Chapter II

THE HENRY VI PLAYS

BEFORE E. M. W. Tillyard’s influential study of the histories appeared in 1944, critics generally looked on the Henry VI trio as formless chronicle plays. H. B. Charlton’s dismissal is typical: “The whole matter of Henry VI has no dramatic form. There is no dominant interest, recognizable as a dramatic interest, to hold the audience in continuous suspense.” A criticism directed toward character analysis almost inevitably reaches such a conclusion, but by turning to theme, Tillyard finds a substantial unity in the whole first tetralogy. He emphasizes its awareness of moral causation in history and especially its concern with the nature of political disorder. Tudor Englishmen remembered with horror the Wars of the Roses. Given such an audience, Shakespeare has seized on the most immediately meaningful part of England’s history and turned it into a great pageant on the moral causes and consequences of political disorder. The dramatic technique changes and in part develops from play to play, but the theme is simple and continuous.

The family in the Henry VI trilogy has no independent role; it is not a conflicting center of interest that
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competes with the political theme for attention. Rather it functions almost entirely as a commentary on the causes and consequences of political disorder. For the most part these characters are not torn between their personal and political identities as Henry IV is; the same force cripples them in both realms. “Though violent, they are, in a deeper sense, all strangely passive: they are at the mercy of circumstances and their uncontrolled selves.” What is most real in the plays is historical destiny, to which the personal identities of the characters are subdued.

Reference to the family is often a device to bring their political roles closer to the immediate experience of the audience. We understand Henry as king because we understand him as father and husband. We know what is happening to England because we see what is happening to fathers and sons and husbands and wives. This pattern reflects the doctrine of correspondences. Since what infects the kingdom infects everything in it, marriage becomes just another part of the struggle for power and loved ones are hostages to fortune in a violent world. The very channels that perpetuate order are corrupted to breed disorder. Inheritance, turned to a monstrous thing that demands vengeance rather than noble emulation, finally produces a demon who is the enemy of both family and state.

Shakespeare also uses the family to suggest what political disorder is destroying in the commonwealth. Especially in the first two plays glimpses of a yet-uncorrupted family life contrast ironically with the decline of justice and harmony among the governors.
This contrast does not suggest that personal virtue conflicts with political virtue—quite the opposite, though in some degree Henry VI's piety cripples his political realism. Still there may be some hint that his early piety does not run very deep. Certainly his asceticism vanishes quickly at Suffolk's descriptions of Margaret in 1 Henry VI. And in adversity Henry gains a real political wisdom, while at the same time his piety becomes more convincing. Better than anyone else in 3 Henry VI, he understands the plight of England, including the threat of Richard, Duke of Gloucester; and he foresees England's redemption by the young Richmond. More serious weaknesses than unworldly piety cripple Henry both as king and as husband and father. The key to his character is that he is a partial man and a partial monarch.

More typical of these plays is the illusory personal loyalty of the York family. It quickly collapses because, in a realm where no strong king commands unexceptionable loyalty, every man is tempted to struggle for himself, even against his brothers. Thus one remarkable achievement of the Henry VI plays is the way that they marshal the powerful claims of family loyalty in defense of political order. Above all they show that the family is involved in the destructive impact of disorder. Partly for this reason, they are significant achievements in dramatic craftsmanship. It is no disparagement of Shakespeare's youthful talents to attribute them to his pen.

1 Henry VI

Despite Charlton's dismissal, the bones of structure
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are, if anything, too prominent in the first of the Henry VI plays. Most obvious is the parallel between disorder in the English court and collapse in the French wars. The opposing powers of order and chaos appear concretely in the contrast between the ideal Talbot and the demonic Joan of Arc. Their careers, and indeed all of the chronicle history, suffer free distortion to make a political fable. As H. T. Price describes the process, “Shakespeare is imposing upon a body of historical data a controlling idea, an idea that constructs the play.” Though one may allow for hyperbole when R. W. Chambers finds an Aeschylean power in 1 Henry VI, the play is often quite impressive in embodying the theme of disorder, and part of this impressiveness comes from its use of the family.

Disintegrationists of the text, those who attribute parts to different authors, find their best ammunition in its undistinguished language. Its abrupt shifts from workaday verse to the extremes of Senecan rant prevent any coherence of tone. The family is present in the language, though not in great enough density to be a unifying leitmotiv. For example, there is a traditional use of correspondence in the description of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, as “a father to the commonweal” (III.i.98). The servingman who thus invokes the Renaissance doctrine of natural order goes on to show how political disorder is involving even ordinary men and their families:

We and our wives and children all will fight
And have our bodies slaughter'd by thy foes.

(III.i.100-101)
With rhetorical extravagance Bedford predicts universal disorder, foreseeing a time

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

(I.i.49-51)

Joan of Arc employs an image of suffering motherhood to sway the wavering Burgundy with the plight of France:

As looks the mother on her lowly babe
When death doth close his tender dying eyes,
See, see the pining malady of France.

(III.iii.47-49)

Thus Shakespeare uses family images to emphasize, directly and by contrast, the wide and terrible impact of political disorder and war.

Birth and inheritance are prominent in the language of the play. The interview between York and his dying uncle, Mortimer, brings out one of the central political issues of the play, the doubtfulness of the king's title. Here and elsewhere the favorite metaphor for orderly succession is growth, especially a flourishing tree or garden. Any interruption of the pattern—depicted as cutting down or transplanting—perverts a natural process. One inherits not only his position but also his virtue and social responsibility. When Joan charges Burgundy with an unnatural betrayal of his country, she goes on to question his "birth and lawful progeny [lineage or descent]" (III.iii.61). When Tal-
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bot strips Falstaff of his Garter, he denounces the recreant as a “hedge-born swain” despite his pretensions to good blood (IV.i.43). Here the embodiment of virtue and order, whose son shortly demonstrates the proper inheritance of valor, describes his opposite.

The theme of birth and inheritance is dramatized in the emblematic Temple Garden scene (II.iv), where the conflict of Lancaster and York emerges in association with the metaphor of red and white roses. The episode gains power by combining an emblematic method with vividly realistic portrayal of the angry quarrelers. The witty play with the roses is natural enough in the mouths of these young law students and courtiers, and Shakespeare differentiates their dramatic voices with skill and economy. The precise nature of the quarrel is unclear, but it quickly brings up the issue of York’s birth. Using the pervasive image of plants and growth, Warwick appeals to his friend’s parentage as a sign of his nobility: “Spring crestless yeomen from so deep a root?” (85). Somerset replies that York has inherited corruption rather than nobility because of his father’s treason.

There is no hint of York’s claim to the throne, though presumably his father was guilty unless their title is valid. Already, however, there is an unconscious irony in his boast that he will wear the white rose

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Until it wither with me to my grave,
Or flourish to the height of my degree.
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(110-11)
His relation to degree is ambiguous. Is he the rightful sovereign needed to restore order to England, or is his ambition the enemy to degree, the weed that the Gardener in Richard II says must be cut down? The ambiguity of York's inheritance is an early hint of how orderly succession becomes more and more perverted and monstrous in the tainted world of Henry VI's England. When in the next scene York takes up his dying uncle's claim to the throne, he finds both glory and destruction for himself and his family.

In the Temple Garden scene the dominant symbol is the garden itself with its red and white roses. This symbol embodies one side of the family motif, the cluster of traditional ideas involving birth and inheritance. The issues of family inheritance are fundamentally the same as those of succession in the monarchy, and so the two are linked in this scene as they will be throughout Shakespeare. In Act IV he returns to the emblematic method in a group of scenes between Talbot and his son, and there the relationship of father and son is the symbol used to provide a commentary on political disorder. However, these scenes are the thematic center of a whole development in the play, the contrast between Talbot and Joan of Arc. In that context their meaning will be more readily apparent.

Talbot is an earlier and simpler version of the warrior-hero Henry V. Neither of these men makes any pretense to super-humanity like Tamburlaine's. They find their strength where a weakling like Richard II finds despair, in their ordinary human nature. Whether the hero-king woos Katherine in bluff English fashion or wanders incognito through the night to meet his
soldiers as one of them, he grounds his royalty in the earth. Nor is Talbot the stock image of a hero; Shakespeare even changes his sources to make the terror of the French physically dwarfish. There are times when he speaks with the stereotyped rant of heroes and behaves with unrealistic bravado. Thus he brags that, while a prisoner, he refused to be exchanged for an unworthy opposite. But his behavior in captivity shows an almost animal ferocity rather than heroic dignity:

Then broke I from the officers that led me,
And with my nails digg'd stones out of the ground
To hurl at the beholders of my shame.

(I.iv.43-45)

The extremes of behavior thus crudely juxtaposed are more subtly fused in Henry V, but the Shakespearian impulse to ground the hero in something more solid than epic glory is already present.

Talbot's self-discipline and virtue appear primarily in his military feats, but on two occasions he is measured by more personal values. The first of these is a light interlude in the French wars, the Countess of Auvergne's attempt to trap him by inviting him to an assignation. Talbot reveals a Guyon-like continence when he brings his army along to the dinner. His domestic virtue resists French seductiveness as strongly as his courage resists French arms. The connection of this episode with Talbot's heroic career is tenuous, but for that very reason Shakespeare's intention of measuring the private virtue of a public figure is apparent.
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This episode is most important in preparing the way for the more effective scenes in which Talbot and his son fight and die together near Bordeaux (IV.v-vii). Here most clearly Shakespeare uses the values of the family to complete the ideal portrait of Talbot and to provide an ironic contrast with the disorder and disloyalty of the court. This relationship of father and son symbolizes the kind of political order that is dying along with Talbot. When he calls young John “the son of chivalry” (vi.29), he means “my chivalric son,” but the loose Elizabethan grammar allows the phrase to suggest that chivalry is an inherited virtue, a mark of the noble family.

Young Talbot’s refusal to abandon his father proves that he has inherited that heroic warrior’s zeal for honor. His argument against flight is unanswerable:

The world will say, he is not Talbot’s blood
That basely fled when noble Talbot stood.

(v.16-17)

Talbot endorses this traditional doctrine when he reports having taunted the Bastard Orleans:

Contaminated, base,
And misbegotten blood I spill of thine,
Mean and right poor, for that pure blood of mine
Which thou didst force from Talbot, my brave boy.

(vi.21-24)

In the dying chivalric order, not only does the father’s blood infuse strength and virtue into the veins of his son, but the effect of breeding is reinforced by
example, a kind of emulation in courage. Hence Talbot's son inspires him to new deeds of valor, and John demands parity with his father even while affirming their unity:

No more can I be sever'd from your side
Than can yourself yourself in twain divide.

(v.48-49)

The destruction of this family foreshadows the collapse of the state, for at King Henry's court the old order has already degenerated into bastard feudalism, a disorderly society of Machiavellian scheming veiled by remnants of the old ceremony.

The special style of these scenes is characteristic of the early Shakespeare's emblematic method. Tillyard brands it "the conventional, the formal, the stylised" and considers it an inadequate way to heighten the effect of Talbot's death. However, the studied artificiality of the verse has another function, to direct attention toward the symbolic weight of the scenes. The poetic idiom is determinedly classical with its stichomythy, its formidable regularity, and its rhetorical pointedness. The classical warrior-hero appears (with Renaissance heightening) in Talbot's description of his son fighting over him "like a hungry lion" and then sallying forth in a rage at the enemy's retreat (vii.5-13). The verse technique is in some ways parallel to the ritualism of the moralities, but it is closest to Ovid, Seneca, and the neo-Senecan plays like Gascoigne and Kinwelmershe's Jocasta. In a similar episode of that play, Creon and his son Menecus
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debate whether the latter should be sacrificed for Thebes. A bit of their stichomythy will illustrate the likeness:

Cre. If such a death bring glorie, give it me.
Mene. Not you, but me, the heavens cal to die.
Cre. We be but one in flesh and body both.
Mene. I father ought, so ought not you, to die.¹²

Shakespeare adds rhyme to increase the pointedness and tightens the rhetorical structure, but the scenes are alike in their formality and sententiousness.

For this final episode Talbot’s animal ferocity is absent so that he and his son may be abstract patterns of English heroism. As in Seneca, the appeal of the verse is to general labels rather than vividly imagined particulars, to “blood,” “mother,” “name,” and “fame.” This movement toward abstraction reaches cosmic scope in Talbot’s speech at the close of Scene v with its astronomical quibble on “son”:

Then here I take my leave of thee, fair son,
Born to eclipse thy life this afternoon.
Come, side by side, together live and die,
And soul with soul from France to heaven fly.

(52-55)

The Ovidian myth of Daedalus and Icarus is rather arbitrarily brought in at vi.54-55, reiterated at vii.16, and then ingeniously transcended in an image suggestive of heroic apotheosis:

Coupled in bonds of perpetuity,
Shakespeare cultivates this heightened and artificial language in order to give the Talbots' loyalty symbolic weight. The scenes gain power by incremental repetition, not only of words and phrases, but also of images and ideas. Hence the repetitiousness that leads John Dover Wilson to suspect dual authorship is more probably a literary device, albeit one largely alien to modern sensibilities.

Perhaps the finest effect of the episode is the ironic contrast produced by an abrupt shift of tone when the French enter to vaunt over the heroes' dead bodies. Typical of their blunt, prosaic comments is the misbegotten Orleans's reference to "the young whelp of Talbot's" (vii.35). But it is Joan, Talbot's demonic foe, who points the contrast in tone when she undercuts Lucy's pompous recital of the dead warrior's honors:

Him that thou magnifiest with all these titles,
Stinking and fly-blown lies here at our feet.

(vii.75-76)

Her practical directness counterpoints the artificiality of the previous scenes and thus enforces their significance: in this degenerate world the ideal embodied by the Talbots is dead.

Joan is Talbot's "mighty opposite," the epitome of disorder and rebellion just as he is the epitome of
order and loyalty. They share a blunt directness of speech that gives them force in this world of empty rhetoric and aimless plotting. Talbot would not be ashamed to choose his sword like Joan, "Out of a great deal of old iron"; after all, he was willing to fight his captors with stones. But he would not have the blasphemous audacity to attribute the choice to divine guidance (I.ii.98-101). Like Richard III, Joan arouses her creator's interest, not because of any goodness in her, but because she has a real zest for evil. She is absolutely corrupt from beginning to end, a degeneracy shown in part by her violation of familial sanctions.

Most obvious are the constant references to her sexual libertinism. The innuendos start when she first appears, and later she is openly the Dauphin's paramour. In ironic proximity to Talbot's victory over temptation by the Countess of Auvergne, Burgundy describes having seen "the Dauphin and his trull" in undignified flight together (II.ii.28). Her corruption is yet more obvious when she offers her body to fiends, and she becomes ludicrous when she abandons her pose of virgin purity and proclaims herself with child in order to avoid execution. Allowing such a trull to stand boasting over the dead Talbot suggests the triumph of degeneracy. And even her death does not purge the world, because she is soon to be replaced by Queen Margaret, another Frenchwoman and one equally vicious though less contemptible.

Heavily symbolic of Joan's evil is a violation of family duty when at the point of death she repudiates her father. As France rebels against England's rightful do-
minion, so its champion denies her parentage. The half-comic scene is in a rude, blunt language appropriate to Joan and her father, yet through the coarse irony appears something of Shakespeare's usual compassion for the sufferings of old men. To an Elizabethan the stage picture of a daughter refusing to kneel for her father's blessing goes beyond comedy; it is a terrible image of disorder. In The Life and Death of Lord Cromwell, the hero shows his filial piety by kneeling to his blacksmith father just after being made Lord Chancellor. When Joan's father curses her, he shows what is all too rare in this play, an individual poetic voice; but the images are at the same time broadly evocative of disordered nature:

Wilt thou not stoop? Now cursed be the time
Of thy nativity! I would the milk
Thy mother gave thee when thou suck'dst her breast
Had been a little ratsbane for thy sake;
Or else, when thou didst keep my lambs a-field,
I wish some ravenous wolf had eaten thee.
Dost thou deny thy father, cursed drab?
O, burn her, burn her: hanging is too good.

(V.iv.26-33)

Joan repudiates her father to claim gentle birth; she pretends to the inherited virtue that young Talbot epitomizes and York claims to embody. There is probably an ironic pun in her claim:

No, misconceived Joan of Aire hath been
A virgin from her tender infancy.

(V.iv.49-50)
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She is not misunderstood but misbegotten, a monstrous example of base inheritance and pretension to rank. Hence Joan is the antithesis of Talbot, and their contrasting attitudes toward family values are one symbolic vehicle of the opposition.

While disposing of Joan, the last act (in the modern division) turns to a new theme, the king's marriage. Henry VI displays his weakness in all his acts, but nowhere more clearly than in his marriage. The relationship between Henry and Margaret develops through all three plays after its introduction at the end of 1 Henry VI. There a few brief scenes contrast two attitudes toward marriage, one that supports order in the state and one that undermines it. Henry himself expresses the former (albeit protesting too much) when, after declaring his freedom from lustful desires, he says:

I shall be well content with any choice
Tends to God's glory and my country's weal.
(V.i.26-27)

Since a king ought to marry according to his country's interests, Henry accepts Duke Humphrey's plan to salvage some of the French empire by a tactical marriage. He is duly contracted to the Earl of Armagnac's daughter. But even in this court of empty ceremonies there is something more than usually specious about the official professions of love; Henry V manages to fall convincingly in love with his Katherine even while being just as conscious of his interest as these negotiators. Nevertheless, a state marriage entails utilitarian
motives; Henry is submitting himself to the necessities of kingship.

The Duke of Suffolk, who introduces Henry to the second view of marriage, first comes to prominence when he captures Margaret only to fall victim to her beauty. This episode introduces the language of Petrarchan love to the play. As a private man Suffolk is permitted to indulge his love, or at least would be if he were single, but he infects the king with the same attitude in urging him to wed Margaret. When the Duke leads his pupil in love onstage, Henry is using the conventional Petrarchan love imagery of storms and ships himself (V.v.1-9). Suffolk’s hint at sexual pleasure seems to shock the pious young king (16-21), but the Duke’s casuistry soon persuades him to violate his previous contract.

There is dramatic irony in Suffolk’s argument against marriages of state:

For what is wedlock forced but a hell,
An age of discord and continual strife?
Whereas the contrary bringeth bliss,
And is a pattern of celestial peace.

(62-65)

Forced marriages are indeed condemned by all Renaissance moralists, but so are marriages for desire alone. This marriage is a pattern, but a pattern of the discord that is overwhelming the English commonwealth. Margaret’s masculine strength of will, which has only faintly appeared in the rather conventional battle of wits with Suffolk, assumes clearer form in an ominous reference to
Her valiant courage and undaunted spirit,  
More than in women commonly is seen.  

(70-71)

Henry's domestic weakness, complemented by the unnatural presumption of his wife and her ambitious lover Suffolk, will help cause the Wars of the Roses. Even now it is only the strong will and benevolence of Gloucester, the Protector, that prevent the onset of civil war.

Conclusion.—Thus the family is significant in the structure of *Henry VI*. Its system of values provides a standard to measure the disorder and moral nihilism that are infecting England and even beginning to corrupt the domestic lives of the rulers. What prevents this dramatic technique from having more than occasional flashes of power is that Shakespeare's exploitation of it lacks immediacy. "The theme . . . is England, and the characters are drawn firmly, but as political, not private, figures. Private, realistic touches do indeed break through the political formalism and rhetoric, but they are few." In the scene between Joan and her father the symbolic action briefly takes on dramatic life, but the scenes of Talbot and his son generate their power as stylized renditions of an idea, as tableaux. Even the Temple Garden episode partakes more of this quality than of the character-centered drama that one associates with the later Shakespeare.

In its language the play illustrates the experimentation natural to a young writer. The styles include workaday verse, a pungently rough prose, a poetic
aureation like Seneca and Ovid at their most extravagant, a more sedately lofty idiom, and even the amorous preciosity of Petrarchan verse. Although these styles have some function in the play, they are not used to create individual voices for the characters, except for Joan and perhaps a few others. The family remains an abstraction because the people who are involved in family relationships speak only in public tones. Its ideals are part of the value system of 1 Henry VI, but its reality never takes on dramatic life. The road to King Lear, or to 1 Henry IV, is a long one.

2 Henry VI

The surprising fact is how far along that road the second of the Henry VI plays progresses. In language and structure it is far more sophisticated than its predecessor, though at the cost of a certain untidiness. 2 Henry VI is built on contrasts of character, especially between Henry and two other royal figures, Gloucester and York. These three divide the qualities of the ideal king—the virtues of the lion, the pelican, and the fox, as Tillyard calls them. The contrast among the three is more elaborate than that between Talbot and Joan in 1 Henry VI, and they are more fully and vividly developed than any characters in the earlier play. Once again Shakespeare illuminates the personal lives of these political figures through the family. The dramatic technique is much the same, though it displays greater skill and subtlety.

The language again includes diverse styles, but they
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have a new dramatic function in establishing individual voices for the characters. The formal style of aureation and stock rhetoric dominates the hypocritical public speeches by Margaret and the plotting nobles, in contrast with their more direct and vehement private utterances. Or the same artificiality can express King Henry’s ineffectual dallying with words at the cost of action. After helplessly watching the nobles arrest Gloucester for treason, he laments in the most precious of veins:

Ay, Margaret; my heart is drown’d with grief,
Whose flood begins to flow within mine eyes,
My body round engirt with misery,
For what’s more miserable than discontent?

(III.i.198-201)

In all the poetic idioms, references to the family support the dominant themes. The theme of disorder becomes more and more prominent not only in events but also in the poetry. References and images suggest that the civil strife infecting the commonwealth has spread through its whole body. The ordinary Englishman, who receives more attention in this play, suffers from the conflicts in the court. A group of petitioners to Gloucester have the misfortune to encounter Suffolk and the queen instead. Comic though it is, one man’s complaint suggests how disorder is breeding injustice: “Mine is, an ’t please your Grace, against John Goodman, my Lord Cardinal’s man, for keeping my house, and lands, and wife, and all, from me” (I.iii.16-18). Suffolk and Margaret find the loss of his wife amusing and make no effort to help him.
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When civil war finally breaks out with the Cade rebellion, such men are shown rising against established order. The consequences of their unnatural presumption appear in the proclamation for which Stafford calls:

That those which fly before the battle ends
May, even in their wives' and children's sight,
Be hang'd up for example at their doors.

(IV.ii.171-73)

Earlier, in parting from Margaret, Suffolk recalls a different world, where children die peacefully in their mothers' arms:

Here could I breathe my soul into the air,
As mild and gentle as the cradle-babe
Dying with mother's dug between his lips.

(III.ii.390-92)

The artifice of his language helps to suggest the distance of this world, especially since it is the presumptuous adulterer Suffolk who thus recalls the sanctities of family living and dying.

Like the previous play, 2 Henry VI emphasizes the theme of inheritance. When the Cardinal demands to be treated with respect as John of Gaunt's son, Gloucester bluntly reminds him of his bastardy (II.i.40-41). When Warwick accuses Suffolk of Gloucester's murder, the two exchange traditional insults about their mothers' chastity, with Suffolk outdoing the "Blunt-witted lord" in vigor and detail (III.ii.210-14, 221-22). This language of birth and inheritance has a parallel
in the characterization of Salisbury and his son Warwick, who illustrate the inheritance of virtue in a noble family. They confront the dilemma of all men of good will in a disordered state, who can find no clear object for their loyalty. They support Gloucester as the main force for order and virtue, but when York presents his claim to the throne, they feel obliged to throw their backing to him. Warwick as yet shows none of his kingmaker's arrogance, though there may be some foreshadowing in his blunt pride. Now, however, he acts as the outspoken voice of simple honesty, like Kent in *King Lear.*

The first scene of the play establishes Salisbury as a choric voice of English wisdom, and he is shown in ideal harmony with his son: "Warwick, my son, the comfort of my age" (*I.i.189*). When these men reveal that they are supporting York's claim, it is a blow to Henry, and he touches on moral inheritance in his grieved outcry:

> Old Salisbury, shame to thy silver hair,  
> Thou mad misleader of thy brain-sick son!  
> (V.i.162-63)

Even that fundamental principle, the inheritance of true nobility, seems to be corrupted in this anarchic time. Whether or not Salisbury's choice for York is correct (and the play does not decide that issue), he is a man of good will. His son could become a mighty force for good in an ordered community, another good Duke Humphrey or Talbot, but in the weak reign of Henry VI his immense energy turns into a disruptive
force. Warwick's degeneration from Salisbury's noble son to the arrogant, impulsive kingmaker suggests what is happening to the inherited virtue of England, the mighty tradition of Crécy and Agincourt to which these plays so often look back.

Thus the leitmotiv of inheritance is developed in characterization with Salisbury and Warwick. It is also used in the one obviously emblematic scene of this play, in which Alexander Iden kills Jack Cade. Cade's appearance marks the spread of anarchy to all of the commonwealth. Like Joan of Arc he shows the dregs of society making claim to lofty position in a prodigious manifestation of disorder. He too repudiates his actual parentage in order to claim high birth. (It is expressive of his popular roots that he concocts his story out of a folk motif, the fairy story of the abducted prince.) Also like Joan, he avows libertine naturalism, even substituting it officially for law: "There shall not a maid be married, but she shall pay to me her maidenhead, ere they have it. Men shall hold of me in capite; and we charge and command that their wives be as free as heart can wish or tongue can tell" (IV.vii.115-119). Cade is himself the threat that he predicts from the nobles when his followers are about to leave him: "Let them break your backs with burdens, take your houses over your heads, ravish your wives and daughters before your faces" (IV.viii.29-31).

When he staggers into Alexander Iden's garden, the types of order and disorder meet. In the symbolic garden that fascinates Shakespeare's imagination, Cade faces its owner, who has expressed his contentment with rural seclusion in a charming brief soliloquy:
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Lord! who would live turmoiled in the court,
And may enjoy such quiet walks as these?
This small inheritance my father left me
Contenteth me, and worth a monarchy.

(IV. x. 16-19)

Unlike Cade, Iden accepts his inheritance, about which he sounds a note common in Latin poetry, the quiet joy of country retreat. The victory of such a man over Jack Cade suggests that virtue is not lost to England, that it has merely fallen back to its rural fastnesses. Iden's quaintly artificial blank verse sets off Cade's vigorous prose, though the former never lives up to the pretty charm of the opening speech. In fact, Shakespeare seems to be so much fascinated with his tough-minded rebel that he gives him a wryly noble death, even at the expense of the emblematic picture. And at most this scene is a perfunctory expression of the ideal while civil strife dominates the dramatic foreground.  

Even more central than inheritance in 2 Henry VI is marriage, which is of special importance for two of the chief kingly characters, Henry and Gloucester. In a way it is significant that York's wife does not appear; his detachment from the marital constraint that hampers his two rivals allows him to concentrate on single-minded pursuit of the crown. Only his sons keep York from being as solitary and unsocial a figure as Richard III, and at that he makes use of his sons' loyalty but shows little paternal affection. The grief for Rutland in 3 Henry VI, stylized in expression as it is, makes the only exception to this coldness. One can hardly conceive of York with a wife, though of course she
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does turn up in Richard III, when he is safely dead.

A passage in the first part of An Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion illustrates both the Renaissance association between family and common­weal and the wife’s divinely ordained role:

Besides the obedience due unto his majesty, he not only ordained, that, in families and households, the wife should be obedient unto her husband, the children unto their parents, the servants unto their masters; but also, when mankind increased, and spread itself more largely over the world, he by his holy word did constitute and ordain in cities and countries several and special governors and rulers unto whom the residue of his people should be obedient.

Both wives and governed are disobedient in this play. In a comic version of the theme Saunder Simpcox, the pretended blind man, is subservient to his officious wife, who keeps interrupting him to embellish his tale of how he was lamed. This comic episode is tied to the main plot by its occurrence just before the court learns of Eleanor’s downfall.

Duke Humphrey is a powerful force for good, as the frequent punning references to his title of Protector suggest. His weakness is an innocence that leaves him vulnerable to the plots of other, more ambitious, people. When his wife warns him of the dangers around him, he assures her, “I must offend before I be attainted” (II.iv.59). Eleanor herself takes advantage of this weakness. Like the plotting nobles she is ambitious; she dresses more richly than the queen and even dreams of seizing the crown for her
husband. Gloucester's rebuke to her arrogance is imperious; but when she starts to lose her temper, he quickly pacifies her, and she goes right on scheming. The conjuring scene (I.iv) exists largely to please the crowd with displays of magic and to foreshadow later deaths, but it also shows the Lord Protector's wife in the blasphemous act of calling up demons. When her enemies seize on her in this act and humiliate her, the shame of her penance subdues her pride, but by then it is too late to save Gloucester.

The disorder of the kingdom has tempted Eleanor to reach beyond her place in society. As a result, Gloucester is destroyed as a governor, and his marriage crumbles in his hands. His words weigh solemnly as he repudiates his union with treason:

Noble she is, but if she have forgot
Honour and virtue, and convers'd with such
As, like to pitch, defile nobility,
I banish her my bed and company,
And give her as a prey to law and shame,
That hath dishonour'd Gloucester's honest name.

(II.i.186-91)

He has the simplicity of an older world, the days when a man needed only to be strong and loyal to his king. His wife adapts herself to the current morality of personal ambition, but she is not clever enough to survive against such adversaries as the Cardinal, Margaret, Suffolk, and York.

Shakespeare develops the relationship of Margaret and Henry at length over 2 and 3 Henry VI after a
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hasty beginning in the first play.\textsuperscript{22} When Margaret slaps her and provokes a quarrel, Eleanor pithily sums up the queen's unnatural dominion over Henry:

She'll hamper thee and dandle thee like a baby:
Though in this place most master wear no breeches,
She shall not strike Dame Eleanor unreveng'd.

(I.iii.145-47)

In this untidy little courtly squabble Henry is, as usual, ineffectually conciliatory. His weakness is apparent when the two chief ladies of England vent their spite by a quarrel in the king's presence.

\textit{2 Henry VI} opens with a spectacular ceremony to impress the importance of the marriage between Henry and Margaret.\textsuperscript{23} In every sense this is an unnatural union. Not only has the king neglected his duty in wedding Margaret at all, but she will assume an unwomanly dominion over him and form an adulterous liaison with Suffolk. When Henry receives her from his "procurator," Suffolk, he echoes the amorous preciosity of the end of \textit{1 Henry VI} along with his usual bland piety:

\textit{I can express no kinder sign of love}
Than this kind kiss. O Lord, that lends me life,
Lend me a heart replete with thankfulness!
For thou hast given me in this beauteous face
A world of earthly blessings to my soul,
If sympathy of love unite our thoughts.

(I.1.18-23)

The pun on "kinder" in the first line evokes the stand-
ard of nature by which this artificial ceremony is found wanting. Henry fuses Petrarchanism and piety in the tangled figure of a face that represents “earthly blessings” to a soul; the clumsiness of the poetry is in part justified by its suitability to Henry’s confusion.

The first scene shows little of Margaret’s character, since she makes only conventional speeches, but Gloucester’s shock at the marriage contract makes clear the unsuitability of the terms. After the king and new queen go out in state, he delivers an impressive harangue in high oratorical style, one that rises through a series of rhetorical questions to a final impassioned exclamation:

O peers of England! shameful is this league,
Fatal this marriage, cancelling your fame,
Blotting your names from books of memory,
Razing the characters of your renown,
Defacing monuments of conquer’d France,
Undoing all, as all had never been!

(97-102)

Henry’s marriage has become a weapon destroying the traditional way of life, the noble code of chivalric glory. In a typically Shakespearian effect the Cardinal punctures Gloucester’s loftiness with cynicism. But his opposition, which obviously springs from his animus toward Gloucester, cannot undermine the impression that the English peers overwhelmingly disapprove this match.

Having established the political inadequacy of the marriage, Shakespeare turns to Margaret’s character in I.iii. She approaches in suspiciously close company
with Suffolk and then violates a right sacred to Englishmen by tearing up the petitions to the Lord Protector. Like Queen Elinor in Peele’s Edward I, she is an arrogant foreign absolutist, as her question to Suffolk establishes:

My Lord of Suffolk, say, is this the guise,
Is this the fashions in the court of England?

(42-43)

Although she hates Gloucester and his wife as overweening subjects, she is not moved by any desire to see Henry assume truly royal state. Suffolk promises her that by the weeding of this garden of haughty peers she herself will come to power. Thus the new queen reveals herself, scornful of her husband’s unmanly piety and scheming with her paramour to take control of the land.

Hereafter Margaret’s voice largely merges with those of the squabbling nobles. She is a skillful orator, though sometimes her spite shows through too obviously to be missed even by Henry, who would be glad not to perceive anything of ill feelings. She finds Petrarchan idiom useful to manipulate his doting fondness for her. Thus she tries to distract him when it seems that Suffolk may be in danger for Gloucester’s death. She embroiders with pretty sentimentality on the stock theme of the lover’s ship voyaging through rough seas. One is willing to forgive Shakespeare the slight inaccuracy when she associates herself with Dido and Suffolk with Ascanius (rather than Cupid in disguise, as in Vergil; see III.ii.113-18). The ludicrous
audacity of turning the weakly pious Henry into the sternly “pius Aeneas” and her formidable self into poor “madding Dido” is too delicious to miss. After this speech it is hard to take seriously the rhetorical passion of her parting with Suffolk, but even this absurdity is later outdone when she draws on the apparently endless supply of bloody heads in Elizabethan theater to fondle that remnant of her dead lover in Henry’s presence. The comic ineffectuality of his remonstrance is almost a justification for the episode:

I fear me, love, if that I had been dead,
Thou wouldest not have mourn’d so much for me.
(IV.iv.22-23)

Her lover dead, Margaret begins to show an aggressive masculinity in her few remaining speeches, a development more completely shown in 3 Henry VI. Even here she is a remarkable example of the forces that are undermining the state. She attacks all the values of the family—by her unfaithfulness to her husband; by her attempt to rule him and the land; and by her attack on the power and life of Gloucester, her husband’s uncle and the last worthy representative of Henry V. Margaret of Anjou, the arrogant Frenchwoman, stands for everything that Henry V opposed. It is ominous for England that she and the Duke of York, the character whom she most resembles in temperament, dominate the two factions of Lancaster and York at the end of the play.

Conclusion.—2 Henry VI has a disorderly vitality
lacking in the First Part, and this vigor affects the handling of the family. One major concern is the theme of inheritance, which embraces the king himself, Salisbury and Warwick, Jack Cade, and Alexander Iden. Only the last remains a stylized, emblematic character. The relationship of Talbot and his son reappears in Salisbury and Warwick, but as these characters come to life, the thematic implications become richer and more complex. The earlier pair show the simple inheritance of virtue, untarnished by a corrupted state, but Salisbury and his son are more ambiguous. Warwick has more or less inherited his father's virtue, but the inheritance is corrupted by the political chaos that encourages his ambition. In different ways both Henry and Jack Cade show this same distortion of inheritance and natural succession.

Of the two important marriages in the play, Shakespeare gives the greater complexity and depth to that of Henry and Margaret; but its implications extend into 3 Henry VI, whereas the study of Gloucester and Eleanor is largely within this play. Gloucester can no more control his wife's ambition than he can maintain order and degree in the commonwealth. Her usurpation of manly concerns shows in little what is happening in the kingdom. She and the other ambitious and mannish women of these plays show that in a collapsing social order women cannot fulfill their natural and traditional functions. In Henry's court, love is either a deceit or a weakness. Margaret's love language can have no meaning except as a mask. The strongest man in the play, Richard, Duke of York, is the one least encumbered with traditional emotions
and loyalties. Although these characters are more vital than those in 1 Henry VI (even the same people), none of them is so strong as the impersonal force that dominates events, the historical power that drives England nearer and nearer to chaos. In this least Senecan play of the first tetralogy, what is most like Seneca is this sense of a fatal curse dominating men’s actions. Past events and dead men lurk in the background, and in the last two plays their presence will be felt even more.

3 Henry VI

The disorder reaches its climax in the last of the Henry VI plays, which has neither the mechanical structure of the first part nor the balanced characters of the second. Insofar as it achieves a unified effect, it does so by its theme and, ultimately, by its poetic language. Not figures but acts and events are balanced against each other. The characters lose themselves in the welter of words and action—all but one, that is. For Richard, Duke of Gloucester, stands out from the fabric of the play in a way that imperils its dramatic and poetic proportion even while creating a high point of dramatic interest. Nevertheless, what is most impressive about the play is not the emerging Richard, who has freer rein in the next, but its attainment of poetic unity without entirely sacrificing the remarkable diversity of poetic modes in 2 Henry VI.

The family is more prominent as emblem and symbol in this part than in the previous two. It is so richly
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woven through the language that it helps greatly in
the unity of effect that this play achieves. One ob­
jective measure of its importance is the frequent
occurrence of eight common nouns of family relation­
ship—brother, daughter, father, husband, mother,
sister, son, and wife. They appear 228 times in 3 Henry
VI, nearly three times as often as in each of the other
two Henry VI plays. Only Richard III, a play similar
in technique, compares in frequency among all the
histories with its 256 occurrences. Of course, statistics
like these are only a crude measure of the importance
of the family, but such wide variations surely indicate
a remarkable concentration of references in the last
two plays of the tetralogy.

The specific content of references to the family
varies greatly. Clifford draws on the doctrine of cor­
respondences to prove from animal behavior how im­
moral is Henry’s willingness to disinherit his son. After
citing the lion, the bear, the serpent, the worm, the
dove, and even their enemy York as good parents, he
makes the application specific: “For shame, my liege,
make them your precedent!” (II.i.ii.33). Richard, Duke
of Gloucester, draws on his stock of proverbs to chide
his brother Edward’s foolish marriage: “Yet hasty
marriage seldom proveth well” (IV.i.18). Clarence
uses biblical lore, the tale of Jephthah, to justify
breaking his oath to his father-in-law and thus evokes
the terrible image of a father sacrificing his daughter
(V.i.93-94). Clifford in his dying speech cites the myth
of Phaethon as a classical parallel to Henry’s failure
as son and heir of Henry V (II.vi.11-13). More in­
geniously handled is a reference to Daedalus and
Icarus in the scene of Henry's death. Richard introduces the story with characteristic bluntness and punning.

Why, what a peevish fool was that of Crete,
That taught his son the office of a fowl!
And yet, for all his wings, the fool was drown'd.

(V.vi.18-20)

Henry picks up the thread with his usual poetic prettiness and turns the allusion into a schematic allegory (21-25). Here at least Shakespeare adjusts the classical decoration to the distinctive voices of the two characters. As these different uses illustrate, the family theme pervades all the poetic modes of the play.

Underlying this pattern in the language is constant emphasis on a few key ideas, the themes of disorder and corrupted marriage and inheritance. Thus frequent references to disorder in the family suggest the chaos to which civil war has brought England. Since the poles of this disorder are two men, Henry in his weakness and Richard in his evil strength, a reference to the effect of each of them on the family will illustrate the technique. The dying Clifford asserts that if Henry had not been a weak king,

I, and ten thousand in this luckless realm
Had left no mourning widows for our death.

(II.vi.18-19)

And when Henry is about to die, he prophesies of Richard:
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And many an old man's sigh, and many a widow's,
And many an orphan's water-standing eye—
Men for their sons', wives for their husbands',
Orphans for their parents' timeless death—
Shall rue the hour that ever thou wast born.

(V.vi.39-43)

Both speeches emphasize the sheer number of those who are to suffer rather than the intensity of the individuals' grief. The abstractness of the images is in keeping with the lofty Senecan mode. Most of the references to the family are of this sort, though the most striking examples gain force from their dramatic context. The themes of marriage and inheritance are also present in this play, but they are more thoroughly woven into complexes of character and action. The language is less a separable element than in 2 Henry VI, even while it plays a bigger role.

The last of the Henry VI plays has the most impressive of the emblematic scenes, one that helps to enrich the many references to the family. At the battlefield of Towton, Henry soliloquizes on the woes that he has brought to himself and England. Then he overhears and joins in the laments of a father who has killed his son and a son who has killed his father. Unlike the emblematic scenes with Talbot and Alexander Iden, this episode comes early in the action (II.v). Partly as a consequence, the play afterward loses emotional momentum until it picks up toward the end. Henry's soliloquy itself is charming to modern taste; but Sir Barry Jackson, commenting on his production of 2 and 3 Henry VI in Birmingham, defends their
decision to include the scene of the fathers and sons as well: “The poet’s infallible intuition, however, proved right. The scene was retained, but treated as a static tableau: it shone away and above the violent episodes with which it is surrounded and threw more light on the horror of civil war than all the scenes of wasteful bloodshed.”

Henry VI is the most iterative of Shakespeare’s history plays, with its insistence on the theme of disorder. Hence the suddenly expansive effect of this scene, with its different mode of expressing the theme, is all the more striking.

After the scurrying to and fro of Scenes iii and iv, the sudden shift to Henry’s soliloquy is like an orator’s dramatic lowering of his voice. Clifford’s challenge to Richard has just shown the usual idiom of the play:

This is the hand that stabb’d thy father York,
And this the hand that slew thy brother Rutland;
And here’s the heart that triumphs in their death
And cheers these hands, that slew thy sire and brother,
To execute the like upon thyself.

(II.iv.6-10)

In the elaborate nature simile with which Henry begins, Shakespeare not only gives all this violence a sudden distance, but suggests the realm of the pastoral, to which Henry will explicitly turn. His solitary position on a molehill is appropriate to this weak man who is the center of the struggle, yet who has been chidden from the field because he does his cause more harm than good.

His words give an idyllic view of the shepherd’s
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orderly life and the natural fecundity with which it is associated. The shepherd is of course a traditional symbol for benign leadership, whether Christ or the governor; thus in 2 Henry VI Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, is "the shepherd of the flock" (II.ii.72). But Henry's wish for the pastoral life is ironic, since it undermines what the symbol in this sense represents, the guiding role of the king. He is disrupting the order of the state in seeking the orderly life of tending flocks. At the same time Shakespeare is careful to give the wish poignance; as always, he shows a deep understanding of the king's inevitable loneliness. For this purpose he uses the pastoral theme in a way characteristic of Seneca and countless others, contrasting the safety of humble life with the peril of lofty position.

The soliloquy also provides a fine tonal modulation. Its artificiality is to some extent psychological, a manifestation of Henry's escapism, but it prepares the way for the full-blown ritualism of the episode with the fathers and sons. With this shift to a more abstract dramatic level, Shakespeare gives one of the recurrent images of the play pictorial form. The many images of disorder in the family come together in a symbolic action that vivifies them all. At the same time, the scene directs attention to the thematic significance of the family relationships of the main characters, especially the fathers and sons—Henry and Prince Edward, the two Cliffords, and York and his sons. Much more than the Talbot-and-son episode of 1 Henry VI, this scene expresses in emblematic form the theme of the play.

Even within the passage one can see the movement
from the specific to the idealized and general. The first speeches of the son and father are more detailed and less stylized than Henry's formal lamentations at the end of each. Also the son's speech is more exact in biographical detail than the father's. The latter moves from bemoaning his son to a wider vision:

O pity, God, this miserable age!
What stratagems, how fell, how butcherly,
Erroneous, mutinous, and unnatural,
This deadly quarrel daily doth beget!

(88-91)

The language may at first seem simple, yet it has considerable rhetorical pattern. What is first noticeable is the series of adjectives building up to the key word “unnatural.” The aural play of “deadly” and “daily” in the last line suggests with the word “beget” that natural forces have been perverted, turned to breeding chaos. The passage demonstrates Shakespeare's skill at interweaving Latinate and English terms, not only in the series of adjectives but also in the pairing of “pity” and “miserable,” which suggests its Latin sense. This last device evokes the language of liturgy, a kind of stylization toward which the whole passage moves.

Henry’s choral response to this lamentation is longer, more general, and more artificial than that to the son's. He begins on the note with which he ended before, closing the line with the same word, “grief,” and then goes on to amplify a familiar emblem:

Woe above woel grief more than common grief!
O that my death would stay these ruthless deeds!

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O pity, pity, gentle heaven, pity!
The red rose and the white are on his face,
The fatal colours of our striving houses:
The one his purple blood right well resembles;
The other his pale cheeks, methinks, presenteth.
Wither one rose, and let the other flourish!
If you contend, a thousand lives must wither.

(94-101)

Here the king's conventional prettiness of idiom suggests the tone of the previous soliloquy, but the artificiality is less ironic because of the generally formal context and the contact with the theme of the play. No longer out of touch with the reality around him, Henry is expressing the disorder of civil war. This is the paradox of his nature, that despite his failure as a king his personal goodness and piety enable him to see better than those around him the nature of the forces sweeping through England. Especially striking is the image that makes the dynastic quarrel of York and Lancaster parasitic on the life of the nation. After a conventional poetic game with the red and white roses evokes the submerged metaphor of the state as a garden, the last line makes the growth of the two rival plants destructive of the whole garden.

What follows is hard for us to understand and harder yet to manage on the modern stage: the king, father, and son chant an antiphonal chorus of lamentation. The technique has its roots in the morality play and Seneca's scenes of lamentation, but Shakespeare's combination of severe regularity with simplicity of means is not really comparable with either. Again one is most directly reminded of liturgy and the Book of
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Common Prayer. The Talbot-and-son scenes are much more "literary." The rhymed stichomythy there, as is almost inevitable, gives a sense of premeditation and artfulness. The attitudes of the father and son are too obviously the stock responses of heroes in books. It is indicative of the muted poetic means in the later scene that Shakespeare avoids couplets except to cap the episode. The two ostentatious classicisms, the Latinate pun on "obsequious" in line 118 and the allusion to Priam's grief for his sons in line 120, are obtrusive. One should not so much listen to the speakers' words as respond to the symbolic picture of King Henry sitting on his molehill and the father and son kneeling beside their victims, all mourning. The father and son are nameless because they are England. Even Henry for once transcends his weakness and in his grief becomes the king and father of a suffering land. Thus for a moment the play shifts to a level of powerful abstraction.

It is with grim irony that the action resumes and the normal view of Henry returns. The first speaker after this antiphony is Prince Edward, the son whom Henry has disinherited and whom his weakness will shortly destroy. The king relapses into his normal, blandly conciliating manner and hurries off after being bullied by Margaret and Exeter. In the normal life of this play the only kind of antiphony is parodic, as in the next scene, when the victors mockingly lament over Clifford's body. Their sarcastic echoing of the themes of mercy and father-and-son emphasizes that they are immersed in the violent strife, that ceremony and ritual have no meaning for them:
Here as elsewhere the perversion of ceremony is a sign of the corruption of all meaningful order. In a play marked by these parodic ceremonies, only the visionary Henry can detach himself from the violence to partake of a genuine ritual, one that evokes the standards of order by which these bloody rivals are finally judged.

The themes of marriage and inheritance are both important in 3 Henry VI. As visionary, Henry may rise above the others; but as husband and father, he epitomizes the disorder of the commonwealth. His wife’s infidelity with Suffolk is not forgotten, for Edward calls her a Helen to Henry’s Menelaus (II.ii.146-49), and York compares her to “an Amazonian trull” (I.iv.114). This last insult also suggests what is more prominent in this play, her unnatural assumption of a masculine role, in effect usurping her husband’s kingship. It is she who gathers an army to oppose York’s enforced settlement after the battle of Saint Albans. She will not allow her husband to speak before the battle of Towton, or to be present at the battle, lest he demoralize the army. But even this inverted marriage is shaken by Henry’s weakness. Since 2 Henry VI began with the formal ceremony of their marriage, the effect is all the more powerful when in the first scene
of this play she formally renounces her husband because he has disinherited his son. It is ironic that Margaret should thus appeal to the sanctions of the family. They have a purely verbal currency among these selfish and ambitious conspirators, who flagrantly ignore them in practice. In defeat Margaret will earn our sympathy, yet there is a fierce justice in her being forced to see her son stabbed to death.

In a schematic parallel with Henry's rash marriage, Edward is moved by lust to neglect a prudent match for a foolish one. The lust of this "bluntest wooer in Christendom" (III.ii.83) lacks even the disguise of Petrarchan language. He is unscrupulous enough to use Lady Grey's affection for her children in his attempt to seduce her. The bawdy humor in this episode undermines in advance Warwick's formal proposal of affiance to the Lady Bona, and the ceremonial wedding procession at IV.i. seems especially hollow. Warwick's speech to King Lewis reflects the Petrarchan idiom:

Myself have often heard him say, and swear,
That this his love was an eternal plant,
Whereof the root was fix'd in Virtue's ground,
The leaves and fruit maintain'd with Beauty's sun.

(III.iii.123-26)

But such poetic embellishments are more and more separate from the reality of behavior and motive. This language is not merely a poetic smokescreen for a state marriage that will later be broken off, as in 1 Henry VI. Here the "eternal plant" has already found new ground in which to root. Again the only valid
ceremonial language is the mock ceremony of Lewis's and the Lady Bona's replies to Edward.

Like his rival, Edward proves his weakness as a king by a foolish marriage; and Warwick, now an enemy, spells out the political consequences:

> Alas! how should you govern any kingdom
> That know not how to use ambassadors,
> Nor how to be contented with one wife,
> Nor how to use your brothers brotherly?

(IV.iii.35-38)

The last line refers to the damage that Edward's uxoriousness inflicts on his brothers. As Clarence says, "But in your bride you bury brotherhood" (IV.i.54). The consequence is that Edward loses Clarence's support, and Richard stays with him only to usurp the crown. If this brother destroys Edward's hope for a peaceful succession, the retribution is appropriate to his misdeeds, a pattern reiterated to the point of tediousness in this play and Richard III.

The most important family theme in this play is inheritance, of which Clifford gives the orthodox doctrine: "Who should succeed the father but the son?" (II.ii.94). The words "father" and "son" occur 137 times, the references centering on the two rival houses. In the first scene their rights of inheritance are disputed at length. Henry's descent from the warrior king Henry V is his main claim to the throne. Even York's supporter Warwick does not attack the dead hero, but he is quick to point out that Henry VI is not his father's moral inheritor. Henry V's virtue has been lost
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to his country; the suggestion may be that Henry VI's weakness is a delayed effect of the curse on his grandfather's usurpation. Exeter's decision to support York's title emphasizes that the right of inheritance cannot be bartered away by men. In the curiously repetitive structure of 3 Henry VI, the gist of this discussion is repeated when Warwick debates Margaret and her followers at the French court, where Oxford traces Henry's heroic lineage back to a John of Gaunt un-historically given Spanish conquests.28

Nothing was more sacred in Elizabethan eyes and more firmly established by law than the son's right of inheritance. One of Henry's weakest acts is to disinherit his son in favor of York. Both he and Margaret refer to his deed as unnatural in the first scene, and she renounces their marriage on that ground. Prince Edward completes the destruction of natural order when he too repudiates his father to follow his mother into battle. Curiously enough, however, the young prince more than his father is Henry V's moral heir. At the battle of Tewkesbury his courageous words inspire Oxford to exclaim:

O brave young Prince! thy famous grandfather
Doth live again in thee: long may'st thou live
To bear his image and renew his glories!
(V.iv.52-54)

He gives a very different view of moral inheritance from Henry's defense of abandoning his son's claim to the throne:

And happy always was it for that son

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Whose father for his hoarding went to hell? I'll leave my son my virtuous deeds behind; And would my father had left me no more!

(II.ii.47-50)

These words might seem to express the highest piety and wisdom. After all, Henry cannot deny that his title to the throne is weak. Yet his father has left him not just the English crown but a tradition of glorious rule and conquest. He is losing the moral heritage of Agincourt just as surely as his reign has lost the territorial gains. The knighting of Prince Edward is necessarily a flawed ceremony, since he cannot fight only for the right if he is to defend the greatness of his own heritage. He is trapped by his great-grandfather’s usurpation, and the tainting of his moral inheritance is completed by Margaret’s questionable ancestry.

In an ordered society the son can by emulation learn his forebears’ virtue even while he takes over their social position. But in the chaos of 3 Henry VI moral order is dissolved; the forces of inheritance are perverted to an unnatural function, the perpetuation of a curse. Not only does this distortion affect the two rival houses, but it encompasses the supporting nobles of each side. One recurrent event includes a son who commits violence in revenge for the death of his father or some other member of his family. Both times that Henry’s title to the crown is discussed at length, a noble vows to support him whether or not it is weak, because the Yorkists have killed the noble’s father. Oxford, who thus answers Warwick at III.iii.101-5, is left relatively untainted by this motive; but Clifford
(I.i.165-66) is led to commit the most brutal act of a violent play. When he encounters the youngest son of his enemy York, he declares:

As for the brat of this accursed duke,
Whose father slew my father, he shall die.

(I.iii.4-5)

This theme becomes obsessive in the many debates between such opponents as Clifford and York’s sons about who is fighting whom in revenge for what butchered relatives.

Much subtler is the treatment of the House of York, to which the center of attention shifts as the Lancastrian power fades. Early in the play the loyalty of York’s sons seems a remarkable exception to the destruction of traditional bonds. Edward and Richard show apparently sincere concern about their father’s welfare, the latter revealing even a kind of hero-worship: “Methinks ’tis prize enough to be his son” (II.i.20). The omen of three suns merging into one gives cosmic endorsement to the unity of York’s three heirs. Is it possible that this family, rightful heirs to the throne, are not infected by the general disorder? They seem to uphold the ideal expressed by Stefano Guazzo: “There is nothing which so much maintaineth the honour of houses, as the agreement amongst brothers.” Their success applies the critical test, for all three brothers begin to pursue their individual ends when Edward reaches the throne.

Shakespeare gives perfunctory attention to Clarence’s wavering. Because of ambition and anger at
slights by Edward, Clarence entangles himself in a new family loyalty by marrying Warwick's daughter. His dilemma of loyalties is summed up by the repetition of "father" in his ceremonial repudiation of Warwick's cause:

George takes the red rose from his hat and throws it at Warwick.

Father of Warwick, know you what this means?
Look, here I throw my infamy at thee;
I will not ruinate my father's house,
Who gave his blood to lime the stones together,
And set up Lancaster.

(V.i.84-88)

The irony is all the richer if one follows Andrew Cairncross and Peter Alexander in using the quarto staging of the incident. After Clarence declares for Warwick, Richard in pantomime seduces him into changing sides. Whether or not his reform of conscience is purely hypocritical, there is a powerful irony in the greeting of Richard, who by now has established his villainy: "Welcome, good Clarence; this is brother-like" (108). Opposite this brotherly corruption in the Yorks is the truly fraternal attachment expressed by the dying words of Warwick and Montague in the next scene.

Richard, Duke of Gloucester, is the final inheritor of the York cause, and his attitude toward the family most fully expresses the corruption of his house. He reveals himself at length in Richard III, but 3 Henry VI raises an interesting technical question: how can
the loyal son of the early acts be reconciled with the ruthless schemer who emerges in the soliloquy of III.ii? Even Margaret implies his devotion to his father when she taunts the latter with his helplessness:

And where's that valiant crook-back prodigy,
Dicky your boy, that with his grumbling voice
Was wont to cheer his dad in mutinies?

(I.iv.75-77)

But this speech also hints at the other side of Richard's character, that he is a "prodigy," a perversion of nature. Neither he nor anyone else can forget his distorted body and the unnatural portents of his birth. Margaret baits him:

But thou art neither like thy sire nor dam,
But like a foul misshapen stigmatic.

(II.ii.135-36)

Richard gives memorable expression to the same idea in the soliloquy that establishes his demonic force:

Why, Love forswore me in my mother's womb:
And, for I should not deal in her soft laws,
She did corrupt frail Nature with some bribe,

To disproportion me in every part,
Like to a chaos, or unlick'd bear-whelp
That carries no impression like the dam.

(III.ii.153-62)

He is specifically talking of sexual love, but his un-
natural birth and monstrous growth alienate him from all affection. His final soliloquy powerfully sums up his isolation from everything human:

Then, since the heavens have shap’d my body so,
Let hell make crook’d my mind to answer it.
I have no brother, I am like no brother;
And this word ‘love,’ which greybeards call divine,
Be resident in men like one another,
And not in me: I am myself alone.

(V.vi.78-83)

His words repudiate the last vestiges of order and morality. He embodies the evil toward which the others have been drifting. Because they hold on to some few shreds of affection and humanity, he dismisses them as sentimentalists. Entirely single-minded in his ambition, he is the most powerful force left in England: “I am myself alone.” In one sense he is a monster created by heaven to punish the land, but in another he is the natural product of the whole descent toward chaos.

Still, the problem of Richard’s change of character is unanswered. The simplest explanation is that in the puzzling early speeches he is merely a type, an expression of the family loyalty of the Yorks, whereas later he becomes an independent character. In most of his speeches he has a distinctive poetic idiom, but his expressions of concern for his father are conventional and artificially elevated. This early nature could reflect what Samuel Bethell calls depersonalization; Richard loses his identity in order to express a general
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theme. The family loyalty of the Yorks must be established at first so that its collapse may illustrate the consequences of rebellion. One question about this explanation is why Shakespeare uses the most individual of the three sons to express loyalty to York. Clarence, for example, is a shadowy enough figure that he could have voiced Richard's sentiments in II.i without appearing notably inconsistent, yet he is not even present.

On the other hand, there is a more elaborately psychological explanation. From his first appearance in 2 Henry VI Richard is a powerful force, one who slices through the cant of those around him in a single-minded pursuit of whatever seems important to him. As the early Warwick illustrates, such a man can be a strong support for order and virtue if something larger than himself attracts his loyalty. York is the only man in 3 Henry VI whose ambition and strength of will are enough to compel Richard's support. Although his son can teach York something of Machiavellian casuistry (I.ii.22-34), York's massive violence of nature is worthy of Richard's respect. It is the most powerful force of the early civil wars. Richard never expresses without irony an attachment to anyone but his father. When the strength of his nature is freed from its filial tie, the last remnant of an order into which he can fit, he inevitably becomes a destructive force.

This argument is translatable into political terms. Whether or not York has a good title to the throne, he is a rebel, and rebellion breeds more of itself. As Dostoyevsky shows in The Devils, the second generation of revolutionaries is more demonic than the first. Rich-
ard is exactly right when he avows, “I am son to York” (II.vi.73), but his inheritance is perverted. The disorder that his father must foment he carries to new lengths, not only in the state but also in the family. One curious fact about him is that he is most human—and most like his father—in the heat of battle. It is in the conspiracies of the court that he goes beyond any evil yet shown in these plays. Thus there is a psychological and political validity in Richard’s change, though it seems inadequate to explain the fullness of his malevolence. There is also a thematic justification for the change in order to express a paradox in the origin of evil. Human categories of causation cannot explain the full power of evil. Rebellion breeds disorder by a natural process, but sometimes it releases a demonic power whose generation is finally mysterious.

All these explanations have some truth, yet they are not totally satisfying. Shakespeare may well have had these ideas about Richard or something like them, but he has not really embodied them in dramatic action. We do not see Richard becoming a monster; we only see him as son and then as monster. Change in the state and change between generations are important themes in 3 Henry VI, but change in character has not yet enlisted Shakespeare’s full imaginative powers. This is not finally a play of character but of atmosphere, the atmosphere of disorder and chaos.

The corruption of the House of York is apparent in one final irony, the false dawn with which the play ends. When the Yorkists murder Prince Edward before his mother’s eyes, she cries out a curse on their
children. Only a score of lines later Edward says of his queen, “By this, I hope, she hath a son for me” (V.v.88). With pomp and circumstance the last scene of the play reveals the king, the queen, and this new heir to the throne. Edward proclaims the triumph of the York cause in the last lines of the play:

Sound drums and trumpets! Farewell, sour annoy!  
For here, I hope, begins our lasting joy.  
(V.vii.45-46)

But the image that remains is of the crook-backed Richard kissing his nephew. Order in the family and the state may seem to have been restored, but the appearance is illusory. The chain of guilt is too strong to be broken without still more violence and suffering for England.

Conclusion.—Far from being an incoherent piece of chronicling, 3 Henry VI is an ordered drama, though it is not, like 2 Henry VI, built on the usual Shakespearian method of character development and contrast. The theme of political disorder informs the entire structure, and the primary symbol is disorder in the family. If anything, the iterative technique of the play is monotonous with its countless allusions to the destruction of family bonds, the meaninglessness of marriage, and the corruption of inheritance in a realm where there is no strong king who commands unquestioned loyalty. The poetic variety of the previous play is here subdued to this overriding tone, though Richard has a poetic idiom more distinctive than any in
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2 Henry VI. Except for him there is a loss in vitality, but that is compensated for by a gain in brooding power. The monolithic integrity of the work is reminiscent of Seneca's plays at their best. Also Shakespeare is developing the technique of irony, which later becomes immensely rich. As yet it is often rather crude, but even now it is valuable as an organizing principle. Perhaps because Richard III is superlatively built on a similar pattern, the structural skill of 3 Henry VI has been too little appreciated.

7 Both the Cairncross and Wilson (New Cambridge) editions read "Falstaff" as in the Folio, though most editors emend to "Fastolfe" as in the chronicles.


* Shakespeare omits the fact, reported in Hall, that Talbot had a
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"Tillyard, p. 172.


"Cf. Cairncross’s note on the passage.

"See, for example, “The Booke of Matrimony,” The Worckes of Thomas Becon (London, 1564), I, 618 ff. Henry’s violation of the earlier spousals makes this marriage even more suspect.

"Cairncross, 1 Henry VI, p. xlv.

"Tillyard, pp. 185-86.

"The idea that rebels meet such a fate is a truism, often found in the Homilies, for example: “For first, the rebels do not only dishonour their prince, the parent of their country, but also do dishonour and shame their natural parents, if they have any, do shame their kindred and friends, do disherit and undo for ever their children and heirs” (“The Third Part of the Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion,” Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches [Oxford, Eng., 1822], p. 525).

"Tillyard, pp. 181-83, creates an unnecessary difficulty by assuming that Salisbury and Warwick know of the plot to murder Gloucester. Surely they are not intended to stand silently by during the planning at III.i.223 ff. (The quarto has them exit with the king.) From York at II.i.71-74 they learn only what everyone knows, that most of the court is scheming toward Gloucester’s overthrow; nothing is said of his murder. Hence Warwick’s indignation on finding his body is neither feigned nor out of character.


"Homilies, p. 508.

"There is just a hint of Gloucester’s uxoriousness as well. At I.i.39-40 the Cardinal sneers: “Thy wife is proud; she holdeth thee in awe / More than God or religious churchmen may.”

"As Brockbank points out, Holinshed traces the beginning of Henry VI’s woes to this marriage (Early Shakespeare, p. 82). Hall has a similar sentiment; see Hall's Chronicle, p. 204.

"Or at least she is a party to the action if the quarto version is correct. See Cairncross’s note at I.iii.39.

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Erasmus illustrates the allegorical reading of this myth when he interprets Phaëthon as "a prince, who while still headstrong with the ardor of youth, but with no supporting wisdom, seized the reins of government and turned everything into ruin for himself and the whole world" (The Education of a Christian Prince, trans. Lester K. Born [New York, 1936], p. 147). This allegorical tradition may help to explain why the same myth is, as H. C. Hart's note at I.iv.33 remarks, "unmercifully lugged in" by Clifford to describe York's downfall (The Third Part of King Henry the Sixth, Arden Shakespeare [London, 1910]).


The same legend occurs in the Spanish Tragedy. The two references may reflect a popular tradition, as Hart suggests in his note at III.iii.81-82.

Ronald S. Berman writes (specifically of 2 Henry VI): "In order to demonstrate devotion and filial piety man must change the moral standards of loyalty to those of the vendetta" ("Fathers and Sons in the Henry VI Plays," Shakespeare Quarterly 13 [1962], 490).


