transfer of authority. The problem of succession takes on special significance in the history plays, however, because historical succession suggests the possibility of a connection between the performed past and the performative present—links, as it were, in the chain from *then* to *now*. *Henry VI, Part 1* uses narratives of succession and their disruption to frustrate notions of continuity between the present and the past, and thus asserts dramatic historiography's power to shape the conceptual meaning of the past in the present.

Henry VI, Part 1 is, as numerous studies have argued, a play about crumbling structures of authority and stability.²¹ The language of loss and the desire for some form of recuperation shapes the play. Talbot's exclamation after one of the many shifts in momentum during the French wars—"Lost, and recovered in a day again!" (3.2.115)—is emblematic of the play's concern with notions of loss and recovery as organizing principles for the story it tells. Uses of the word *loss* and its cognates proliferate with a frequency that suggests loss is meant to be thematic rather than simply functional. Indeed, *loss* or *lost* appear five times within just ten lines in the play's first scene (1.1.59–68), asserting the symbolic value of the concept from the start. But one particular moment late in the play, worthy of mention for invoking the precarious state of Henry V's victories, is Sir William Lucy's bitter reflection on the English decline, as England stands poised to lose both its possessions in France and its great hero, Talbot:

Sleeping neglection doth betray to loss
The conquest of our scarce-cold conqueror,
That ever-living man of memory,
Henry the Fift. Whiles they [the English nobility] each other cross,
Lives, honor, lands, and all, hurry to loss.

(4.3.49–53)

Lucy's dark words, framed by "loss" at the end of the first and last lines quoted, point both to the idea of loss as central to the play and to its specific connection with the

²¹ This is a well-established trope in criticism of the play. Here is a selective survey of works that trace the patterns of disintegration somewhat explicitly, although it is adduced in smaller ways throughout the criticism on *1 Henry VI*: E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's English Histories*, 161–73, esp. 164–68; Philip Brockbank, "The Frame of Disorder—Henry VI" (1961) in *On Shakespeare: Jesus, Shakespeare and Karl Marx, and Other Essays* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 79–103; Edward I. Berry, *Patterns of Decay: Shakespeare's Early Histories* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1975), 1–28; Ronald Levaio, *Renaissance Minds and Their Fictions: Cusanus, Sidney, Shakespeare* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985), 281–94; and Lisa Dickson, "No Rainbow Without the Sun: Visibility and Embodiment in *1 Henry VI*," *Modern Language Studies* 30 (2000): 137–56.

Loss

figure of Henry V. The “ever-living man of memory” (the phrase is itself a temporal paradox) is constructed throughout this play as what the present lacks, and, somewhat akin to the ghost of Hamlet’s father, the idea of this great king and the consequences of his death hover over and haunt the proceedings of *1 Henry VI*. The sense of loss that is woven into the verbal patterns of the play begins with the disruption that Henry V’s death produces, and it coheres around the idea of pastness that he represents.

The opening scene of *1 Henry VI* posits memorialization as a strategy for coping with cultural disintegration. The play begins as the body of King Henry V, “too famous to live long” (1.1.6), is brought onstage in a coffin, the (in)visible presence of a debilitating absence. As the dead king is eulogized by his advisors and family members, descriptions veer from the fantastic (“His arms spread wider than a dragon’s wings” [l. 11]) toward the sacrosanct (“He was a king blest of the King of kings” [l. 28]) and at one point seem to run aground on the limits of language, as Gloucester proclaims: “His deeds exceed all speech” (l. 15). This sense of limitation is not observed, however, even by Gloucester, for the praise continues until the moment the speakers descend into bickering and self-conscious predictions that even in the minor “jars” (l. 44) at King Henry’s funeral a picture of future strife can be discerned. In the play’s first fifty lines Henry V is sentimentalized as representing the irrecoverable past that stands in contrast to the anxious present and the sinister future. His loss, as established at the dramatic outset, is a hole, a great “O” perhaps, into which England is sinking.²²

The twentieth-century playwright Heiner Müller speaks of a desire at the heart of drama to forge a “dialogue with the dead.”²³ Bedford explicitly yearns for such a dialogue, exclaiming, “Henry the Fifth, thy ghost I invoke: / Prosper this realm, keep it from civil broils” (ll. 52–53). The difficulty of establishing such communication is almost immediately acknowledged, for Bedford’s attempted invocation is interrupted by a messenger bearing tidings of England’s military disasters in France, where English holdings “are all quite lost” (l. 61). In an almost comical compounding of the sense of doom, two additional messengers arrive with more ill news from France. The portrait of family strife and cracked stability, coupled with the presence of *nuntius* figures bringing news of catastrophe, lends an aura of Greek tragedy to the beginning of *1 Henry VI*, particularly discernible in Bedford’s dark prophecy:

²² Phyllis Rackin reads not just *1 Henry VI* but both Shakespeare’s tetralogies as driven by the absent King Henry V; the first looks back for him, the second looks forward to his ascension, culminating in *Henry V* (*Stages of History*, 29–30).

²³ Quoted here from Jonathan Kalb, *The Theater of Heiner Müller* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 15.

Posterity, await for wretched years,
 When at their mothers' moist'ned eyes babes shall suck,
 Our isle be made a nourish of salt tears,
 And none but women left to wail the dead

(ll. 48–51)

Foreboding prophecies such as Bedford's are common in this play, and none is more pithy than one from Exeter in mid-play, as he recalls a homely formulation that neatly articulates what the opening of *1 Henry VI* suggests: "Henry born at Monmouth [Henry V] should win all, / And Henry born at Windsor [Henry VI] lose all" (3.1.197–98). The play's first scene offers a formula for disaster, as factions and the loss of effective leadership define the English nobility. Succession is one hope the play holds out but then retracts as a means of coping with the troubled present.

The view of English history as a tragedy of degeneration is momentarily altered by the glimmer of hope represented in Lord Talbot. His story, relayed by the third messenger, "displaces" the death of Henry V from our attention.²⁴ This displacement suggests some light emerging from the darkness of the French wars, for even as it describes Talbot's capture, it asserts his heroism, a match or successor perhaps to the loss figured by the casket onstage. The first messenger invokes the absent Talbot in this early moment in the play and, in doing so, diverts attention from the present spectacle of in-fighting and toward the potential stability and historical continuity Talbot represents. If there is one constant in this play, however, it is that succession is a fraught concept. For just as King Henry V was unable to pass his merit on to his young son, so Talbot, too, fails to supply the place of the deceased Henry. While clearly the play's putative "hero" and its moral center, Talbot is nonetheless implicated in the constant caprice of fortune that marks the play, the swing of momentum between the English and the French, summed up by Joan de Pucelle's phrase "Turn and turn again!" (3.3.85). Joan's language elsewhere captures the play's commitment to disrupting historical stability:

Assign'd am I to be the English scourge.

.....

Glory is like a circle in the water,
 Which never ceaseth to enlarge itself,
 Till by broad spreading it disperse to nought.
 With Henry [V]'s death the English circle ends,
 Dispersed are the glories it included.

(1.2.129–37)

²⁴ This point is made by Alexander Leggatt, "The Death of John Talbot" in *Shakespeare's English Histories: A Quest for Form and Genre*, John W. Velz, ed. (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1996), 11–30, esp. 13.

Talbot himself speaks what might be an epigraph for this chaotic play, when, having been bested by Joan in a brief combat, he exclaims, "My thoughts are whirled like a potter's wheel" (1.5.19). *The First Part of Henry VI's* vision of an unstable world is perhaps best mapped through Talbot, whose trajectory from humiliated captive to sporadically triumphant warrior to slain hero holds within it many of the play's most prominent themes. For in Talbot, whose story culminates in an enactment of thwarted succession, we see the play reaching for some sort of stability, a point of historical continuity that appears only to vanish, again like the Ghost at the start of *Hamlet*—"Tis here! / 'Tis here! / 'Tis gone!" (1.1.141–42).

Talbot is never fully compromised by the ominous world of the play, but he does depart from the heroic, both in his petty refusal to be ransomed by men of lower rank (1.4.30–33) and in the image conveyed in the Countess of Auvergne's disdainful description of him as a "weak and writhled [wrinkled] shrimp" (2.3.23). The play proposes him as a center for the disordered world but shows us his struggle to maintain any sense of stability or control. His status is always in doubt. He is particularly equivocal about issues of presence and public display. When describing his time as a prisoner of the French, he recalls that "in open market-place produc'd they me / To be a public spectacle to all" (1.4.40–41) and remembers this as the worst form of punishment. To be shown publicly, to be displayed and made a spectacle by his captors is an almost unbearable torture, yet when Salisbury (himself a link to the glorious past, for "Henry the Fifth he first train'd to the wars" [1.4.79]) is slain ignominiously by a French boy and his linstock, Talbot can devise no better way to memorialize the earl than to publicly display his corpse: "Bring forth the body of old Salisbury, / And here advance it in the market-place, / The middle centre of this cursed town" (2.2.4–6). Christopher Pye reads Talbot's decision to exhibit Salisbury's corpse in the marketplace as an act of critical "revision," an insight that lends a performative cast to Talbot's determination to present Salisbury there.²⁵ Shame or glory for Talbot is not inherent in public presentation but is rather a variable result, conditioned by the shifting valences of performance. Talbot's recognition of performance's mutable value reinforces his, and the play's, more general uncertainty about issues of presence and presentation.

The anamorphic view of public display seen in Talbot's earliest scenes is indicative of Talbot's character, which comes in and out of focus as alternately the "terror of the French" (1.4.42), the last vestige of ancient English warrior nobility, and the hapless old general, the "weak and writhled shrimp" who in the play's whirligig of battles is defeated and sent fleeing almost as often as he conquers. That the figure

²⁵ Christopher Pye, "The Theater, the Market, and the Subject of History," *ELH* 61 (1994): 501–22, esp. 513.

of Talbot is slippery is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his complicated, riddling wordplay with the Countess of Auvergne. The Countess lures Talbot to her castle, insults him bitterly, and claims him as her prisoner. Talbot responds, "You are deceiv'd, my substance is not here" (2.3.51). The Countess is astonished to hear him say he is not truly present: "He will be here, and yet he is not here. / How can these contrarieties agree?" (ll. 58–59). Talbot then explains that he is but a "shadow" of himself, his real "substance" being his army (ll. 62–63), which enters to his rescue.

The strange scene of Talbot's meeting with the Countess has been dismissed by some critics as an unstructured intrusion of the romantic into the historical.²⁶ Alternatively, Phyllis Rackin reads this scene in terms of its implications for the gendering of historical narrative. Women in the play, Joan and the Countess in particular, are for Rackin "antihistorians."²⁷ The Countess entices Talbot into captivity precisely in order to negate the history he has made and continues to make at the expense of French lives and property. Rackin sees in *1 Henry VI* a pervasive attempt to figure female characters as "reductive" and "nominalist" in their efforts to annul the history that English men attempt to script through their actions.²⁸ In this scene what seems more prominent to me than romantic interruption or the gendering of history, though, is the infusion of the theatrical. Talbot's denial of presence deepens the interplay between shadow and substance that the scene brings forward. This interplay is introduced by the Countess's cryptic reference to the portrait of Talbot on her wall: "Long time thy shadow hath been thrall to me, / For in my gallery thy picture hangs; / But now the substance shall endure the like" (ll. 36–38). Talbot's image, then, precedes his visit to the Countess, but even after his arrival, he is not fully there.

It has been said that "disappearance [is] a phenomenological given of all performance."²⁹ Talbot embodies this given throughout the play. As the putative center of the fractured world the play depicts, Talbot emerges long before his death as already a ghostly figure, one whose presence and absence seem always to be almost concomitant. Emrys Jones and others have noted the theatrical language of the scenes involving the Countess or her servants, from "plot" (2.3.4) and "acts" (2.2.35) right

²⁶ See, for instance, Marco Mincoff's "The Composition of *Henry VI, Part 1*" (SQ 16 [1965]: 279–87), in which Mincoff refers to the Countess episode as a "pointless excrescence" (279).

²⁷ Phyllis Rackin, "Anti-Historians: Women's Roles in Shakespeare's Histories," *Theatre Journal* 37 (1985): 329–44. See also Rackin's elaboration of this piece in *Stages of History*, esp. 151–58.

²⁸ Rackin, *Stages of History*, 153.

²⁹ This line is from Elin Diamond's explication of the work of Peggy Phelan and Herbert Blau in *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on feminism and theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 152. For more on performance and "disappearance," see Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146–66.

down to the word *shadow* itself, a synonym for *actor* in the period.³⁰ Jones argues that the scene offers a contrast “between the fame of the historical Talbot in the minds of Shakespeare’s audience and the ‘shape’ it assumes, reincarnated by the actor, in the present play.”³¹ This scene with the Countess enforces the play’s artificiality as a representation of the past, but, even more crucially, it is a comment on the performance of history that it nonetheless presents. The scene’s reference to theatricality threatens the integrity of the play’s historical representation: Talbot’s insistence that he is but “Talbot’s shadow” (l. 46) momentarily appears as a moment of *alea*, an unexpected interruption of the play as mimesis, which upsets the Countess’s and the play’s coherence as an enactment of the past. Talbot’s claim that he enjoys a corporate identity is both a nod to “chivalric community” and an acknowledgment that the Talbot onstage is a product of the communal event of theater.³²

Talbot and the Countess reach a strange, uneasy truce after his army storms the castle, Talbot insisting that he is “not offended” by the Countess and the Countess insisting that she is “honored / To feast so great a warrior in [her] house” (2.3.76, 82). Their compromise precludes further unpleasantness between them and allows the play to continue, but it cannot wholly mend the rupture that the scene has produced. It instead suspends skepticism in favor of pursuing the desire that underlies the scene, in the same way that the desire to watch performances of history ensures that the performances continue despite their artificiality and obvious fictiveness.

Talbot’s ambiguous attitudes toward the “open market-place” and toward the play of shadows and substance indicate his fluctuating perception of his own status as an agent of history and his difficulties in being the ostensible successor to the great English “lions” of the past. When Talbot claims his army is his substance, it is difficult not to think of the words with which he berated his men shortly before: “Sheep run not half so treacherous from the wolf, / Or horse or oxen from the leopard, / As you fly from your oft-subdued slaves” (1.5.30–32). For Talbot to assert that his army is his substance when his relation to the soldiers is volatile and at times even hostile suggests his own shifting sense of self. His sense of events, “Whirled like a potter’s wheel,” alternates between an idea of mastery arising from self-control and a troubling fear that he is at the disposal of more powerful forces. “Heavens, can you suffer hell so to prevail?” (1.5.9), he cries, as his troops retreat and he engages Joan in single combat. The Countess’s incredulous question about

³⁰ Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 143–49. Sigurd Burckhardt points to some theatrical implications of this scene and the play at large in *Shakespearean Meanings* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1968), as do Rackin in *Stages of History* and Pye in “The Theater, the Market, and the Subject of History.”

³¹ Jones, 147.

³² Berry, 8.

the "here and not here" status of the man who stands before her defines Talbot's fragility as locus of the play's desire for some point of stability. The contrariety of the here and not here is, further, a figure for the ambivalent relation of the present and the past generated by *1 Henry VI*. Like Talbot, the past represented here is both present and not present, invoked only to be shelved in favor of an indeterminate, idealized past that is always receding.

Succession promises a link between generations that might seal the gaps in the flow of historical time. Talbot represents a generalized idea of succession, filling the place of Henry V, while Talbot's son John represents a literal succession, in which the son succeeds the father. And yet the enactment of Talbot's death announces with grim clarity that succession is precarious, for when he dies, he holds in his arms the body of his dead son: "Now my old arms are young John Talbot's grave" (4.7.32). The scene of their demise, with both Talbot and his son refusing to flee the battle even when staying will mean death, guarantees their place in history as heroes. They privilege their historical legacy over the capacity to "be" and make more history; the future, absent narrative of their deeds takes priority over a continuing living presence:

TALBOT	Upon my blessing I command thee go.
JOHN	To fight I will, but not to fly the foe.
TALBOT	Part of thy father may be sav'd in thee.
JOHN	No part of him but will be shame in me.
TALBOT	Thou never hadst renown, nor canst not lose it.
JOHN	Yes, your renowned name: Shall flight abuse it?
TALBOT	Thy father's charge shall clear thee from that stain.
JOHN	You cannot witness for me, being slain. If death be so apparent, then both fly.
TALBOT	And leave my followers here to fight and die? My age was never tainted with such shame.

(4.5.36–46)

Their choice to remain on the battlefield is an explicit counter to the cowardice of John Falstaff, who twice retreats from battle and leaves his fellows in danger (1.1.131–36; 3.2.104–9), for which he is publicly shamed and stripped of his honors (4.1.13–47). The language of the exchange between Talbot and his son, however, goes beyond simply affirming that staying is the morally honorable thing to do, raising questions of legitimacy, fame, witness, and lineal succession.³³ Talbot insists that

³³ John fears he will sully his mother's reputation if he does not live up to the expectations of being Talbot's son; he will honor his mother by dying, and thus be unable to represent his father in the future.

part of him will be preserved if his son lives, an argument that John rejects because he fears that by surviving the battle, he would mar his father's name.

The painful spectacle of their conversation and eventual deaths, drawn out over two separate scenes that are virtually identical, has obvious affective potential.³⁴ The decision that young and old Talbot make to die in battle no doubt signifies as heroic, but, I would argue, it is simultaneously problematic because of the cultural and political void their deaths create. Alexander Leggatt, focusing on the form of their dialogue, suggests that the rhyming heroic couplets produce "the effect not just of heightening the scene by stylizing it, but of making the Talbots seem boxed in, stymied."³⁵ Consistent with Leggatt's sense of this formal effect is the terrible and inescapable paradox that the situation presents: the qualities that make Talbot and his son heroic also make it unthinkable for them to do anything that might prolong their lives for future heroic deeds.³⁶ Father and son do offer each other ways to preserve the integrity of the family name and to promote the greater good of the commonweal through one of them escaping. John says to his father: "Your loss is great, so your regard should be; / My worth unknown, no loss is known in me. / Upon my death the French can little boast; / In yours they will, in you all hopes are lost" (4.5.22–25). In the next scene Talbot responds:

If I to-day die not with Frenchmen's rage,
To-morrow I shall die with mickle age.
By me they nothing gain and if I stay,
'Tis but the short'ning of my life one day.
In thee thy mother dies, our household's name,
My death's revenge, thy youth, and England's fame.
(4.6.34–39)

According to the son, the Talbot name as invested in the father is what must be preserved—his loss signals that "all hopes are lost." For the father, the line should be preserved in the natural succession of youth. Talbot explains that he is old and ready to die, but in young John lies the potential to avenge Talbot's death and restore

³⁴ E. Pearlman argues that the repetition is evidence of textual corruption, and that the scenes indicate Shakespeare's revision process ("Shakespeare at Work: The Two Talbots," *Philological Quarterly* 75 [1996]: 1–22). I read the repetition as an intentional demonstration of the Talbots' willful decision to stay.

³⁵ Leggatt, 18.

³⁶ Relevant to my reading, David Riggs writes that here "the Talbots discover that the ideal figured by their heroic 'name' is too pure for sublunary existence. It can be ratified only in the very act of death" (*Shakespeare's Heroical Histories: Henry VI and Its Literary Tradition* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971], 110). For another strong reading of this scene, see Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time*, 20–23.

"England's fame." Both father and son offer each other compelling logical reasons why the other should flee and propose solutions to the shame that flight might confer by looking to future benefits. Namely, they each point to the maintenance of the "household's name" and the reimposition of English rule in France, things that can occur only if one of them survives. Their resolution to die together constitutes a choice to forego the continuity they both represent as potential successors—Talbot to Henry V, and John to that generation through his father. Succession and the social stability it ensures becomes disrupted when father and son perish together.

Their decision is figured as simultaneously heroic and questionable, and is made more ambiguous in John's case by his youth and his more natural title to succession, and also by the mythological allusions to Icarus, to whom Talbot twice compares his son (4.6.55; 4.7.16). This association with Icarus, a symbol for youthful inexperience and dangerously self-indulgent ambition, somewhat dilutes the heroism of young Talbot's refusal to flee insurmountable odds, suggesting that a prideful stubbornness lies at the heart of his desire for a glorious death. His refusal to care for his safety and perhaps for vengeance, as Talbot suggests (4.5.18), is at once noble and deeply troubling because it extinguishes hopes for stability and recuperation through succession.

John Talbot cannot carry on his father's tradition because he chooses to die with him, a decision that affirms he is Talbot's son and negates his ability to use his inherited nobility for the good of the commonweal. Meanwhile, young King Henry VI has failed to inherit his father's gift for leadership, and even the play's putative villain, Joan de Pucelle, repudiates her lineage at the moment of her death, denying that the humble shepherd who comes to see her is her father (5.4.21–22). The pattern of broken succession in *1 Henry VI* reveals the play's interest in exploring the problematic question of stability and historical continuity.³⁷ In the end Talbot is unable to give England victory over France, as King Henry V did at Agincourt, and Talbot's death signals the end of the English lions whose primary allegiance was supposedly to their country's honor.³⁸ One way in which Talbot does finally replicate Henry V is in his failure to leave behind him an heir who will perpetuate the traditions of the old English nobility.

³⁷ On this point, see also Leggatt, *passim*; and Dickson, *passim*.

³⁸ Shakespeare will later depict King Henry V and his father, Bolingbroke, as canny political manipulators, and the Henry V play with which most spectators in the early 1590s would be most familiar, *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (from which Shakespeare drew much inspiration), certainly paints a less-than-idealized portrait of Henry V's apprenticeship, consistent with the narratives about him in the chronicles and other sources. But in the context of *1 Henry VI*, at least on the level of the characters' sense of historical legacies, Henry V and his generation stand for adherence to a certain ideal of patriotic service that the new generation of nobles lacks.

More generally, the play's mode of presenting Talbot and then his son as potential successors provides a temporary distraction from the ominous tone set in the opening scene. This strategy of distraction is attenuated by the vagaries of the scene with the Countess, undoes itself in the scene of the Talbots' death, and thus works continually to displace audience focus, directing attention elsewhere for some link between past and present. Richard, Duke of York, might have provided a counterweight to Talbot's loss, but his own implication in a sectarian quagmire produces another instance where the hope of succession expires in contingencies.


III. FACTIONALISM AND THE RHETORIC OF GENEALOGY

The Talbots' deaths are clearly linked to the factionalism that is one of the play's most salient features. Sign and cause of England's ruin, factionalism is also a dramatic method of introducing contested histories. The conflict between York and Somerset that prevents aid to Talbot is explicitly identified as the cause of the Talbots' plight and complicates Talbot's belief that "malignant and ill-boding stars" (4.5.6) are to blame. The play's idea of causation is in fact rooted largely in factionalism, which is enacted in the bickering at King Henry's funeral and specifically mentioned by the first messenger in Act 1, who chides the English nobility:

Amongst the soldiers this is muttered,
That here you maintain several factions;
And whilst a field should be dispatch'd and fought,
You are disputing of your generals.

(1.1.70–73)

This pattern is recognized by many figures in the play, as when Exeter adds his own reading of the factional splits: "But more, when envy breeds unkind division: / There comes the ruin, there begins confusion" (4.1.193–94); Lucy refers to the same pattern in words quoted above—"Whiles they [the English nobility] each other cross, / Lives, honor, lands, and all hurry to loss"—seeing factionalism as directly contributing to Talbot's death and the English demise.

 Factionalism emerges as an analogue to succession in *1 Henry VI*. The play posits sectarian rifts—humanly constructed "second" causes—as an alternative to providence or sorcery, also commonly invoked as the driving forces of human events. Beyond this, the highlighting of factionalism is a way of broaching the problem of historical continuity. Factionalism produces multiple histories, for it implies an inability to reach consensus on how to read what has happened in the past. Factionalism as an engine for historical inquiry informs the opening quarrel between Gloucester and Winchester over Henry V's relation to the church (1.1.28–44) and is plainly evident in the famous garden scene (2.4) and

Plantagenet's subsequent visit to his dying uncle Mortimer (2.5), who delivers a history lesson worthy of a choral figure. In the garden scene factionalism is a vehicle for introducing more histories, forcing the audience's perspective away from what is happening onstage in search of something else that might help to explain the deficiencies of the enacted present.

The scene in London's Temple Garden (2.4) relocates the action from the battlefields of France to a more explicitly discursive realm and introduces the next generation of English nobles. These men are not, like John Talbot, being "trained to the wars" but are, rather, honing their rhetorical and genealogical skills. This moment in the play underscores the cultural shift implied by John Talbot's dying with his father, as sons now prove their lineage through rhetorical and legal wrangling rather than martial action. The scene revolves around a never-explained legal debate between Plantagenet (later York) and Somerset, a serious rift that will eventually contribute to the "civil broils" of the Wars of the Roses. In this scene Shakespeare invents a moment of origin for the symbols of the Lancaster and York families, the red and the white rose. But as with any attempt to posit origins, this scene points backward as well as forward, asking inevitable questions of pre-origins. For beyond simply implying a trivial beginning for the long civil wars ahead, the problems in the garden scene gesture to both present troubles and past causes.

As the debate over a point of law escalates, Somerset recalls the past in order to discredit Plantagenet:

Was not thy father, Richard Earl of Cambridge,
For treason executed in our late king's days?
And by his treason, stand'st not thou attainted,
Corrupted, and exempt from ancient gentry?
His trespass yet lives guilty in thy blood.

(2.4.90–94)

Plantagenet's pedigree, defensively adduced by Warwick a few lines earlier, links Plantagenet to perhaps the greatest lion in English history, Edward III: "His grandfather was Lionel Duke of Clarence, / Third son to the third Edward, King of England" (ll. 83–84). The irrelevant legal debate then gives way to a debate over Plantagenet's place in the lines of royal succession. This "jar" drives Plantagenet's own interest in his past, inspiring him to seek out answers from his dying uncle Mortimer, who provides his nephew with both a particular and a general historical frame. Mortimer's history of the English monarchy from Richard II to Henry VI (2.5.61–92), with its description of his family's disenfranchisement from the throne, helps to bring to light some relevant historical background. But more crucially, it underlines the sense of loss and desire for recuperation at the heart of historical narration. It is Mortimer's fondest wish that his nephew Plantagenet "might recover what was lost" (l. 32)—that is, regain the family title stripped from his father.

The idea of restoration or reinstatement comes to occupy Plantagenet's story and is in fact first suggested by his enemy Somerset: "Till thou be restor'd, thou art a yeoman" (2.4.95). Plantagenet's restoration by the young King Henry VI, in which he becomes duke of York, is one moment in the play where the present affords some measure of recuperation (3.1.168–72). York fulfills the hopes of his dying uncle by recovering "what was lost." Intriguingly, York's restoration also stands as a refutation of Henry V. York had told his uncle, "methinks, my father's execution / Was nothing less than bloody tyranny" (2.5.99–100), and the son's reinstatement would seem tacitly to confirm this view. The play subtly but clearly suggests that perhaps its absent hero was in fact a "tyrant," or that York is unworthy of his noble place. In either case, the translation of Plantagenet to York is itself a moment of rupture; through it King Henry VI reverses his father's disenfranchisement of Plantagenet's line.

Looming behind York's reinstatement is the dark shadow of civil wars to come, which, as the play would have it, result in part from the personal animosity between Somerset and York, a rivalry that drove York to regain his hereditary right in the first place. Plantagenet reassumes his family's noble standing, but as York, he fails to rise above factionalism, so that a reordering of the lines of succession neither resolves problems nor protects England's stability.

York's succession fails to heal the "unkind division" threatening the world of 1 Henry VI. This failure, coupled with the death of the Talbots, prompts a continual diversion of attention in the play, a search for bedrock beneath the shifting soil. The title character cannot fulfill this role. Lisa Dickson notes that the young king's absence from the crucial opening scene "is indicative of a political vacuum" in the play.³⁹ The play's other major character, Joan de Pucelle, is more than anything a figure of instability. Joan commands demons that only sometimes work for her, and she vacillates between glamorous national hero of France and conniving Vice figure. In 1 Henry VI a center of coherence is elusive, as are hopes for points of connection to link the generations.

IV. "DEAD MARCH"

The Countess of Auvergne's confusion over Talbot's claim to be "here and not here" expresses the yearning for stability that characters in this play, and perhaps also audiences of this play, can never capture. Henry VI, Part 1 figures the spectacle of the past as a spinning "potter's wheel" rather than as the kind of stable historical narrative that Gloucester attempts to deliver at Henry V's funeral, where he recalls Henry as one who "ne'er lift up his hand but conquered." As perhaps best exemplified by

³⁹ Dickson, 138.

Mortimer's history of the monarchy, which in the midst of England's deepening conflicts directs our attention away from present urgencies, the audience's perspective on the play is never stable. Within the play, the repeated deflections away from the time it depicts generate a sense of instability concomitant with the instability the play thematizes. This conundrum points in part to the unique temporality of history plays. Performing history disrupts the linearity of time. Within the performative present of *1 Henry VI*, fractured layers of temporality emerge. There is the now of 1590s London, the palpable place in which the play is performed, and there is the then of medieval England and France, the time and places to which the play putatively refers. Within the then of medieval England and France, the play invokes another then, that of the even more distant past to which characters in *1 Henry VI* refer. From the opening evocations of Henry V to Suffolk's final musings on ancient Greece and the Trojan wars, audiences are forced to look out and away from the time and place of the play.

Henry VI, Part 1 ends with a temporary victory over the French, but one so precarious that not even the English feel very triumphant. York predicts that the peace England offers is merely a temporary victory: "I foresee with grief / The utter loss of all the realm of France" (5.4.111–12), while the king's last words hardly provide comfort: "And so conduct me where, from company, / I may revolve and ruminate my grief" (5.5.100–101). The king even loses control of his simple hope to meditate and reflect by using the word "revolve," implicating his language in the whirligig imagery of the spinning "potter's wheel" that defines the play. The gloomy ending of *1 Henry VI*, with its lack of closure, denies a neat historical narrative but does suggest *theatrical* continuity; for the play seems designed either to encourage sequels or, as some scholars have suggested, to serve as a kind of "prequel" to the other *Henry VI* plays.⁴⁰ This observation reminds us of the play's status as a play, a creation for the popular stage. Despite its range of reference, *1 Henry VI* never quite escapes its containment on London's South Bank. The language of *1 Henry VI* circles around its own theatricality, inscribed in the play's very first words, where Bedford employs a stage metaphor to describe the somber mood of Henry V's funeral: "Hung be the heavens with black" (1.1.1), wordplay on the trimming of the stage for tragic plays.

This sensitivity to the language of theatricality, evident as well in Talbot's anxieties over public display, manifests in more ambiguous and sometimes more tense

⁴⁰ In "Shakespeare and Others: The Authorship of *Henry the Sixth, Part One*," Gary Taylor provides a cogent and plausible argument that the composition and performance of *1 Henry VI* postdates the other *Henry VI* plays (149–53); ascertaining *1 Henry VI*'s exact place in the sequence of these other plays is not crucial to my argument.

ways throughout the play, especially at moments in which characters problematize the prospect of performing history even as the fact of the drama itself suggests playing as a form of historical recuperation. Early on, Exeter reminds us that “Henry [V] is dead, and never shall revive” (1.1.18), while, as we saw above, John Talbot remarks to his father that the dead cannot witness for—or, for that matter *to*—the living. In such observations the characters express skepticism about the notion of historical revival even as they enact a play in which dead figures are revived and witnessed to by living actors. The first words of the printed playtext, prior to the opening dialogue, are the stage direction “*Dead march,*” referring to a solemn funeral march—probably performed by muffled drums—that helps to set the scene. The morbid image prompted by the phrase “*Dead march*” suggests an attempt at revival that is qualified by its associations with death and decay, pointing perhaps to the conceptual contradictions inherent in performing history.

I alluded earlier to Thomas Nashe’s use of Shakespeare’s *1 Henry VI* to defend the practice of staging plays. This famous Elizabethan commentary on performing history onstage as a form of revival in fact calls up the tensions of dramatic historiography. Countering the many Elizabethan antitheatricalists, Nashe argues that plays are in fact a “rare exercise of vertue.”⁴¹ Nashe’s defense is worth returning to, in that it provides insight into the period’s discourses of theatricality and dramatic historiography with particular attention to *1 Henry VI* and the curious ambivalences such discourses and this play offer.

First, for the subiect of them [stage plays] (for the most part) it is borrowed out of our English Chronicles, wherein our forefathers valiant acts (that haue long buried in rustie brasse and worme-eaten bookes) are reuiued, and they themselues raised from the Graue of Obluion, and brought to pleade their aged Honours in open presence: than which, what can be a sharper reproofe to these degenerate effiminate dayes of ours?⁴²

Nashe’s assertion that performing history serves as a rebuke to the present is a paradoxical argument to make about a play such as *1 Henry VI*, which, as we have seen, condemns the present it depicts as inferior to an idealized and irrecoverable past. Such paradoxical characterization of the relation of the performative present of history plays to the past they conjure marks Nashe’s discussion of playing history and must inform any attempt to read his remarks in relation to *1 Henry VI*.

Nashe’s talk about history plays reveals more than just a banal patriotic enthusiasm for historical revival; it reveals the complex function of stage plays within the social scene of early modern London. On one hand, Nashe argues that plays are

⁴¹ Nashe, 1:212.

⁴² Nashe, 1:212.

valuable because they distract playgoers from more nefarious behavior. They provide "light toys to busie . . . heads withall, cast before them [audiences] as bones to gnaw vpon, which may keepe them from hauing leisure to intermeddle with higher matters."⁴³ In this view, plays serve the practical civic function of controlling the dangerous energies of the idle, especially idle soldiers, and are mere "toyes" or "bones" to distract the populace from worse vices, such as gambling, drinking, or whoring. At the same time, Nashe asserts that plays serve a didactic purpose, through which both vices and virtues "are most liuely anatomizd" to a heuristic end.⁴⁴ To the sober, business-minded charge that plays are worthless because they don't produce anything, Nashe responds that plays have intrinsic merit as "Artes": it is "a glorious thing . . . to haue *Henrie the fifth* represented on the Stage."⁴⁵ This affirmation that plays produce immaterial but valuable effects helps to define them as aberrant in the emerging market economy of late-sixteenth-century London.⁴⁶ Moreover, the argument for the artistic integrity of plays is grounded by reference to a figure who, while present in other plays of the period (notably the anonymous *Famous Victories of Henry V*), remains a ghostly presence in *1 Henry VI*—one who is conjured but acknowledged as irrecoverable.

The most widely quoted portion of Nashe's defense of plays refers specifically to the representation of Lord Talbot's death:

How would it haue ioyed braue *Talbot* (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, and haue his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least (at seuerall times), who, in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding.

I will defend it against any Collian, or clubfisted Vsurer of them all, there is no immortalitie can be giuen a man on earth like vnto Playes.⁴⁷

Nashe argues that the enactment of Talbot's end performs the function of moving audiences and conferring "immortalitie" on the great historical figure being represented. Nashe's words implicate the practice of staging long-dead figures such as Talbot in a paradoxical movement between absence and presence, loss and recovery, the past and the present. Nashe considers audiences indispensable to the produc-

⁴³ Nashe, 1:211.

⁴⁴ Nashe, 1:213.

⁴⁵ Nashe, 1:213.

⁴⁶ Pye looks closely at how *1 Henry VI* can be read in relation to the language of markets and economy, pointing to Jean-Christophe Agnew's incisive study *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986); see "The Theater, the Market, and the Subject of History," 501–22.

⁴⁷ Nashe, 1:212.

tion of this moment, for it is through their tears that Talbot's "bones" revive. This feint toward the performative present opens up space for the resignification of history through the theatrical event of performing the past. A few pages later, Nashe makes a contemporary reference that further illuminates the binaries of absence and presence, past and present: "Not Roscius nor Æsop, those admyred tragedians that haue liued euer since before Christ was borne, could euer performe more in action than famous Ned Allen."⁴⁸ Edward Alleyn, the most celebrated actor of his time, was the leading player associated with the Rose, where *1 Henry VI* was first performed. There is no evidence that Alleyn played Talbot, but the role would almost certainly have been acted by someone well known to Elizabethan theater audiences.⁴⁹ Nashe's reference to Alleyn recalls his earlier words about the "tragedian that represents his [Talbot's] person," calling attention to the live, and perhaps "famous," player enacting the role onstage. In emphasizing the tragedian at work and mentioning Alleyn, Nashe reminds us that a cult of celebrity did exist for the most popular actors in this period, and that the sight of a particular player might well have been as desired as the representation of a particular heroic figure. In calling our attention to the staginess of Talbot's death scene, Nashe suggests that, rather than simply recalling past glory or reviving the dead, the performance of history evokes the past but never quite transcends the temporality of the body onstage. The player displaces the rejuvenated historical figure. Henry V must remain that "ever-living man of memory," continually reconstructed in the present by a living, breathing actor, for "Henry is dead, and never shall revive" (4.3.51; 1.1.18).

Nashe's particular privileging of history plays invariably highlights the performative present and calls attention to the institutional context in which such plays unfold. The description of Talbot's death conjures an iconic frieze of heroic suffering but also points to the recurring but always-disappearing condition of theatrical performance. For, as Nashe goes on to say, this sight was available "seuerall times," a stage effect produced only to be produced again, a spectacle enabled by the relative novelty of commercial theater. In popular Elizabethan theaters the representation of history took place in repertory with other kinds of plays, so that the

⁴⁸ Nashe, 1:215.

⁴⁹ While it is tempting for my line of thought here to suppose that Alleyn played Talbot, this scenario is doubtful, not least because Nashe, despite prominent mention of the part and the player, fails to make the connection explicitly himself. Whether Alleyn played the part is impossible to know, but we have no record of his ever having been associated in his own time with the role of Talbot, as he was associated by contemporaries and near-contemporaries with many other parts, such as Marlowe's Faustus and Tamburlaine. On Alleyn and the roles with which he was associated, see Edwin Nungezer, *A Dictionary of Actors and of Other Persons Associated with the Public Representation of Plays in England before 1642* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1929), 4–11 and 7–9. I thank Susan Cerasano, the current leading authority on Alleyn, for her advice on this issue.

actor playing Talbot one day might play a tragic lover or a mischievous Vice figure the next.⁵⁰ The idea of historical presence in historical representation onstage is complexly framed by the commodified repetition and variety that the new commercial theaters allowed in their evolution from older theatrical traditions.

Joan's graphic description of Talbot's corpse, which, she says, "Stinking and fly-blown lies here at our feet" (4.7.76), calls attention to the horrifying appearance of death, however heroic, and to the fact that the invocation of history entails confronting the past in all its sometimes gruesome materiality. The morbid notion of performing the past represented by "Dead march" extends to Nashe's description of the spectacle of Talbot's death, in the notion that Talbot's bones are "newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least." Embalming in the 1590s, as now, could signify both a figurative idea of preserving something in memory and a more literal sense of preserving a body from decomposition. The first meaning certainly obtains in this instance in the patriotic hope that the performance of the past can be a testament to national heroism and, in collaboration with audiences (whose tears do the embalming), produce heightened emotional pleasures, perhaps even the terror and pity of catharsis. The second meaning simultaneously connects the idea of performing the past with a less pleasant idea of preservation, a staving off of the body's decay, a less seemly and ultimately more grotesque idea of revival that can provide only the illusion of preservation in the face of the breakdown of the fragile body.

Nashe invokes, then, numerous associations in his polemic against the anti-theatricalists. His defense of plays is not confused, but it is unstable. As critics of such early modern defenses have argued, instability may well be inherent in the form.⁵¹ Nashe's defense is a rhetorical exercise; as such, its reliance on a range of strategies to affirm the morality of theater is not exceptional—nor would I assert that within this variety there are necessarily contradictions.⁵² Rather, the range of defenses, like so much in the debate over theatricality and so much in *1 Henry VI*, seems productively anamorphic. For Nashe, playing is an exercise in virtue and an expedient distraction. It suggests the productive value of performance while deny-

⁵⁰ For a sense of the Elizabethan theatrical "scene" and its variety, see, for instance, Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 119–96; and Roslyn Lander Knutson, *The Repertory of Shakespeare's Company, 1594–1613* (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1991).

⁵¹ On Sidney's defense of poetry, see, for instance, Ronald Levaio, *Renaissance Minds and Their Fictions*; and, more generally, Margaret W. Ferguson, *Trials of Desire: Renaissance Defenses of Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1983).

⁵² Relevant to this point, W. B. Worthen writes: "performance is always in the present; ideologies of restoration are always rhetorical" ("Reconstructing the Globe: Constructing Ourselves," *Shakespeare Survey* 52 [1999]: 33–45, esp. 45).

ing that it needs to have productive value. The practical social function of playing, its didactic value, its aesthetic integrity, and its ambiguous conjuration of some idea of historical revival indicate the difficulties of assessing what performing history onstage “does.”

For Phyllis Rackin, Nashe’s words in *Pierce Penilesse* express the allure that history plays had for early modern audiences: they promised an “experience of presence.”⁵³ Rackin reads *Pierce Penilesse* as an effort to describe history plays as holding a “transcendent power” and as arguing that “only in dramatic performance . . . can the past be preserved, the dead come to life, the absent past of historical representation return in full, living presence.”⁵⁴ But while the plays might be driven by some desire to experience presence, or for the past to come alive, Nashe acknowledges the utter impossibility of a “full, living presence” of the past in dramatic historiography. Christopher Pye suggests an alternate, more ambivalent reading of Nashe when he writes, “how equivocal Talbot’s return remains in the theatrical apologist’s account.”⁵⁵ I agree with Pye’s skeptical sense of *Pierce Penilesse* but find Nashe’s figuration of *1 Henry VI* less specifically invested in the economy of theater, as Pye’s reading would have it, and more engaged in the phenomenology of the popular theater, which includes the crucial fact of its commodification but more broadly entails the practice of playing itself. This is evident when Nashe grounds the experience of seeing history plays not only in the commercial context of the theaters but also in the “sensation” of performance and its ultimately morbid attempt to revive the past in all its brutal materiality.⁵⁶ Nashe echoes the play’s ambivalence about presence and revival, an ambivalence embedded in his paradoxical phrase “liuely anatomiz’d.” Unable to, perhaps uninterested in, providing a stable reading of what performing the past does or how it works, Nashe helps to affirm that *1 Henry VI* occupies an ambiguous position between being a thing of the past and one contained in the performative present. Nashe’s words demonstrate a perhaps unresolvable tension between past and present endemic to historical revival.

⁵³ Phyllis Rackin, “Temporality, Anachronism, and Presence in Shakespeare’s English Histories,” *Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 17 (1986): 101–23, esp. 107. See also the elaboration of this piece in Rackin’s *Stages of History*, 86–145.

⁵⁴ Rackin, *Stages of History*, 116.

⁵⁵ Pye, “The Theater, The Market, and The Subject of History,” 518.

⁵⁶ Herbert Blau, *The Dubious Spectacle: Extremities of Theater, 1976–2000* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002), x. Blau’s work on the ontology of theater can be seen in this collection and elsewhere in his prolific writings. See, for instance, *To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1992), as well as his *Take Up the Bodies*, cited below. For a concise consideration of the phenomenology of theater, see Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985).

Henry VI, Part 1 problematizes the idea of performance in its equally ambivalent attitude toward the logic of substitution and replacement which underlies playing. In one notable instance, a single English soldier frightens away the pillars of the French army—the Dauphin, Alençon, Joan, and others—simply by entering and yelling “A Talbot!” He then claims:

I'll be so bold to take what they have left.
 The cry of Talbot serves me for a sword,
 For I have loaden me with many spoils,
 Using no other weapon but his name.
 (2.1.78–81)

The “cry of Talbot,” the invocation of an absent, shadowy reference, creates a moment both funny and troubling. The English soldier scares off the French nobles and their champion Joan, revealing their momentary cowardice and a common soldier’s ingenuity. But by appropriating an absent signifier, the soldier connects himself both with the stage tradition of clever war profiteer and with the duplicities involved in theatrical performance.

The ambivalences of performance are inherent in the riddle of “contrarities” at the heart of *1 Henry VI*, the “here and not here,” the play of substance and shadows in the conversation between Talbot and the Countess. The absences of the past are met with the “absent presence” of performances, such as the soldier’s cry. Performing history in *1 Henry VI* emerges as an “unkind division” of the real and the intangible. When Talbot claims “My substance is not here” (2.3.51), he simultaneously annihilates and affirms his status as an actor *of* and *in* history, at the same moment in which he annihilates and affirms the play’s larger project of reenacting the past.

V. TRANSFUSING HISTORY

Herbert Blau has written that “The past always needs blood donors. The theater is a means of transfusion.”⁵⁷ But the “transfusion” history plays offer Talbot in the moment of his “fresh bleeding” appears a somewhat anemic gesture, according to my arguments here. This analysis is not meant to suggest, however, that a performance-oriented reading of *1 Henry VI* must conclude simply in proclaiming the obvious fact of its failure to “really” revive the past. Nor do I want to argue that the performance of history is itself rotten or decayed because it invariably invokes such connotations. It is doubtful that *1 Henry VI* became as popular as it did because audiences enjoyed feeling alienated from their past. It seems rather that the force and

⁵⁷ Herbert Blau, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1982), 9.

pleasure of performing the past onstage lies precisely in putting in play the “contrarities” that emerge. The theatrical event of performing history offers a supplement to the losses it makes apparent. The players are simultaneous substitutions and additions to the enactment of pastness.⁵⁸ They stand in for particular historical referents but also always exceed those referents as self-conscious figurations, playful embodiments grounded in the *now* of performance. The audience is also complexly supplementary. For the audience of a history play is always itself performing a witness function while also bearing preternatural witness from a privileged perspective, seeing the “making” of history as a process. The tragedian bleeding while the audience weeps creates the collective moment of the theatrical event, an event that, to adopt a phrase of Walter Benjamin’s, calls forward the past and “blast[s it] out of the continuum of history.”⁵⁹ Performing the past might conjure a sense of emptiness, but it is one engaged in a dialectic with the plentitude that Shakespeare’s theater strives for while admitting its own imperfections.

To understand longing for the past as necessarily mediated by the presentness of performance is to acknowledge that history is a site of production in the present. This acknowledgment asserts that to perform history is a process of inquiry rather than recovery, invention rather than recuperation. The potential political functions of performing history are exponential, but the modern practice of performing the past is probably most familiar to us in mainstream manifestations as part of a conservative and nationalist agenda. *1 Henry VI* offers a possible alternative at the beginnings of modernity. The play destabilizes the authenticity and authority of either history or performance to posit a coherent picture of “how it was,” substituting instead a popular entertainment that asserts self-consciously “how it *seems*, or *might have been*” in the space of the *now*. Theatrical time disrupts teleological and providential ideas of history, which assume stable beginnings while looking forward to prescribed endings. Theatrical time is a time of the *now* that infuses the present with power to shape the past. The “now time” of theater does not necessarily obtain

⁵⁸ I am drawing here on Jacques Derrida’s theory of the supplement, as put forth in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), 144–64. In a section entitled “The Theorem and the Theater” (302–13), Derrida discusses Rousseau’s distrust of theater as grounded in its “dangerous” supplementarity. See also “The Supplement of Copula: Philosophy before Linguistics” for an elaboration of the theory of supplementarity in relation to the philosophical, and theatrical-Shakespearean, conundrum of what it means “to be” (Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Alan Bates [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982], 175–205, esp. 201–5).

⁵⁹ Benjamin refers to Robespierre, for whom “ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history” (“Theses on the Philosophy of History (XIV)” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968], 263).

in Benjamin's messianic sense of *Jetztzeit* but, less mystically, as a spatiotemporal site wherein the promises of dialectical thinking can pass through the *Spass*, or "fun," of playing.⁶⁰

Standing over the dead Talbot, Sir William Lucy engages in a moment of fantasy. Addressing Joan and other French leaders, he exclaims: "O, were mine eyeballs into bullets turn'd, / That I in rage might shoot them at your faces!" (4.7.79–80). This risible wish quickly becomes a more affecting one: "O, that I could but call these dead to life!" (l. 81). Lucy's longing to revive the dead is a reminder that at its most primal level performing history is a profound expression of *desire*. The impulse to subject history to performance is driven by the desire to obtain a view of what is vanished, but, as *1 Henry VI* demonstrates, such performances can never shed their own embeddedness in the performative present; and the distance this embeddedness implies makes history appear, in the words of Suzan-Lori Parks, as a "great hole."⁶¹ Reenactments of the past that seek to connect the performative present to historical precession run aground on the inexorable linearity of time. The desire of the present to address the past through performance, to reinhabit old subject positions, perhaps even to intervene in the stories that make up history, is, then, fundamentally asymptotic. It is a move toward intersection that always warps or deflects before the "planes of historicity" cross.⁶²

Henry VI, Part 1 engages a notion of performance that is "dependent . . . on disguise and yet committed to demystification."⁶³ The potential for demystification in historical performances is enabled by the absences of history and the "dubious spectacle" of theater itself.⁶⁴ Performance is a kind of negative presence that doubles the

⁶⁰ On *Jetztzeit* ("now time"), see Benjamin, 263–66. Bertolt Brecht scatters the word *Spass* ("fun") throughout his writings on theater as a vital component to theater's potential as a vehicle for social commentary and change; see *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 9n. For an important elaboration of Benjamin's *jetztzeit* and the temporalities of performance, see Elin Diamond's assertion in *Unmaking Mimesis* that for Benjamin "the past becomes readable only through the *present* image that transforms it" (181).

⁶¹ Suzan-Lori Parks speaks of "the Great Hole of History" in her *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 157–99. I was first referred to this work by W. B. Worthen's article "Reconstructing the Globe: Constructing Ourselves." Worthen gives an excellent reading of Parks before providing an incisive analysis of the discourses of history and authenticity surrounding the reconstruction of the Globe theater. His reading of the project, in its look at the present's desire for an inaccessible past and its claim that the Globe reconstruction represents "an anxious performance of the past in the present" (34), bears on my arguments here.

⁶² I take this phrase from the first chapter of Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 3–20.

⁶³ Bonnie Marranca, *Ecologies of Theater: Essays at the Century Turning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 278.

⁶⁴ The phrase is from the title of a book by Blau, cited above.

losses inherent in any attempt to gain access to the past and, in so doing, asserts the positive value of negation as a cultural-critical practice. *Henry VI, Part 1*, in its language and within Elizabethan discourses of performance, suggests that to perform history is not to fill in fissures of historicity, or even to "discover" the past to be a gaping absence. Rather, the play suggests that the performative invocation of the past productively digs the great hole of historicity in the first place.