William Shakespeare’s three Henry VI plays are often perceived as solely being about the Wars of the Roses. The texts, in particular 3 Henry VI, do follow the dynastic progression that leads to the Wars of the Roses, but their complexity means they are not just a story of the English line of succession. The presentation of the characters provides a social commentary, critiquing them both directly and indirectly. In the 1983 television productions, part of the BBC Television Shakespeare series, the social commentary is undercut by buffoonish humour, although the director was keen to alert viewers to the horrors of war. The 2016 versions, presented under the banner of The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses, brought the dynastic plot to the fore. By cutting subsidiary characters and storylines, it also vastly reduced the social commentary. However the director uses the texts to raise awareness of the impact of war, this time on the individual. In conclusion, the Henry VI plays provide both social commentary and a story of two dynasties, but the way they do this varies, depending on the way they are presented.
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**Introduction**

William Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* plays are the earliest of his history plays: the editors of the Norton Shakespeare suggest they date from around 1591 to 1593.¹ Some argue they are his very first works.² They are also much less studied than his more famous works and therefore fertile ground for investigation. John Julius Norwich states that ‘in the *Henry VI* plays his subject is above all the Wars of the Roses and the events which led up to them’.³ This would indicate that their focus is the battle between the houses of York and Lancaster. However Michael Hattaway notes that Shakespeare ‘examines roles for women in political life […] More generally he questioned whether nobility derived from birth or behaviour […] and explored what constituted the “common weal”’.⁴ This would indicate that the playwright is also providing a social commentary on the English nation. This area in particular has not been looked at in depth before. This dissertation will examine the plays and will highlight Shakespeare’s critique of society alongside the historical narrative. It will also look at television performances of them and establish whether the same societal critique is presented on screen as in the texts.

The plays date from an era when ‘history was a popular commodity’ for playwrights.⁵ Nicholas Grene highlights the fashion at the time for the ‘multi-play history series’, following the ‘spectacular success of *Tamburlaine*’.⁶ Hattaway states that ‘[l]ike the “chroniclers” Shakespeare does not offer an unadorned account of act and event, nor does he separate

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dramatisation from commentary’. Gordon McMullan comments that the playwright ‘compresses, he elongates and he inserts scenes when he needs to emphasise certain points’. Shakespeare’s Henry VI plays also give us a history of adaptation in microcosm; Edward Hall, Raphael Holinshed and others take existing narratives and adapt them into the chronicles. Shakespeare then takes their source material and transforms it from the written word to spoken performance. And his works are subsequently further adapted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries for television.

Margaret Jane Kidnie states that ‘[i]t is sometimes assumed, perhaps for lack of a better alternative, that the printed text of Shakespeare’s plays provides a fixed point’. However, this is not the case. There is no single version of many of Shakespeare’s works, including the second and third Henry VI plays, which were published as quartos as well as in the First Folio. Editors change words and punctuation, as well as adding in stage directions. The plays can also be ambiguous; Coursen states that Shakespeare could ‘let motives jostle without definition or explanation’. In addition, Jonathan Miller suggests ‘[t]he very act of putting his [Shakespeare’s] plays on stage automatically pre-empts the alternative meanings that would otherwise occur in the mind of the private reader’. One might include television adaptations in this, and so it is inevitable that such productions will differ from the play texts.

Shakespeare’s plays have regularly been performed on British television, including the three parts of Henry VI. However, these plays have usually been cut for broadcast, in

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7 Hattaway, p.16.
particular the productions in 1960 and 1965. The BBC has since returned to the *Henry VI* plays twice more. In 1983 they were broadcast as part of the BBC Television Shakespeare project. The thirty-six plays in the First Folio, plus *Pericles*, were filmed over a period of six-and-a-half years. The *Henry VI* productions met with success and praise; director Jane Howell chose to present them highly theatrically, rather than using more conventional television methods, and cut very little of the texts. By contrast, the versions of the plays presented in 2014 are shot on location in a highly realistic style, and are heavily cut. Janis Lull is among a number of academics to have noted that ‘[s]everal twentieth-century [stage] productions cut and combined the three *Henry VI* plays into two, increasing pace for a modern audience’. Therefore Dominic Cooke’s cutting of *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses* is not especially unusual, but does have a substantial impact on the story.

Television productions of Shakespeare’s plays have long been regarded as inferior: Emma Smith states that ‘[s]tudies of televisual Shakespeare have tended to stress its inadequacy’. She cites Laurence Kitchin as denouncing television as ‘a medium chronically inadequate to Shakespeare’s plays’. However, Ben Power, adaptor of the 2014 productions claims: ‘Shakespeare can be engaging, dynamic and cinematic’. And Kidnie states that television ‘represents in Shakespeare studies a relatively neglected medium of production’. By examining the productions above, this dissertation will illustrate the very different ways in which television can present Shakespeare’s texts. An example of this is the use of horses. In

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16 Smith, p.135.
17 Ibid.
19 Kidnie, p.104.
hobby horses. In *The Hollow Crown*, the actors use real horses, often doing their own stunt riding. This is not just a different style, but also has an impact on the way the plays are received by their respective audiences.

Linda Hutcheon notes that ‘[a]n adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context – a time, a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum’. Those involved in both television productions have noted that the politics of their own day influenced their thinking about the texts. In both cases the consequences of war play a major part in their interpretation and are reflected in the way it is represented on screen. This adds a different layer of social commentary not immediately obvious in the words alone. In performance, the realities of war can be portrayed in a way that influences the audience.

The three *Henry VI* plays have long suffered from a lack of attention. They have been described as ‘a mass of historical material’ that leaves an audience ‘confused by the unevenness of Shakespeare’s apprentice work’. However, they are more than just a complicated story of fifty years of English history. Within Shakespeare’s texts there is a commentary on the treatment and behaviour of all society. This commentary is not always brought out in modern television performances, but directors and production teams have found other areas of life to critique through the texts. This dissertation will examine how this is done and how it relates back to the original works.

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20 *Henry VI Part One*, in *The Shakespeare Collection*, (2 Entertain Video, 2005) [on DVD] 0:23:56. Future time codes listed Part One, Part Two, or Part Three are to these DVDs, and are included in parentheses in the text.

21 *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses*, dir. Dominic Cooke (Universal Pictures UK, 2016) [on DVD] *Episode Two*, 0:13:52. Future time codes listed Episode One or Episode Two are to these DVDs, and are included in parentheses in the text.


Chapter One: The texts of Shakespeare’s Henry VI plays

Shakespeare’s plays about King Henry VI are among his least popular works. John Julius Norwich describes them as ‘the runts of the litter’.\(^{24}\) They chronicle fifty years of crucial English history, including the Wars of the Roses. With such a wide time span and complex story to relate, the plays might have been simply a story of dynastic succession. However, Shakespeare chose to cut some of the history and to include in the narrative vivid portraits of both the main characters and the peripheral players. As such, the three plays are both a story of dynastic succession and a commentary on the people who were part of it.

Like all Shakespeare’s plays it is impossible to give a precise date for the three parts of Henry VI, although it is largely thought they date from the early 1590s. A number of events happening at this time could be said to have resonances with the play. E. M. W. Tillyard states that ‘[t]hroughout the Henry VI’s [sic] and Richard III Shakespeare links the present happening with the past’.\(^{25}\) Donald G. Watson highlights three issues that were concurrent with the plays. Firstly, death in battle: ‘[b]etween 1585 and 1602 more than 100,000 men were conscripted to fight abroad and fewer than half that number returned’.\(^{26}\) Secondly, ‘[t]he Irish were once again rebellious in the 1590s’.\(^{27}\) And thirdly, ‘[f]ood riots were common in the early 1590s’.\(^{28}\) R. J. C. Watt also highlights another rebellion ‘in the summer of 1592 […] when a group of Southwark feltmakers clashed with guards of the Marshalsea prison’.\(^{29}\) John Julius Norwich raises the issue of the Spanish Armada of 1588

\(^{24}\) Norwich, p.9.
\(^{27}\) Watson, p.78.
\(^{28}\) Ibid.
and suggests that the political atmosphere of the age in which Shakespeare was writing would have made ‘Catholic France fair game’.  

However, it is now widely accepted that assumptions cannot be made as to how these events affected Shakespeare’s writing. Watt suggests Tillyard’s ‘interpretation of the histories was shaped by a conservative and nationalist politics of the 1940s’ producing a ‘Shakespeare who is politically orthodox and conservative’.  

He goes on to say that ‘modern critics have chosen to see the plays instead as conscious acts of historiography, serious attempts to interpret the past, not merely about the 1590s in disguise’.  

Watson likewise discredits the Tillyardian view, saying that literary historians ‘have recognized […] the problems of accepting a literary approach in which the text frequently but innocently reflects assumptions of its culture’.  

And both Watson and Gabriele Bernhard Jackson also suggest that if Shakespeare was taking his lead from the politics of his time, then the story of Henry VI was an odd choice; Bernhard Jackson suggests a play ‘recalling the gallant deeds of the English in France’ would be more apt.  

While Watson specifically suggests the story of Henry V.  

Therefore, while Shakespeare would undoubtedly have been aware of what was going on around him, it is not possible to state that the historical context of his own time influenced the plays he produced.

Much criticism of the plays has been dismissive of them. Harold Bloom spends just seven pages of a seven-hundred page book on them, describing part one as ‘bad’ and saying he would be ‘pleased to believe that other botchers had been at work’ on them, rather than

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30 Norwich, pp.236-37.
31 Watt, p.2.
32 Watt, p.3.
33 Watson, p.12.
35 Watson, p.39.
Shakespeare alone. However, they are not universally disregarded. Jane Howell, who directed them for the BBC in the 1980s describes them as ‘wonderful’ and ‘extraordinarily powerful, major works’. Critics are divided over who or what is at the centre of the plays. In a trilogy largely considered to be about the Wars of the Roses, it might be thought that King Henry and Richard of York would be central. However, Janis Lull states that the protagonist is ‘the reign, not the king’. Stuart Hampton-Reeves and Carol Chillington Rutter sum up Tillyard’s view as ‘arguing that the plays’ main character is England itself’. This would imply that despite the plays being named after Henry VI, he is not their most important character. Instead it could be claimed that interpersonal relationships are more important. Lull states that ‘the Henry VI plays show the interdependence of character and circumstance’. While Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter suggest the plays ‘contemplate questions of national identity’. These are not simply plays showing a dynastic progression, but plays that closely examine their characters.

Shakespeare made his story more compelling by taking ‘a big knife’ to the ‘hefty narratives’ he used as source material, as Dominique Goy-Blanquet suggests. Janis Lull says ‘[n]either the chroniclers nor the playwrights cared as much about the facts as they did about the possibilities’. And Nicholas Grene states that ‘[c]haracter was not the business of the chronicler’. However, character is the business of the stage. McMullan comments that ‘quite a large amount of these plays is versified chronicle but he’s a dramatist, he’s the best

38 Lull, p.90.
40 Lull, p.91.
41 Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter, p.1.
42 Goy-Blanquet, p.66.
43 Lull, p.89.
44 Grene, p.97.
dramatist ever. He knows how to take that stuff and then turn it into a drama’.\textsuperscript{45} Lull also states that Shakespeare ‘allows his audience to infer how an event reflects on other characters’.\textsuperscript{46} By creating characters with multi-faceted personalities and showing how they interact, Shakespeare provides a commentary on human behaviour. In the course of the three plays he does this directly and through comparison, by juxtaposing the French and the English, nobles and commoners, and men and women.

The order in which the plays were written is disputed. Some, such as Norwich, Grene and Wilders, argue that they follow a narrative arc and must have been written in sequence.\textsuperscript{47} This is significant because the idea that they form a planned route through history places emphasis on the dynastic storyline. However, others, in particular the editors of the Oxford Shakespeare, believe there is evidence that plays two and three came first.\textsuperscript{48} The production history of the plays would also suggest that playing them as a trilogy, or a tetralogy with Richard III, was not always common. Emma Smith concludes: ‘the seriality in the Folio is an editorial process rather than a theatrical one’\textsuperscript{49}. Stuart Hampton-Reeves states: ‘[t]he practice of playing the history plays together is, by and large, a modern one’.\textsuperscript{50} And together with Chillington Rutter, he suggests that there is a tension between critical and theatrical approaches to the plays, stating that ‘[i]n recent years, textual criticism has tended to stress the differences among the three plays’.\textsuperscript{51} The likelihood that they originally functioned as individual plays suggests more emphasis on character and less on a through-storyline.

\textsuperscript{45} McMullan, 0:21:11.  
\textsuperscript{46} Lull, p.91.  
\textsuperscript{49} Smith, p.146.  
\textsuperscript{50} Hampton-Reeves, The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s History Plays. p.236.  
\textsuperscript{51} Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter, p.15.
The tensions that lead to the Wars of the Roses are also only a backdrop in the first two plays of the sequence. York’s claim to the throne is not revealed until the end of 1 Henry VI, act two, and the first play is primarily about the battles between the English and the French. It is easy to view the French characters negatively, and at times they are portrayed as cowardly or liars, but Shakespeare not only critiques them, but uses them to provide a foil to the English.

The most prominent of the French is the ‘shepherd’s daughter’ Joan la Pucelle. She is not simply a successful warrior or a religious zealot, but a complex combination of both, with added wit and humanity. Shakespeare uses all these traits to create dramatic tension, humour and tragedy. When Pucelle enters, she immediately spots the trick René and Charles try to play on her, knowing who the real dauphin is, and when challenged to combat by Charles, he has to ask her to stop as she overcomes him. In addition to her strength and intelligence, she declines Charles’ advances, declaring ‘I must not yield to any rites of love, / For my profession’s sacred from above’ (1 Henry VI, 1.3.92-93). The use of rhyme here, and in the following couplet, elevates her speech and implies a genuine piety. Pucelle is also a strategist; her troops gain entry to Rouen by appearing to be ‘vulgar sort of market men’ (1 Henry VI, 3.2.4), taking it back from the English. And she is persuasive, turning Burgundy from a supporter of the English to a supporter of the dauphin: ‘I am vanquished. These haughty words of hers / Have battered me like roaring cannon-shot’ (1 Henry VI, 3.7.78-79). However, the behaviour of the English towards her is misogynistic and brutal.

She is a capable fighter; Talbot is unable to beat her when they fight, and is reduced to abusive words: ‘Devil or devil’s dam’, ‘high-minded strumpet’, and ‘witch’ (1 Henry VI,

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52 William Shakespeare, The Norton Shakespeare, 2nd edn, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and others (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 1 Henry VI, 1.3.51. Future scene and line references are to this edition, and are included in parentheses in the text.
1.7.5, 12, 21). And once finally captured by York, his and Warwick’s treatment of her is merciless. Bernhard Jackson suggests Pucelle’s captors play ‘cat and mouse with her as they condemn her’, adding that ‘it is unlikely York and Warwick come off unscathed by the negative associations of their total violation of English custom’ by condemning a possibly pregnant woman to being burned to death. Bernhard Jackson adds that audiences at the time may well have been appalled by Pucelle’s punishment. Kelly Newman O’Connor also picks up on the behaviour of the English, describing their reaction as ‘misogynist heckling’. All this suggests that the portrayal of Pucelle is not so much damning of her as of the English.

York and Warwick are not the only English characters to behave poorly. Gloucester and Winchester are in conflict with each other from almost the opening moment of the play. They bicker as they mourn the dead King Henry V, and by scene four, Gloucester is barred by Winchester from entering the Tower. This prompts Gloucester to call his uncle ‘haughty prelate’ and ‘manifest conspirator’ (1 Henry VI, 1.4.23, 33) while Winchester calls his nephew ‘ambitious vizier’ and ‘a foe to citizens’ (1 Henry VI, 1.4.29, 61). These are the two most powerful men in the kingdom, and yet they are portrayed as petty and caring more for themselves than for the state. In act three, their animosity leads to outright anarchy, when the actions of their respective supporters force the Mayor of London to appeal to King Henry for help to quell them.

By comparison, the first signs of the War of the Roses are quite minor. York and Somerset’s falling out in act two, scene four, leads the main characters to choose sides, picking red or white roses (1 Henry VI, 2.4.30-33). However it is not about York’s claim to the throne but an unspecified point of law (1 Henry VI, 2.4.5-9). In the following scene,

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53 Bernhard Jackson, p.31.
54 Ibid.
York’s uncle Mortimer does reveal their claim (1 Henry VI, 2.5.63-92), but for the rest of the play the issue is barely touched on. As such, dynastic succession is a particularly weak plotline in 1 Henry VI, while the portrayal of the French and the English nobility provides a social commentary.

There are no named commoners in 1 Henry VI; however in the following play, the general populace make up a significant part of the cast and the action. The commoners largely provide comic relief from the continuing dispute between Gloucester and Winchester in the first half of the play, and the rise of York towards the end of the play. However, the commoners are not just ignorant peasants; they offer both an insight into the lives and thoughts of the working classes, as well as how they were treated by those above them. Petitioners hoping for help from the Lord Protector unwittingly appeal to the Queen and Suffolk instead, but while the moment can be played for comic effect, there is an undercurrent of wrong-doing.

FIRST PETITIONER    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.

And shortly afterwards:

SUFFOLK (Reads)    ‘Against the Duke of Suffolk for enclosing the commons of Melford’! How now, Sir Knave?

SECOND PETITIONER    Alas, sir, I am but a poor petitioner of our whole township.

2 Henry VI, 1.3.18-27

The scene highlights the behaviour of two nobles, Winchester and Suffolk, and the impact they have on their subordinates. Another petitioner, Peter the armourer’s man, appears a fool when he claims his master, Horner, said ‘the King was an usurer’ (2 Henry VI, 1.3.34), when he means a usurper. But this comic start becomes much darker an act later when he is forced into single combat with Horner. This scene illustrates three levels of society: the nobles, who
are viewing the match as entertainment; Horner and his neighbours, who are drinking heartily; and Peter and the other prentices. What follows can be portrayed as a comic fight, accentuated by Peter’s surname of ‘Thump’. But it is also a vindication of members of the lowest class over their superiors. Peter asks for prayers while Horner gets drunk; Peter is afraid, Horner is over-confident. Finally, despite Horner’s protestations of innocence, when Peter overcomes him, Horner admits his treason as he dies (2 Henry VI, 2.3.95). Lull comments that ‘[t]he behaviour of the common people […] often echoes and comments on the behaviour of England’s leaders’. The scene gives both dark comic relief and a commentary on the characters’ behaviour, and appears to suggest the lowest class is morally superior to those above them.

The most significant commoner in the play is Jack Cade, and the uprising of his supporters is used as another source of comedy. Cade’s claims of descending from the Mortimers are continuously, and humorously, undermined by Dick’s asides about Cade’s real background. But when Dick calls to ‘kill all the lawyers’ (2 Henry VI, 4.2.70), Cade’s response shows both wit and an underlying sense that the commoners have been ill-treated.

CADE Is not this a lamentable thing that the skin of an innocent lamb should be made parchment? That parchment, being scribbled o’er, should undo a man? Some say the bee stings, but I say ’tis the bee’s wax. For I did but seal once to a thing, and I was never mine own man since.

2 Henry VI, 4.2.71-76

Cade shows an eloquence here that might have better suited verse. However, speaking in prose means Cade remains aligned with the commons, rather than the people they are berating. It might also be suggested that while Cade is obviously clever enough to use the speech patterns of the nobility, he chooses not to.

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56 Lull, p.93.
Cade also proves himself both thoughtful and persuasive. When Lord Saye pleads for his life, Cade tells the audience in an aside: ‘I feel remorse in myself in his words, but I’ll bridle it. He shall die an it be but for pleading so well’ (2 Henry VI, 4.7.96-97). And when Clifford arrives and convinces the rabble to switch sides using threats, Cade reminds them that if they return to the king they will ‘live in slavery to the nobility’ (2 Henry VI, 4.7.170). He uses persuasion rather than aggression to win them back. Clifford gains them again, this time by suggesting the French will come to England and take control (2 Henry VI, 4.2.184-190). This sequence shows the pliability of public opinion, but it also suggests that ultimately threats, used by the nobility, are more successful than hope for a better future, as used by the commoner Cade.

Like 1 Henry VI, the approach of civil war does not feature prominently for the majority of 2 Henry VI. York has a soliloquy at the end of the first scene where he speaks of his desire to be king (2 Henry VI, 1.1.213-258), and another in act three, where he sets out his plans to use ‘John Cade of Ashford’ to see how the commoners ‘affect the house and claim of York’ (2 Henry VI, 3.1.331-383). But he does not take action until the start of act five, when he arrives from Ireland to ‘claim his right’ (2 Henry VI, 5.1.1). Instead, the storyline focuses on Gloucester and Winchester for the first half of the play, then on Cade, and only finally on the approaching Wars of the Roses. This is a story of violent squabbles, not a battle between two houses for the crown; a complex portrait of national identity raising questions with its audience as Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter have identified.

The final part of Henry VI is the one play where the Wars of the Roses take centre stage. Here, there is a strong storyline of two dynasties fighting for supremacy. However, that does not mean it is without social commentary; in particular the acceptable behaviour of women and the departure from it made by the two leading female characters plays a significant part. Lady Gray, who becomes the wife of the future Edward IV, has a relatively
small role in the play, but she is not a passive character. When Edward becomes king, she petitions for the return of her dead husband’s lands, seized after the battle of Saint Albans (3 Henry VI, 3.2.1-9). However, it quickly becomes apparent that Edward intends to have some fun with the widow first. The duologue that follows between the two initially suggests she is naïve about what he is hoping for. When he tells her she must undertake ‘[a]n easy task—’tis but to love a king’, her reply is ‘[t]hat’s soon performed, because I am a subject’ (3 Henry VI, 3.2.53-54). But when he becomes more explicit, she takes a tough stance:

LADY GRAY My mind will never grant what I perceive
            Your Highness aims at, if I aim aright.
KING EDWARD To tell thee plain, I aim to lie with thee.
LADY GRAY To tell you plain, I had rather lie in prison.

3 Henry VI, 3.2.67-70

Even when Edward says he wants her for his wife, she is wary of him and will not be tricked: ‘I know I am too mean to be your queen, / And yet too good to be your concubine’ (3 Henry VI, 3.2.97-98). By showing Lady Gray as strong, moral and fearless, Shakespeare creates dramatic tension, fuelling the reason for Edward to choose her over Lady Bona. But the scene also critiques gender politics: the strong, honest woman versus the arrogant, foolish and sexually demanding man.

The wife of the play’s other king, Henry, is also stronger than the men around her and provides effective opposition to York and his sons. From the outset of this play, Margaret’s fighting spirit is evident. Whereas Henry will hesitate and compromise, she will stand her ground, including in her relationship with him:
QUEEN MARGARET

I here divorce myself,
Both from thy table, Henry, and thy bed,
Until that act of parliament be repeal’d
Whereby my son is disinherited.

3 Henry VI, 1.1.248-251

Like Lady Gray, she will withhold her favours until she gets what she wants. But it is not just in her domestic life that Margaret is a force to be reckoned with. After her tirade against her husband, she announces ‘Our army is ready—come, we’ll after them’ (3 Henry VI, 1.1.257) and takes a leading role in the assault on York. When the ‘Queen, with all the northern earls and lords’ (3 Henry VI, 1.2.49) arrive to attack York, Richard initially says: ‘A woman’s general—what should we fear?’ (3 Henry VI, 1.2.68). But by the end of the play he has changed his opinion of the Queen: ‘If she have time to breathe, be well assured / Her faction will be full as strong as ours’ (3 Henry VI, 5.3.16-17).

Margaret’s humiliation of York is unlike the behaviour of any other character in the three plays. She makes him stand on a molehill and wear a paper crown (3 Henry VI, 1.4.68, 95). And she goads him with the death of Rutland, offering him a napkin stained with his son’s blood. Norwich states: ‘her savage mockery […] and, worst of all, that terrible moment when she herself drives the dagger into York’s heart – all this adds immeasurably to the drama, as well as casting a new and hideous light on her character’. 57 York’s reaction to her, though, has misogynistic overtones:

YORK

She-wolf of France […]
How ill-beseeming is it in thy sex
To triumph like an Amazonian trull
Upon their woes whom fortune captivates!

3 Henry VI, 1.4.112-116

57 Norwich, p.309.
York seems to be suggesting the most reprehensible thing about her is not what she does but the fact she is a woman. In addition, he mentions her nationality, something the plays rarely draw attention to after her marriage. It seems particularly apt here, though, as his condemnation of Margaret echoes that of fellow Frenchwoman, Pucelle, in the first play.

Margaret continues to prove tougher than her male counterparts and is only shaken when her son is killed. She witnesses Edward, Richard and George stab Prince Edward to death, in a scene similar to that of her and Clifford’s killing of York. On that occasion, York begs Clifford ‘take me from this world’ (*3 Henry VI*, 1.4.168), which he does. When Margaret begs for the sons of York to ‘dispatch’ her, they refuse, with George saying ‘I will not do thee so much ease’ (*3 Henry VI*, 5.5.72). It has not been noted by critics, but Margaret is shown to be as strong if not stronger than the male characters, but is treated more harshly.

In the three plays of *Henry VI*, Shakespeare tells the story of the King’s reign and, in the final play, the Wars of the Roses. They are based on the chronicles, but divert from them, simplifying a complex period of history through both editing and changes to the ‘truth’ they present in order to produce an entertaining narrative. However, they are far from a simple tale of dynastic battles. Even those who acknowledge the importance of character and identity in the plays have not examined the extent to which Shakespeare provides an insight into the way people behave and interact with each other. During the course of the trilogy he portrays all levels of English male society, as well as the French and women; he enables the audience to critique these characters not only through their own actions but in the way they interact with others, providing a social commentary.
Chapter Two: The BBC Television Shakespeare *Henry VI* plays

When the BBC Television Shakespeare project began in 1978, it was designed to fulfil the Reithian values of ‘educate, inform and entertain’. Known internationally as the BBC-Time/Life series, some critics felt its makers saw the last on that list of values as the least important. However, that changed when Jane Howell came to direct the first tetralogy over the winter of 1981 to 1982. She decided to break away from many of the conventions that had been established, using a theatrical rather than televisual style and winning much praise in the process. Her versions of the three *Henry VI* plays use near full-text scripts and the productions contain all Shakespeare’s characters, from prentices to kings. However, Howell’s use of broad comedy negates the effect of some of the social commentary. By repeatedly portraying the commoners and French as silly, they lose any critical edge, while the nobles retain their dignity and emotional power throughout.

Ace Pilkington states that ‘during the tenure of the first producer, Cedric Messina’ there was ‘pressure to do “definitive” productions.’ But as Grene points out, there is ‘no production that does not reflect interpretative decisions or ideological inflection’. This led to a problem. Jonathan Miller, the series’ second producer, later wrote that the BBC ‘hoped by excluding fashionably imaginative productions that they would guarantee the programme an undateable permanence’ but that what they ended up with were productions that risked

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59 Ace Pilkington, ‘Shakespeare on the Big Screen, the Small Box, and in Between’, *The Yearbook of English Studies* 20 (1990) p.74-75.
62 Pilkington, p.70.
63 Grene, p.53.
‘looking permanently quaint without ever having enjoyed the privilege of being briefly brilliant’. The reason for the need to produce something definitive and timeless was the market for the series.

It was aimed at overseas sales and academic purchases of video cassettes. The BBC also had an American financial partner. Olwen Terris is one of a number of writers to suggest that ‘the productions that emerged were generally bland and unimaginative’. However, Kidnie states that ‘despite widespread reservations about the critical merits of many of its productions, [the series] has served as a pedagogical tool in classrooms around the world for the better part of three decades’. Brooke writes that it was a ‘commercial triumph’. But while it may have achieved the aims of its producers, many felt the majority of the plays were not artistically successful. However Holderness comments: ‘The conservatism of the whole series can best be measured against one remarkable exception – Jane Howell’s production of the first historical tetralogy’. Stanley Wells states: ‘Howell has dared to encourage us to remember that the action is taking place in a studio’. Howell went against the wisdom of her producer, Miller, that to do successful television Shakespeare, the sets had to look real. Instead, she chose an ‘anti-realistic set’. The costumes were also ‘extremely stylised’. Howell, an experienced theatre director, chose to use the conventions of the stage – a simple set, an ensemble cast, and the audience’s imagination – rather than

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64 Miller, p.67.
66 Brooke, para.3.
67 Terris, p.31.
68 Kidnie, pp.129-130.
69 Brooke, para.7.
72 Miller, p.65; Miller quoted in Graham Holderness, *The Shakespeare Myth*, p.197.
73 Lull, p.104.
present a mid-twentieth century image of Shakespeare as drama for the middle classes and academics.

Kidnie states that a ‘recurrent observation’ was that the plays were ‘ill suited to the typical three-camera studio format’. She cites television’s ‘small screen and poor quality image’ and says that although it is ‘a dialogue-intensive medium’ it was not considered suitable for Shakespeare. Size is also an issue for Pilkington, who says ‘[i]here is a feeling of constriction about many of the BBC productions’. However he suggests that this has more to do with a lack of money and therefore lack of time for filming. Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter state that ‘Howell’s achievement was to film a Henry VI trilogy that was completely at home in this environment’. Television was considered at the time to be more verbal than visual; the opposite of film. It seems Howell made a virtue out of the very things people felt held back television productions of Shakespeare – a lack of resources and space – and put the text to the fore.

When it came to the design, Howell said: ‘[i]t struck me that the behaviour of the lords in England was like a lot of children […] Out of that I suppose came this adventure playground set […] I was also looking for something which was modern […] but also had a medieval flavour’. The costumes followed this lead; designer John Peacock said: ‘The first play is dressing-up time […] Bright colours, primary colours, children’s colours’. However, as the plays progress, both set and costumes become darker, to reflect what Howell saw as the more serious mood of the plays. Henry Fenwick says of Part 3: ‘the adventure playground

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75 Kidnie, pp.119-120.
76 Kidnie, p.120.
77 Pilkington, p.68.
78 Ibid.
79 Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter, p.108.
had become burned and charred [...] less a playground, more a bear-pit, enclosed, boarded in’. The mix of medieval and modern did not go down well with everyone; Grene says Trevor Peacock, dressed as Talbot, ‘was made to look like a bad-tempered American football-player’. However, Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter felt the decisions were successful: ‘[t]he scenography was Elizabethan and modern, contained and yet mysteriously uncontainable, naturalistic and stylised’. The effect was to heighten the artificiality of the production, not try to make it realistic. Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter go on to state: ‘Howell deftly exploited both the theatrical potential of the plays and the possibilities offered by television in order to [...] challenge preconceived notions of how Shakespeare should be televised’. By creating a non-realistic setting for her production, Howell reflected the non-realistic speech patterns of the text, much of which is in verse. She signalled to the audience that this is not a literal representation of history but a creative version of it.

When it came to casting, Howell also borrowed a technique from the theatre. She chose to double parts, saying: ‘[i]t just seemed practically and artistically a good idea’. She believed this brought a number of benefits; ‘[t]he leader in the first play [Talbot], for example, is still a leader, of a different sort, in the second play [Cade]’. And Fenwick notes that David Burke plays Gloucester and Dick the Butcher, who are both ‘aides-de-camp to a ruler’. It also meant Howell could work with actors who otherwise might not have felt they had enough to do, allowing her ‘the enormous privilege of having wonderful actors like Tenniel Evans for example, coming on in Part 3 to do a messenger's speech’. Evans in fact plays eight parts across the three plays. It also led to some interesting early appearances for

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84 Grene, p.73.
85 Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter, p.115.
86 Ibid.
87 Howell quoted in ‘The Production’ in Henry VI, Part 1, p.29.
88 Ibid.
89 Fenwick, ‘The Production’ in Henry VI, Part 2, p.28.
90 Howell quoted in ‘The Production’ in Henry VI, Part 1, p.29.
actors who would become more prominent later in the drama. Brian Protheroe, Paul Jesson and Ron Cook take the roles of the first three messengers at the start of the first play, announcing the fall of France. Later they become Edward, George and Richard respectively, the men responsible for the fall of Henry.

Howell’s filming style also reflected her theatre background. Fenwick comments on the use of ‘long takes without cuts, so that the action in the studio can run uninterrupted’. 91 And the fact that ‘[b]ecause the scenes were large and complex and needed to show as many actors as possible simultaneously it involved a wide-angle camera technique’. 92 Again, this is unlike conventional television camerawork, where short takes and close shots would be more common. Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter believe ‘of Shakespeare’s works, the Henry VI plays seem most fit for television’: 93

[E]ach play is episodic, spectacular and constantly varied. The main characters are simply drawn but have riveting story arcs which twist and turn just as they do in modern television serials. 94

Howell herself described the plays as ‘medieval Dallas’. 95 But while the soap opera is filmed to look real, inviting the audience to identify with the characters, Howell’s technique created a distance between the viewer and the programme, perhaps echoing Brecht’s Verfremdung. This might suggest a desire to create a social critique through the plays, however this does not take the same form as the original texts.

The portrayal of the French in Howell’s production of 1 Henry VI is not used to highlight the flaws of the English but purely for comic effect. Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter state: ‘[t]he French were depicted as adolescents (although played by

93 Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter, p.108.
94 Ibid.
95 Howell quoted in ‘The Production’ in Henry VI, Part 1, p.22.
adults) who raved enthusiastically about war with preposterous naivety.' And Howell’s own description echoes this:

> For example, you get the French army who say, ‘The English are all spotty-faced cowards; they’re a lot of weaklings. Let’s go and kill them’ and a lot of people charge through a door. There’s a tiny pause and they all come back and say, ‘Aren’t the English brave? Aren’t the English wonderful?’ It’s a gag, it is a shorthand gag.

Howell states that the actors had to be ‘farceurs’ and ‘light comedians’. When the French flee at the end of act two, scene one, it is indeed reminiscent of farce (*Part One*, 0:46:14). First, the audience sees clothes drop to the floor from on high. Then the Bastard appears, climbing down a rope, apparently only wearing a shirt and showing a lot of bare leg, as if he is a lover fleeing the unexpected return of his mistress’s husband. Next Reignier enters wearing a shirt and blanket and falls over the Bastard. Finally, a few seconds later, Charles and Pucelle enter, again only wearing shirts and wrapped in the same blanket. They fall over. The scene is short, but rather than convey the terror of being pursued by the English, it is played as if the group are escaping from various trysts.

> Pucelle herself appears as a woman of youth, energy and a lot of cheek, at least for most of the play. Grene describes Brenda Blethyn’s portrayal as ‘a robust northern wench’. Howell says: ‘[s]he comes on like a 12-year-old bossy-boots who not only wants to play football with the boys but actually captain the team!’ She is shown chasing the English, shouting ‘Vive la France and la Pucelle’ direct to camera (*Part One*, 0:37:15). Shortly afterwards, as she enters to fight Talbot, she looks at him coquettishly. When they fight, she is almost dancing around him, and when a trumpet blasts and they stop, she smiles at him as

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96 Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter, p.121.
99 Grene, p.72.
she says: ‘thy hour has not yet come’ (*1 Henry VI*, 1.5.13). She runs off, killing a few English on the way. War to Pucelle appears to be just a game and the audience is not encouraged to take her, or it, seriously.

Despite Howell’s taste for the theatrical, she chooses not to show Pucelle’s fiends (*1 Henry VI*, 5.3; *Part One*, 2:34:03). And when Pucelle enters to be judged by York in act five, scene four, she looks like a little girl lost. Now dressed in a sack-like robe, she looks warily around (*Part One*, 2:49:33). The English laugh at the Shepherd’s pleas, and as he departs, weeping, York and Warwick shake their heads despairingly. Michael Wood states the scene ‘in the end verges on black comedy’.¹⁰¹ Despite the seriousness of what happens, and Pucelle’s screaming and struggling, the English are full of cynical humour and Pucelle is as cartoonish as she was earlier. None of the performances show any emotional depth or social commentary.

Like the French in *1 Henry VI*, the commoners in *2 Henry VI* are used for comic relief, rather than critique. Howell seems to see the earlier scenes with the petitioners, Simpcox the fraud and his wife and Thump and Horner’s duel, as unconnected to the Cade rebellion that dominates the latter scenes of the play. She says:

> We are trapped within our own political view and you have to get out of it, otherwise you start seeing this rebellion as a socialist rebellion. Cade does have communist lines but the very real grievances of the workers at that time are not expressed in the play.¹⁰²

This is in direct contrast to Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter writing about Howell’s production: ‘[t]he commoners’ story simmered in the background and, with each successive act of oppression and disenfranchisement, their frustration grew’.¹⁰³ However they do

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¹⁰² Howell quoted in ‘The Production’ in *Henry VI, Part 2*, p.27.
¹⁰³ Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter, p.126.
acknowledge that ‘Howell stopped short of dignifying the commoners’. In fact, the commoners, including Cade, are played entirely for comedy and any discernible social comment probably comes from prior knowledge of the text rather than these performances. In Howell’s hands, any sympathy is always undercut by broad, even vicious, humour.

Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter highlight the incident of Simpcox and his wife: ‘Simpcox was unquestionably a charlatan, and those that followed him were simple-minded, but his wife’s passing line, “we did it for pure need”, visibly disturbed Gloucester and suggested momentarily a more pressing sense of social hardship underlying the comedy’. Unfortunately their recollection of the scene is incorrect; there is no sign that Gloucester is disturbed; instead he continues to look fierce and angry (Part Two, 0:53:20). And Queen Margaret’s reaction is to laugh at both the Simpcoxes and those that followed them. Other nobles join in. Mrs Simpcox’s line is all but lost in the amusement of the nobles, and the audience is encouraged to react as the nobles do, and see it all as a kind of sport.

There is a similar example in the fight between Thump and Horner. Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter state ‘[c]omedy was also transformed into extreme class violence in the Thump-Horner scene’. However, the violence remains comic, and anyone unfamiliar with the text would probably be surprised to see Horner die after such an exaggerated fight sequence (Part Two, 1:07:58). Both Thump and Horner are caricatures, the sequence is cartoonish, and because of Howell’s use of doubling, the actor playing Horner, Arthur Cox, reappears two acts later as Old Clifford, negating any sense of finality.

However, there is more consensus of opinion over the Cade rebellion. Michael Wood notes that ‘Shakespeare’s portrayal of the poor, the commons, as individuals is more often

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104 Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter, p.127.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
than not highly sympathetic, but rarely so when they gather together as a body and they act to a political end’. Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter state that Howell ‘saw nothing in the riot itself that could be compared to legitimate political protests; the indulgence in ignorance and cruelty was too extreme’. And Howell does present Cade and his supporters as a baying mob rather than a group with real social grievances. During Cade’s speech to them in act four, scene two, the men cheer after each statement, but there seems little to suggest they are really listening to their leader. When Cade says ‘there shall be no money’, it is greeted with raucous laughter, and just a lone voice crying ‘eh?’ (Part Two, 2:18:30). This is not a political meeting with a leader outlining legitimate grievances against the state.

By contrast, the nobles are much more empathetic and are generally played in a much lower key. Many of them also feature in all three plays, with the same actors portraying them throughout. This creates a sense of continuity and solidity, unlike the commoners who come and go, often with the same actor playing different commoners from scene to scene in the same play. King Henry could be played as a silly, comic character; he is guileless, trusting and weak, manipulated by all around him. But Peter Benson plays him with complete integrity; his Henry is a truly religious man. He is not an idiot but a believer in God. During both the Simpcox and Thump-Horner sequences, Henry is the only noble not to laugh, and instead raises his eyes imploringly to heaven (Part Two, 0:53:14, 1:09:30).

Grene describes David Burke’s portrayal of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester as ‘honest’ with ‘incontrollable gusts of anger’ and ‘tender love for his wife’. In the Simpcox incident, his outrage is at the wrongs the fraudster is inflicting on his fellow commoners. And in death, he is afforded much more dignity that those of the lower ranks. Horner’s body is

108 Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter, p.127.
dragged off, feet first. Gloucester is presented in bed and spoken of with reverence by Warwick (*Part Two*, 1:46:58). Warwick’s extreme description of the body could prompt a grotesque presentation on screen; but Gloucester is as dignified in death as in life.

York is also portrayed as sincere and just. In his first appearance, in the Temple Garden scene, he is anxious that his interpretation of the law is correct. While the others seem to view it as a game, giggling like naughty schoolboys, he is earnest (*Part One*, 0:59:54). Throughout, like David Burke’s Gloucester, Bernard Hill imbues York with a sense of dignity and justice, even though he is on the opposite side to the king. In his death scene, while Queen Margaret rails at him, he is emotionless and restrained (*Part Three*, 0:32:50). When he finally begins to cry, it is at the memory of his dead son (*Part Three*, 0:35:10). And when he says ‘[h]ard-hearted Clifford, take me from the world’ (*3 Henry VI*, 1.4.167), he is calm and ready to die (*Part Three*, 0:38:13). As Clifford stabs him, he does not cry out (*Part Three*, 0:38:59). This is in contrast to Horner who begs Thump to ‘[h]old, Peter, hold’ (*3 Henry VI*, 2.4.93). Horner’s is a cowardly death; York dies a noble hero.

Howell therefore chooses to ignore any social commentary in the text itself. However, that does not mean there is no social awareness or politics in the production. Both Howell and her designer, Oliver Bayldon, are quoted as discussing contemporary resonances between the plays and ‘Northern Ireland and Beirut and South America, about warlords and factions’. 110 Actor Trevor Peacock is quoted in late 1982 highlighting the riots taking place in the country at the time. 111 Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter also point out an unintentional political echo; the plays all had an interval, meaning that ‘all sorts of ironic juxtapositions

111 Trevor Peacock quoted in Fenwick, ‘The Production’ in Henry VI, Part 1, p.27.
were created by a half-time live news broadcast’. In part two this included Margaret Thatcher on a victory visit to the Falkland Islands.

There was therefore a great awareness of the political implications of the plays, although many of the possible areas that could have been developed, such as the treatment of the poorest members of society, were played down. One issue that was brought to the fore, though, was the cost of war. The plays were filmed just prior to the Falklands War in 1982. But they aired after the conflict at the start of 1983. Commenting on the plays, Howell says ‘[w]ar is treated like a game at first, then you slowly remember it does really mean killing people’. And she was at great pains to make sure her audience was aware of that. In part one, when a body falls at the feet of Fastolfe and another dangles beside him, he gives a quizzical and humorous look to camera (Part One, 1:32:21). However, that quickly changes. Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter state: ‘[v]iolence was explicit and bloody, so much so that, when first broadcast in the United States, battle scenes were cut substantially in order to make the series more palatable’. By the conclusion of part two, the audience sees Salisbury pause to look at the body of a soldier slumped against a cannon (Part Two, 3:30:00). The camera shot then changes to show the bodies of several other bloodied men, before fading to black. Part three opens with a close up on a mangled heap of corpses, with the camera pulling out to reveal more and more bodies (Part Three, 0:0:34). They are then covered with a grimy cloth with ‘Henry VI Part 3’ written on it. All this is additional to the text, but clearly makes the point that war has consequences.

By keeping nearly all of Shakespeare’s text, and not cutting any characters, the BBC Television Shakespeare productions of the three Henry VI plays show the dynastic struggle

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112 Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter, p.110.
115 Hampton-Reeves and Chillington Rutter, p.118.
that ran through the latter part of the king’s reign. However, director Jane Howell plays down the social commentary in the text, dismissing the grievances of the commoners and using comedy to undercut them. She also makes the French relentlessly comic, preventing them from being a foil to highlight the flaws of the English nobles. She does not completely ignore the political issues the plays raise, though; in particular she is acutely aware of the horrors of war and the reality for those involved. By showing viewers multiple dead bodies, she ensures they cannot forget that dynastic battles have bloody consequences.
Chapter Three: *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses*

Following the BBC Television Shakespeare project, the corporation’s productions of the playwright’s works have been much more sporadic, with two exceptions. In 2012, a series entitled *The Hollow Crown* was broadcast to coincide with the London Olympics and Cultural Olympiad. The four programmes covered the second tetralogy. Four years later, a second series was broadcast, this time to coincide with the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth and featuring the first tetralogy.

There were only three programmes in this series of *The Hollow Crown* covering the four plays; *Richard III* had an episode to itself, while the three parts of *Henry VI* were heavily edited and condensed into two episodes. Instead of filling ten hours of screen time, the three parts of *Henry VI* were squeezed into just four hours. To do this, the adaptor and director took some liberties with the texts, streamlining the plays to focus on the story of two dynasties. Adaptor Ben Power says: ‘we felt that in order to serve our central dramatic line then we had to cut away a lot of the more labyrinthine socio-political material’. Therefore in this production there was a conscious choice to reduce the social commentary aspects of the plays in favour of the royal line of succession.

There may also have been a more practical reason for the cuts. Terris points out that ‘drama [now] has to deliver an economic as well as a cultural return (ie: high viewing figures and strong international sales).’ So cutting the text, and casting star actors in key roles, may have had financial as well as artistic benefits. Stars to attract the audience; cuts to reduce the running time, and therefore filming time and cost. *The Hollow Crown* also reduces the number of characters, again saving money, as well as increasing clarity for viewers.

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116 Power, p.34.
117 Terris, p.33.
Developments since the 1980s brought technical improvements that influenced this production. Television picture quality had vastly improved, with the regular use of HD (High Definition). Cameras were smaller and lighter, and more easily portable to locations, making filming more flexible. The expectations of audiences had also changed; it is no slip of the tongue that those involved in these productions repeatedly refer to them as ‘films’. Power says: ‘We wanted to use contemporary film-making techniques’. However director Dominic Cooke was well aware the production did not have the budget of a Hollywood film, especially when it came to the battle scenes: ‘we couldn’t afford thousands of extras, nor could we afford really extensive CGI’. Cooke also stated: ‘These stories are like soap opera about family’. This suggests that however much the aim might have been to emulate cinematic style, populist television remained an influence.

*The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses* drew particular comparison to the Sky television drama *Game of Thrones*; the author of the books on which it is based, George R. R. Martin, has cited the Wars of the Roses among his influences. Writers including Peter Kirwan, Chase Branch, Benji Wilson and Michael Billington all make the connection. Even Cooke, without directly mentioning *Game of Thrones*, alludes to its influence: ‘There’s a real appetite, I think, at the moment for myth and for epic stories’. And what epic stories have at their heart is a struggle for power. This was not lost on Benedict Cumberbatch, who plays Richard of Gloucester:

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118 Power, [press pack], p.34.
120 Cooke, [press pack], p.33.
Everything in the current politics is there in those plays [...] You have PR spin, backroom operations, true intents being shown, moments of utter vulnerability, grandstanding. You have xenophobia, you have jingoistic pride, you have more inclusive pro-European-style love.124

This became all the more relevant with the timing of the broadcast. Principal photography began in October 2014.125 However, the series was aired in May 2016, in the weeks leading up to the EU referendum in the UK. American audiences did not see it until after the vote, as Newman O’Connor notes: ‘[i]t is hard not to see parallels between the films’ action and the rapidly-changing cast of modern British politics, as the space of two weeks from late June witnessed a regime change’.126 The timing of the broadcast therefore gave a political relevance to the production that could not have been expected during filming, as the referendum had not been called at that point. By paring the production back, Power may have intended cutting some of the politics, and does excise much of the commentary in the original text, but he also provides a critique of political systems.

Power states that a ‘lot of the changes are about sense’,127 This leads to name changes: Rutland is always referred to as Edmund, making it more obvious he is one of the four sons of York; Henry’s son is Prince Ned, to distinguish him from York’s son Edward; and Margaret’s father, who has a string of titles, is identified simply as the Duke of Anjou. This last case not only makes life simpler, it also prevents viewers unfamiliar with fifteenth century nobility from thinking he was more important than he was; as Grene states ‘though he was styled King of Jerusalem, [he] was a nobody in the major league of European power politics’.128 Another change to the text is the opening of the whole series; a prologue not from

124 Wilson, para.11.
126 Newman O’Connor, p.9.
127 Power, [press pack], p.34.
128 Grene, p.113.
any of Shakespeare’s history plays, but from *Troilus and Cressida*. The five lines, lifted from act one, scene three, are used to set up the chaos to come, hooking in the audience with their portentous warning that ‘discord follows’ when ‘degree, priority, and place’ are not observed.\(^\text{129}\) As a play, and a period of history, many viewers will be unfamiliar with, it signals the fact that this is the story of a realm in trouble.

In order to focus on the regime change at the heart of the Wars of the Roses, only characters essential to that storyline were retained. This means many of the scenes involving the French are cut. In *1 Henry VI*, the war with France takes up a significant part of the action. However, in *The Hollow Crown*, very little makes the edit. None of the scenes in the French court remain; losing the interplay between Joan la Pucelle and the dauphin cuts any sense of exuberance from her character. By only seeing the fighter and the woman who hears voices, she becomes a much more serious figure. As Newman O’Connor puts it, Pucelle ‘must rely on scenes of violence and quasi-mysticism to convey a sense of character’.\(^\text{130}\) Her only role is to move the plot forward, not to provide any commentary on the treatment of women or the French.

Prior to one battle between the two nations, three scenes are intercut, setting up Pucelle in direct opposition to Talbot.\(^\text{131}\) This comes to a head with Talbot finding his son’s body. While he is bent over it, grieving, Pucelle appears behind him, grabs Talbot and thrusts her sword into his back, killing him (*Episode One*, 0:33:45). This contrasts with the original text where he appears to die of grief. Shortly afterwards, Pucelle speaks the lines of the Bastard: ‘Hew them to pieces, hack their bones asunder’ (*1 Henry VI*, 4.7.47). The overall


\(^{130}\) Newman O’Connor, p.6.

\(^{131}\) *The Norton Shakespeare*, *1 Henry VI*, 3.3, 4.2 and 1.2. Future line references are to this edition, and are included in parentheses in the text.
effect of this is to make Pucelle much more violent than in Shakespeare’s text. She becomes a plot device rather than a rounded character.

The French characters may be cut to the bare essentials; the commoners disappear almost completely. By cutting these characters, the productions become more sombre and lose the original texts’ social commentary. One example of the impact of this is the cutting of the petitioning of the prentice Peter. By removing his initial petition, ‘[a]gainst my master, Thomas Horner, for saying that the Duke of York was rightful heir to the crown.’ (2 Henry VI, 1.3.28-30), the idea that the whole realm is aware of the rivalries behind the throne is lost, reducing the tensions to simply those between two families, rather than the entire country.

Cutting the fight between Peter and Horner also has an impact on the departure of Gloucester. In the play text, the fight follows on from the conviction of the duke’s wife for practicing witchcraft against the king and the duke giving up his role as Protector. By cutting the darkly comic duel, The Hollow Crown is able to leave viewers with the sight of a distraught King Henry, and move straight on to Gloucester’s farewell to his banished wife. This creates audience sympathy with Henry and Gloucester and draws attention to their powerlessness.

The most significant character to be cut is Jack Cade. This whole episode is lost in what Kirwan describes as ‘an unfathomable decision – why cut the best scenes of the whole sequence.’\(^\text{132}\) Newman O’Connor says that though it is a ‘glaring casualty […] perhaps its inclusion would have made things even more dizzying, but are we actually getting the Henry VI plays if Cade isn’t in them?’\(^\text{133}\) However, by cutting Cade, Power not only simplifies the route to war, he also changes the character of York. Without his soliloquy explaining his involvement with Cade, York does not seem as devious or manipulative.

\(^{132}\) Kirwan, para.1.
\(^{133}\) Newman O’Connor, p.1.
York’s claim on the throne is presented very early on. The scene with Mortimer is shifted to before the Temple Garden scene, and to add weight to the claim, Mortimer unrolls an ornate genealogical chart to show why York should be king (Episode One, 0:07:35). Mortimer is played by Michael Gambon; a well-known, much loved and respected actor, putting additional leverage on the audience to believe this is the truth. York is also removed from the scene showing the conspiracy over the death of Gloucester (2 Henry VI, 3.1). Even his desire to be king is shown as either in the country’s interests or something he pursues with reluctance. His monologue at the end of the opening scene of 2 Henry VI is severely cut and divided between him and his wife, turning it into a duologue in a domestic setting (Episode One, 1:01:36). The scene makes clear his hunger for the crown, but by sharing the lines with his wife, York is shown as a twenty-first century husband in a partnership of equals, rather than a power-hungry noble thirsty for glory.

When York finally does seize the crown, he quickly capitulates to Henry, saying he will allow him to reign while he lives (Episode Two, 0:21:30). It is his sons who are unhappy with this, and later try to persuade him his oath is not valid (Episode Two, 0:27:09). York’s response is cut short, so that instead of being persuaded, he ignores them, but is forced to fight anyway by the arrival of the Queen. York is continually portrayed as noble and loyal to the king, even though he has doubts about his sovereign and wants the crown for himself. His nobility is perhaps most in evidence at his death. In this version of 3 Henry VI, 1.4, he is tormented by Margaret even more than the text demands (Episode Two, 0:35:15). When she taunts him with the napkin stained with his son Rutland’s blood, she stuffs it into his mouth. And instead of putting ‘a paper crown’ on his head, as the stage directions state (3 Henry VI, 1.4.96-97), one of the soldiers makes a crown of thorns from the bushes in the courtyard, which she puts on York, pushing the thorns into his head. While this differs from Shakespeare’s text, it is closer to Holinshed’s description of the scene:
[T]he duke […] on whose head they put a garland in stead of a crowne, which they had fashioned and made of sedges or bulrushes; and hauing so crowned him with that garland, they knéeled downe afore him (as the Iewes did vnto Christ) in scorne.¹³⁴

By creating a visual parallel between the death of Jesus and the death of York, The Hollow Crown signals that York is a wronged man.

The series turns many of Shakespeare’s characters into ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’; in particular Somerset is radically refashioned from the original texts, conflating much of the role with that of Suffolk and setting him up as antagonist to York in the first episode. This begins in the Temple Garden scene (I Henry VI, 2.4), where the two confront each other. In Shakespeare’s text it is over a point of law; however, in The Hollow Crown it is specifically because York is claiming he is the true king. Later, in newly written dialogue, Somerset promises to supply horsemen to support Talbot against the French (Episode One, 0:21:26). But he fails to do this. When Lucy challenges him about this, Somerset is not shown dressed for battle; instead, he is lying down, apparently naked, being massaged (Episode One, 00:28:41). The visuals support the words, emphasising that he is dishonest, uncaring and self-obsessed.

The relationship between Suffolk and Margaret is transposed to Somerset, who appears to be guided by lust in his courting of the future queen (Episode One, 0:39:09). This is conveyed by performance alone. The truncated first meeting of the pair is filled with meaningful pauses; Somerset looks Margaret up and down as she wears just a nightgown, falling off her shoulder. The sexual chemistry between the actors, Ben Miles and Sophie Okonodo, tells the audience that this relationship will be more than queen and subject. While Shakespeare later suggests a strong bond between Margaret and Suffolk (2 Henry VI, 1.3, 3.2,
4.4), her relationship here with Somerset becomes explicit, reaching its height in a purely visual sequence that does not appear in the play. Shots of the murderers approaching Gloucester’s cell and the sounds of him being murdered are intercut with shots of Somerset and Margaret having sex. The scene reaches a climax with the sound of Gloucester’s screaming crossfading into Margaret’s sexual moaning. This is immediately followed by the arrival of the murderers at Somerset’s door to report they have carried out their work, while Margaret is still in his bed. Michael Billington praises the scene as ‘a good example of sharp, intelligent editing.’

Kirwan points out that ‘[i]t isn’t subtle, but it makes fine use of the form to clarify the complex machinations that leave Humphrey’s sprawled legs visible through a doorway’. Above all, this sequence shows that Somerset is an adulterer and a commissioner of murder. This is in contrast to the original plays, where Somerset is in opposition to York, but if anything he is on the side of right, supporting King Henry.

Somerset could arguably be described as the Richard III of the first episode, showing a similar ability for manipulation and murder. His death, near the start of Episode Two, only shortly precedes the first appearance of the near-adult Richard. The audience do see Richard at the end of Episode One, but only as a young, hunched boy in silhouette. He does not participate in the battle of St Albans, as he does in 2 Henry VI, and he does not kill Somerset. The audience is given the impression that Richard is too young to fight, and when he is seen again, thirteen minutes into Episode Two, he is innocent of all the bloodshed that has gone before. He is also, from this point on, played by the star of the sequence, Benedict Cumberbatch.

Despite being considerably older than the character he is playing at this point, Cumberbatch brings a wide-eyed innocence to the part, suggesting youth, and the audience is

135 Billington, para.3.
136 Kirwan, para.11.
encouraged to empathise with him through his many reaction shots. He looks joyful when Exeter states; ‘My conscience tells me he [York] is lawful king’ (Episode Two, 0:20:42). Shortly afterwards, when York agrees to resign the crown to Henry, Richard looks at his father with disgust (Episode Two, 0:21:38). However, the most powerful scene is the killing of Richard’s brother. In the play text he is always referred to as Rutland. Here his Christian name is used instead, and he is unhistorically the youngest of the four sons; this makes him seem more childlike and vulnerable. Richard and Edmund hide from Clifford, but when they think the coast is clear and they attempt to leave, Edmund is caught. Richard, because of his disability, is slower and not seen by Clifford so continues to hide. The audience not only watches Clifford taunt and kill Edmund, but also Richard’s horror at what is happening (Episode Two, 0:31:05). As Newman O’Connor describes it: ‘[h]e suffers the trauma of witnessing his brother’s death […] trembles with shock, his hand clamped over his mouth to contain fearful cries’.  

Cumberbatch believes this, and the ‘summary execution’ of Richard’s father, are the source of Richard’s ‘vendettas’. Richard is the only character who speaks directly to camera and Newman O’Connor suggests his key soliloquy, which is moved almost to the end of the second episode (Episode Two, 1:49:21), ‘marks a tonal shift’ as he ‘shares with the viewer his savage nature’. Cooke states: ‘Shakespeare was writing about post-traumatic stress disorder 400 years before the term was coined’. In the portrayal of Richard there is an aspect of social commentary, however it is rooted in changes to the character from Shakespeare’s text and represents a twenty-first century take on psychology, rather than a critique of life in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries.

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137 Newman O’Connor, p.8.
138 Wilson, para. 7.
139 Newman O’Connor, p.8.
140 Cooke, [press pack], p.31.
While initially Somerset is the main opposition to the House of York, by the second episode Queen Margaret takes over that role. Dressed in armour, she leads her own troops, successfully fighting hand-to-hand alongside her men, killing her opponents, and even cutting off one man’s hand (Episode Two, 1:39:26). This is in direct contrast to her husband, King Henry. He appears to struggle with every moment of his kingship; even when York seizes the throne, he is weak when he challenges him. Henry may say ‘Think’st thou I will leave my kingly throne […] first war shall unpeople this my realm’, but he is unconvincing (Episode Two, 0:19:13). And he seems cowardly minutes later when he acknowledges he is disinheritting his son (Episode Two, 0:21:14).

However, his anguish over the battles is more explicit. Henry is shown approaching Clifford, who begs him ‘dispatch, Henry, dispatch’ (Episode Two, 0:53:00). But Henry is unable to bring himself to do so and leaves, vomiting. Shortly after, he witnesses a son who has unwittingly killed his father, and a father who has killed his son. This scene is more intercut than in Shakespeare’s text; the parallel editing heightens the audience’s sense of the trauma felt by the two men.

Henry is next shown in a scene not in the play script, crawling along the ground, looking at the bodies around him and finally casting his crown into a river (Episode Two, 0:59:59). When he reappears, he is reminiscent of ‘Poor Tom’ in Shakespeare’s much later play, King Lear, stumbling through fields wearing only a loincloth. He is no more mad than Edgar is when he takes on the guise of Tom, and he speaks eloquently to himself of how he would be happy if he were ‘no better than a homely swain’ (Episode Two, 1:02:32). Henry’s main role in The Hollow Crown seems to be to provide an alternative view to Richard on the impact of war; rather than being driven on to more violent acts, Henry becomes more passive, and while he verbally challenges Richard when he visits him in the Tower, he puts up little resistance to being murdered (Episode Two, 1:57:09).
The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses is much more like a film franchise, albeit a short one, than a traditional television series. Like many drama programmes from this era, it has much higher production values than its predecessors. But it also borrows from the genre of film in the way it presents its story. The adaptation strips back characters, amalgamates them with others, gives them extra lines or takes them away and inserts purely visual scenes not present in the original text to create polarised characters or to give justification to them. It presents Shakespeare’s earliest history plays as a fight between good and evil, but not always as the audience might anticipate; Saint Joan, as she would become, is violent and evil, whereas the traditionally evil Richard of Gloucester is a loving son who only turns to violence after experiencing the horrors of war.

These productions are not restricted by television’s traditionally small scale, limited movement and heavy dialogue and are more akin to film, with emphasis on the visual rather than the verbal. Also like film, they present a straightforward story with the aim of making it easy for viewers to follow. By laying most emphasis on the dynastic battles between York and Lancaster, most of Shakespeare’s text that might constitute social commentary is cut away. But the productions also provide some twenty-first century commentary on the motivation of characters. Through Richard, the audience sees the impact of brutality; through Henry, viewers are shown there is another way of reacting to it, without resorting to violence. While The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses all but ignores the social commentary in the original text, the makers do use the plays to provide some commentary on the emotional lives of the characters through the prism of the twenty-first century.
Conclusion

Shakespeare’s three plays about Henry VI cover a large part of fifteenth-century history. This was a turbulent time in England, France and Ireland, and it is reflected in the playwright’s work. However, the plays are not just a succession of battles or political debates; they also highlight the behaviour of individuals. Writing a play involves putting believable and interesting characters on the stage, and in doing this, Shakespeare offers a commentary on those both at the heart of the century’s struggles, and on those around them.

The plays do present the story of two dynasties. While the Wars of the Roses are not a central part of the first two plays, York and subsequently his sons always feature as prominently as the king of the plays’ title, although Richard Plantagenet does not appear until act two, scene four of the first play and King Henry’s first appearance is even later, at the start of act three. The contention between the two houses is made explicit in act two, scene five of 1 Henry VI, when Mortimer outlines the Yorkist claim to his nephew; but even then, the main aim of Richard, not yet Duke of York, is only to be ‘restored to my blood’ (1 Henry VI, 2.5.128). And despite his anger at the peace declared between England and France at the end of the first play, there is nothing to suggest he might rebel against Henry’s decision. By midway through the second play, York’s ambition does become explicit, with his soliloquy in act three, scene one in which he declares he will ‘stir up in England some black storm’ until the ‘golden circuit’ is on his head (2 Henry VI, 3.1.349, 352). However, the dynastic dispute does not feature again until act five, when York tells Henry he is ‘[n]ot fit to govern’ (2 Henry VI, 5.1.94) and launches his challenge by declaring ‘I am resolved for death or dignity’ (2 Henry VI, 5.1.192). At the end of the second play it appears that York has won, but 3 Henry VI begins with York allowing Henry to rule in his lifetime, if the crown is made over to the Yorks thereafter. This leads to the rise and fall of each house until the play ends with Edward permanently installed as king.
The BBC Television Shakespeare productions of the plays follow the texts closely, and therefore the dynastic battle between the two houses features throughout. However, because they are near full text productions, they also include all the action not central to this storyline, from the dispute between Gloucester and Winchester to the appearance of the fraud Simpcox and his wife. The productions are a story of two dynasties, but it might be easy for a viewer to lose sight of this in amongst all the other plots and characters. The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses productions make the dynastic storyline their key feature, and therefore it would be easy to assume that there is no social commentary within them. However, just as Shakespeare’s texts combine both the story of two dynasties and social commentary on a nation, so do both television productions.

Shakespeare’s social commentary comes in the detail of the characters. Whether the playwright’s use of the French or the commoners was intended for purely comic relief or to shed light on their actions and the actions of those around them, the plays do provide a critique of human behaviour. The depiction of the French is complex; characters are not simply two-dimensional caricatures. They show strength, bravery and thoughtfulness, and can elicit audience sympathy and respect. Similarly, the depiction of the commoners shows that though they may at times be foolish and easily led, they can be intelligent and witty, and face hardships created by the nobility. And although there are few female characters, those that are presented are clever, tough and frequently able to get the upper hand over the men. By presenting these aspects of others, Shakespeare also creates a critique of the nobles; their often misguided assumptions of superiority and their lack of care of those around them.

In Jane Howell’s 1983 television productions of the plays, she emphasises the comic aspects of the French and the commoners. She also enjoys indulging in the spectacular; Grene comments on the conjuring scene in 2 Henry VI, which he says ‘was very obviously a hocus-pocus with an assistant farcically banging on a sheet of “thunder” to create atmosphere,
sometimes at the most inappropriate times'. With a circle of flame on the floor of the set, candles and dimmed lighting, Howell uses the scene to create a visual feast, rather than any serious critique of the fakeries of witchcraft (Part Two, 0:40:15). In The Hollow Crown, the equivalent scene is cut down to the Duchess simply taking a doll that looks like King Henry out of a box and sticking a pin in its chest. This may seem like simple shorthand in a much truncated production, but Grene notes that ‘[i]n the sources the Duchess of Gloucester stood accused of […] practising upon a wax image of the King’. The Hollow Crown therefore moves away from Shakespeare’s texts but closer to his sources, although, like its televisual predecessor, does not use the scene to make social comment.

Both productions do use the plays to make critical points, though. Jane Howell’s plays crank up the reality of the battles as they progress. Her fight arranger, Malcolm Ranson says: ‘Jane’s idea was that the violence in Part I was – shall we say – a knockabout violence […] Then when we hit Part 2, the violence progressed to become nastier; then Part 3, when it was really something nasty!’. This is not just in the battle sequences, but also in the opening of the third part, which begins with a heap of dead bodies, and in the individual deaths of nobles, particularly Warwick, who evidently suffers before he dies (Part Three, 2:49:56). These productions show that war comes with consequences. This is an idea expressed by Shakespeare in the third play, in the scene where a son discovers he has killed his father in battle, and a father finds out he has killed his son (Part Three, 2.5.55-122). However, Howell places more emphasis on this aspect by using her visual medium to depict the suffering and dying of those in conflict.

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141 Grene, pp.143-144.
142 Grene, p.142.
143 Ranson quoted in ‘The Production’ in Henry VI, Part 1, p.27.
In Dominic Cooke’s 2016 productions, warfare becomes even more visceral, with realistic battles fought on location, with copious amounts of mud and blood. However, although the productions do not shy away from the horrors of war, they have an additional aim; to explain the actions and behaviour of Richard III. Cooke says: ‘[p]eople are constantly acting out what has happened to them [… Richard] has no empathy […] has no connection to another human being’.144 Thirty-five years previously, when writing about Howell’s production, Fenwick stated: ‘Richard is not an evil figure sprung inexplicably from the loins of Satan. He is the logical outcome of the society into which he was born’.145 And these twenty-first century versions of the plays seem eager to show that. There is no critique of the relationship between nations, between rich and poor or between men and women. Instead the productions take a modern, psychoanalytical approach to examine what motivates people.

In all three cases – original texts, 1983 and 2016 television productions – the plays also show an awareness of politics. Stephen Greenblatt believes the tetralogy, including Richard III, ‘invites us, in effect, to watch the invention of political parties’.146 He highlights the Temple Garden scene as the moment when the two factions choose red or white roses, which ‘serve as party badges’.147 But politics plays a significant part in all three plays; from the factions of Gloucester and Winchester to the Jack Cade rebellion to the negotiation of who should be king at the start of 3 Henry VI. Coursen states: ‘Shakespeare leaves the interpretation of a play’s politics up to the director of a modern production’.148 The political aspects of the plays did not escape Jane Howell. She was creating her versions at a time of political unrest and said: ‘I think we are today in that sort of state, in a time of change […]

144 Cooke, [press pack], pp.31-32.
148 Coursen, p.16.
Everything is changing, people are not certain of what is coming in’. And Dominic Cooke said he hoped his versions would ‘engage people about the nature of political power and the choice of political leaders’. The presentation of politics in these plays could also be said to be a form of social commentary, highlighting the behaviour of those in power, the struggles between them and their effect on others.

The *Henry VI* plays provide both a story of two dynasties and social commentary on a nation. However, the way they do this is open to interpretation, by the reader or the television adaptor, particularly if the text is edited or added to. The different aspects can be made more or less prominent, depending on this interpretation. In addition, the visual medium of television is able to bring other issues to the fore, not explicitly in the texts, by the use of image. This might be the consequences of war in terms of casualties, or in terms of its psychological impact. The plays are far more than just a depiction of the Wars of the Roses; they are an examination of politics, power and human nature. The weight of these issues varies from production to production but Shakespeare’s creation of lifelike characters means every production reflects more than just the conflict between York and Lancaster.

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150 Cooke, [press pack], p.33.
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