

2 Henry IV

Plot

The War of the Roses is in full tilt in this historical play about Henry VI's crumbling reign. The play opens with Sommerset returning from France with a bride, Margaret, for Henry VI and a peace treaty from France. The treaty, however, tells of the loss of two significant territories to the French. Noblemen Beaufort, Buckingham, Sommerset, Salisbury, Warwick, and York express their discontent with the weak and indecisive monarch and his Protector Gloucester. As the play progresses, they battle it out in a complex intertwining of allegiances, treasonous plots, banishments, and beheadings. York hires Jack Cade, a lower-middle class man, to start a popular rebellion in an attempt to overthrow Henry. Henry's new bride, Margaret, mocks him cruelly for his weakness and has an affair with Suffolk. When Cade's rebellion proves to be somewhat successful, York marches on London with his army from Ireland. York is winning the final battle scene and very few characters remain alive when Margaret and Henry flee back to London.

Themes and Issues

- the weak king and the crumbling state
- power struggle
- conspiracy
- gender roles: weak male/ strong female
- betrayal and murder
- decaying justice and punishment
- mob mentality

Language and Structure

- tearing apart of state echoed by tearing apart of human bodies (beheading, parading of corpses)
- uprising and infighting of commoners mirrors that among nobility
- gruesome descriptions of dead bodies and violent murders emphasizes harsh power struggle
- Henry's strong religious faith, belief in miracles, and lack of assertiveness illustrated in his soft-spoken, gentle language.

Resources

Davis, Kenneth C. *Don't Know Much About The Kings & Queens of England*. Harper Collins, 2002.
<http://www.warsoftheroses.com/> -- an excellent guide to the historical events of the time period.
<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/henry6pt2/context.html> -- summary and notes on the play.
<http://www.royal.gov.uk/output/Page1.asp> -- the official website of the British royalty. Contains extensive royal family trees.

Student Activities

1. Draw a royal family tree for the "War of the Roses" period. Include birth year, death year, period on the throne, and if each person was murdered.
2. Assign each student to a character either Lancastrian or Yorkist. Students research who that character was and what their ambitions were, what kind of person he or she was, etc. Then, have a partly scripted "Jerry Springer" talk show where the host interviews the characters.
3. The Modern Film Version: write a pitch to a producer for your modern film version of Henry VI part 2 for a high school audience. Where/ when would you set the film? Why? Which actors would you cast in which roles? How would you condense the play into a reasonable length film – which scenes can you cut?

4. The Movie Preview – In small groups, produce a skit or video of a movie preview for Henry VI part 2. Like a real movie preview, your skit should contain clips from the “film,” sound track, narration, words on screen, images, “coming to theatres soon” etc.
5. Perform a 15 minute Henry IV. Condense the entire play into a 15 minute play. You will have to select certain speeches, scenes, acts, etc to convey the most important elements.
6. In groups of 4, perform an Academic Controversy (debate): be it resolved that Henry VI should remain king. Present your final conclusions to the class.
7. The question of the child king – choose another instance in history, film, or legend from anywhere in the world when a child was made royalty. Write a short paper explaining the following: What was the reason the child was chosen? What were some challenges, problems, benefits of the situation. How does it compare with Henry VI’s situation?
8. Gender Stereotyping: Margaret and many characters condemn Henry for being “weak.” In what ways is it unacceptable for men to be “weak” today? Make a collage of magazine images about what it means for a man to be “strong” vs. “weak” and indecisive today.
9. Throughout history, there have been many rebellions of the common people like Jack Cade’s popular uprising. Choose one incident and research what you think were the main factors that lead the working class to rise up. What do you think were the main reasons that the common people wanted to rise up against the ruling class in England during the time of Henry VI? Write a compare and contrast essay examining these two incidents.
10. Write a personal reflection on whether or not you like 2 Henry VI. Choose 1 specific scene or speech which supports your opinion and explain in detail how it affects your opinion.
11. Historical accuracy of the play – Research at least 3 historical inaccuracies in 2 Henry VI. Why do you think Shakespeare made these changes? What was his agenda? Consider the accuracy of the news media reporting on armed conflicts today. Choose one media source you use to obtain information about global events, research who owns/ influences that media source, and discuss in groups how that source’s biases may effect how it reports on events.
12. Henry VI Obituaries – write a page of obituaries for all the characters who died in the play. Use a modern obituaries section of a newspaper as a sample.
13. Social taboos – The Duchess is humiliated and banished for dealing in the occult. Brainstorm a list of our society’s social taboos. Find a newspaper clipping which reports on someone who did something “taboo.” How was that person (literally or figuratively) “publicly humiliated and banished.” List some of the pros and cons of this way of enforcing social rules.
14. Choose one state ruler today or in recent history who is considered to be strong and decisive. What did they do that made them that way? Write a letter from Henry VI asking that state ruler for help. Then write that ruler’s letter of advice back to Henry.
15. Choose 1 scene in the play you think is most significant and select a sound track for it. Submit the tape or CD with a written explanation of how this music would enhance the scene.
16. Compare the nobles to gangsters – how is the play like gangster-rap artist stories e.g. Dr. Dre, Notorious BIG, etc. Summarize the rivalries and power struggles between your choice of gangsters. Explain how it is similar to the events in 2 Henry VI.
17. Listen to Monty Python’s song “Oliver Cromwell.” Write a song, rap, or hip-hop piece about Henry VI and/ or the broader War of the Roses period.
18. You have just invaded warring England of 1461 in Act V when York is winning the battle and Henry flees to London. Your army is far more powerful than York’s or Henry’s. You overthrow the existing government and now you must decide what sort of government to put in its place. Who will be the leader? What will you do with the war criminals? How will justice be served? Write and deliver to the class your speech to the conquered.
19. Imagine Lady Mac Beth and Margaret are pen pals. Write a series of letters between them.
20. Perform a skit in which Henry VI and Margaret have gone to modern day marriage counseling.