

## 2004 Study Guide for *Henry VI Part Two* by William Shakespeare

---

### Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the English traditions of primogeniture and the divine right of kings. What did it mean to be an “anointed king” in the 1400s? What role did religion play in the power of a king? How and why did the king depend on the nobility? How could this result in jealousy and rivalry amongst the nobles? These and other websites provide information:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine\\_right\\_of\\_kings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_right_of_kings)

[http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Divine\\_Right\\_of\\_Kings](http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Divine_Right_of_Kings)

<http://www.elizabethan.org/compendium/41.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primogeniture>

2. Research the social stations of the principal characters in the play: king, queen, protector, cardinal, duke, duchess, earl, lord. Make a chart showing the theoretical status of these individuals in relation to each other (it will turn out to be somewhat different in the many ebbs and flows of the play). Explain what factors confer status on each. These and other websites provide information:

<http://edwardianpromenade.com/resources/titles-and-orders-of-precedence/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord\\_Protector](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Protector)

[http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What\\_is\\_the\\_ranking\\_in\\_the\\_Catholic\\_Church](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_ranking_in_the_Catholic_Church)

3. Research the attitudes toward witchcraft and magic in Shakespeare’s day. These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-witchcraft-and-witches.htm>

<http://phoenixandturtle.net/excerptmill/authhist.htm>

4. Create a family tree for the Plantagenets from Edward III to Richard III. Distinguish each line with a different color: York, Mortimer, Lancaster, Beaufort. This and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.britroyals.com/plantagenet.htm>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English\\_monarchs\\_family\\_tree](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_monarchs_family_tree)
5. Research the Wars of the Roses. What years did they span? Describe the major causes of the conflict. How did the dynamics of the Plantagenet family contribute to the Wars of the Roses? Who were the major players? What were the important battles? What was the outcome? Why were they called the Wars of the Roses? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.wars-of-the-roses.com/>
6. Research the Jack Cade Rebellion. Who was Jack Cade? What were the causes of the rebellion? Who among the nobility supported him? How was the rebellion quashed? What happened to Cade? This and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.britainexpress.com/History/medieval/cade.htm>
7. Research the First Battle of St. Albans. Who were the opposing sides? What were they fighting for? What decisive events took place during the battle? Who won? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.richard111.com/first1.htm>  
<http://www.warsoftheroses.com/WRBattleShell.cfm?bid=1>
8. What qualities should a good leader possess? What qualities in good leaders make people willing to follow them? This and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.zimmerman-lehman.com/leadership.htm>
9. Define ambition. How does ambition function in a personality? Give examples of “good” ambition and of “bad” ambition. What is the difference between them?
10. Henry VI became king at the age of nine months. What challenges face a nation ruled by a child king? What are the challenges of being one? Who makes decisions on behalf of the underage king until he is old enough to make his own? What was the legacy left

to Henry VI by his famous father, Henry V? How might it have been difficult for Henry VI to live up to that legacy? Research Henry VI's relationship with his uncles and great-uncles, the Dukes of Gloucester, Bedford, and Exeter, and the Cardinal of Winchester. What did each stand to gain from influencing the young king? Which had his best interests at heart? Which were concerned for the welfare of the country? Which had other agendas? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.britainexpress.com/History/Henry-VI-Regency.htm>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regency\\_Government\\_of\\_England\\_1422%E2%80%931437](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regency_Government_of_England_1422%E2%80%931437)

11. In presenting historical events, what obligation does a writer have to be true to the facts? What are the pitfalls of fictionalizing events and presenting them as history? Of fictionalizing historical characters and presenting them as biography? Find examples of modern-day films that have taken liberties with history and individuals to create a more compelling story.

## Resources

### Books:

*Shakespeare's English Kings* by Peter Saccio

*Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare* by Isaac Asimov

*The Sunne in Splendor* by Sharon Kay Penman

*Wars of the Roses* by Alison Weir

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/>

<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm>

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

## After seeing/reading the play

1. In Act I, scene i, what conflicts are established? What causes whom to side with whom initially (take into account family ties, loyalties, ambition, power, etc.)? What English territories in France are lost through Henry's marriage to Margaret? How did England acquire those lands? How do the individuals in this scene react to the loss? What reason does the Cardinal give for accusing Gloucester of opposing the marriage?
2. Explain the reasons for these contentions: York versus Henry. Winchester versus Gloucester. Margaret versus Eleanor. Suffolk versus Warwick and Salisbury. York versus Somerset. What did Somerset and York disagree about initially, and what subsequent actions have fueled their quarrel (see *Henry VI, Part One*, Act II, scene iv)? Which characters are allied with which, and why? Which alliances shift and why?
3. Refer to the Plantagenet family tree you constructed. Show visually and explain verbally why York believes he has a legitimate claim to the throne of England. How legitimate a claim would Gloucester have if he chose to pursue it?
4. In Act I, scene ii, what does Eleanor want for her husband? What does she want for herself? How does she try to awaken his ambition? What means is she willing to employ to achieve her desires?
5. Refer to your research on Elizabethan attitudes toward witchcraft and magic. To whom are Eleanor's methods (in Act I, scene iv) dangerous, and why? What is the significance of the spirit's name? What prophecies does the spirit make and about whom? What double meanings do the prophecies contain? Which come true, and how? Why is it a crime to consult the spirit about the King's death?
6. Compare and contrast Queen Margaret and Eleanor, the Duchess of Gloucester. What is their family relationship? What does each expect of the other? What makes them rivals? How do they act out their rivalry? How does each expect to defeat the other? What powers do they claim? To what extent are they dependent on men to give them power? How do they wield their power? What ambitions drive each? Identify instances when each reveals her ambition.

7. At the end of *Part One*, what does Suffolk lead Margaret to expect if she marries Henry? What is the reality that unfolds in *Part Two*? What particularly disappoints her?
8. Refer to your research on the qualities of a good king. Identify instances of nobility and true leadership in King Henry. Find occasions when he recognizes that he is a weak ruler. Name factors other than his own character and actions that make it difficult for Henry to be an effective king. What qualities and situations keep him from exercising his authority? What happens in Act III, scene ii, to cause him to become decisive at last?
9. In Act V, scene i, York declares, "I am far better born than is the King, / More like a king, more kingly in my thoughts." How much of what he asserts can be verified? Compare York's potential for kingship (never realized) with Henry's actual kingship. How accurate do you find York in his assessment of himself?
10. Refer to your research on ambition. Describe the ambition that drives each of the principal characters. Which achieve their ambition(s)? Which suffer because of their ambition? How are they punished? Which characters benefit from ambition, either their own or someone else's?
11. Identify instances in which Henry relies on God to handle a crisis rather than taking appropriate action for himself. In which cases does a good outcome result? How do the nobles regard Henry's piety? How does Margaret regard Henry's holiness and why?
12. Describe instances in which the Lords show that they have given up on Henry's taking decisive action. Since they regard his downfall as inevitable, what do they do to make sure they come out ahead?
13. Describe the religious nature of the Cardinal of Winchester. How is it expressed? What is expected of him as a man of the Church? Find specific references to his corruption? How does he die? Why? How is his death a fitting conclusion to his life? Contrast Henry's manifestations of piety with the Cardinal's.
14. As Lord Protector, whom has Gloucester been protecting and from what? What mistaken beliefs keep Gloucester from protecting himself? How do these beliefs lead

to his downfall? What accusations do his accusers level against him? To what extent might they be describing their own crimes? How do they justify condemning Gloucester without a trial? How do they maintain their pretense of innocence? What do they hope to gain by his death? What atrocities does Gloucester prophesy that subsequently take place? What is lost with the death of Gloucester? Why do the common people love him? Once Gloucester is murdered, who remains to protect the common people? What justice do they demand for him?

15. Why do the common people hate Suffolk? Why do they want him dead? Find instances of his oppression of the poor. Instances of his pride. At whose hands does he die?
16. How does Queen Margaret view herself? How do others view her? How does her behavior fit with her title? How does it contradict her title? How does she maintain control over the King? What causes her to lose her power to manipulate him? How does that loss affect her? Under what circumstances does she exchange gender roles with King Henry?
17. Refer to your research on witchcraft. What were witches believed to be capable of doing? What specific crimes are committed in the witch scenes? Why are they considered deserving of extreme punishment?
18. Chart the status of Henry VI, Gloucester, Suffolk, York, Margaret, the Cardinal, Jack Cade. What factors confer status as the play begins? What causes changes in status? Note how the changes are related (e.g., someone can rise only if someone else falls). Tell the story from the point of view of each of these individuals.
19. What does York hope to achieve by orchestrating Jack Cade's rebellion? What propaganda has he instructed Cade to spread?
20. On what legitimate grievances does Jack Cade base his rebellion? What trumped-up charges? What do the people expect to achieve by rebelling? What does Cade plan to get out of it? How is he exploiting the people? What does he promise them? What arbitrary and tyrannical acts does he perform as soon as he gains a little power? What damages does he inflict? Why do the rebels kill educated people? Why do they hate lawyers?

21. How is the Cade rebellion a microcosm of the dissension among the nobles? Compare the threats to the welfare of England posed by the commoners with the threats posed by the nobility. Which are more dangerous and why?
22. Refer to your research on the qualities that make a good leader. What essential leadership qualities does Henry possess? York? Suffolk? Gloucester? Margaret? Jack Cade? How are their qualities expressed in each case? Where does each fall short? Cite other examples of leadership in the play.
23. Which characters owe loyalty and to whom? On what is their loyalty based? How serious are the pledges of loyalty sworn in the play? When do loyalties shift? How do the individuals justify breaking their loyalty oaths?
24. One of the play's themes is mutilation, both physical and symbolic. In the text, find imagery of the destruction of bodies. Find instances of beheadings; what is the significance of how the heads are subsequently used? Find instances when physical mutilation reflects the mutilation of the country, the people and the body politic.
25. In the final scene, how does Shakespeare set us up for the "sequel"? What stories are left incomplete? What events are promised for *Part Three*?
26. While *Part Two* isn't a full-fledged revenge play, *Part Three* will be. Which characters seem likely to be driven in the next episode by a need for revenge, on whom, and for what wrongs?

---

Members of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Education department created the "2004 Study Guide for *Henry VI, Part Two*." These suggestions were designed for students and teachers but may be enjoyed by audiences of all ages. They may be used without restriction for educational purposes. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is not responsible for the content of any website listed above.

© Oregon Shakespeare Festival No part of the "2004 Study Guide for *Henry VI, Part Two*" may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system, for professional or commercial purposes without permission in writing from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Education department.

---