

2004 Study Guide for *Henry VI, Part One* by William Shakespeare

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**Before seeing/reading the play**

1. Define chivalry. What code guided knights? How were they expected to treat their superiors? Their equals? Their inferiors? Ladies? What were their prescribed attitudes toward loyalty? Power? Bravery? Oaths? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.medieval-life.net/chivalry.htm>

<http://www.middle-ages.org.uk/knights-code-of-chivalry.htm>

2. Research feudalism. When did feudalism flourish in England? What duty did a vassal owe to his lord? What did a vassal receive from his lord in exchange? What were the advantages of feudalism? Disadvantages? Chart the status of individuals under feudalism, starting at the top with the king and working downward. What power did kings hold? Dukes? Earls? Lords? Knights? What was the role of women? How could a person change his or her status? What role did succession play in this system? Under what extraordinary circumstances could titles be inherited through the female line? These and other websites provide information:

[http://www.historyonthenet.com/Medieval\\_Life/feudalism.htm](http://www.historyonthenet.com/Medieval_Life/feudalism.htm)

<http://www.middle-ages.org.uk/feudalism.htm>

<http://www.learner.org/interactives/middleages/feudal.html>

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

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

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

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

4. Research the Hundred Years War between England and France (1337-1453). What caused the conflict? What right did England have to lands in France? What significant roles did the successive Dukes of Burgundy Philip the Bold, John the Fearless and Philip the Good play? How did the conflict change both countries? These and other websites provide information:  
[http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/hundred\\_years\\_war.html](http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/hundred_years_war.html)  
<http://ehistory.osu.edu/osu/archive/hundredyearswar.cfm>
5. Research the major landowners in France and England from 1420 to 1450. Find a historical map of England and France to determine who owns what in 1420 and who owns what in 1450. How did land ownership change over these thirty years? How was power tied to land ownership? These and other websites provide information:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hundred\\_years\\_war\\_france\\_england\\_1435.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hundred_years_war_france_england_1435.jpg)  
<http://www.theotherside.co.uk/tm-heritage/background/100yearswar.htm>
6. Research the historical Joan of Arc. What were her origins? What claims did she make for herself? Why did she believe she could lead the French forces to victory? How successful was she? Why did the French turn against her? What threat did she pose to the English? To the Church? How is she presently regarded? This and other websites provide information:  
[http://archive.joan-of-arc.org/joanofarc\\_short\\_biography.html](http://archive.joan-of-arc.org/joanofarc_short_biography.html)
7. Create a family tree for the Plantagenets from King Edward III through Richard III. What are the Wars of the Roses? How did the dynamics of the Plantagenet family contribute to the Wars of the Roses? What are the family relationships among the English characters in *Henry VI, Part One*? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.britroyals.com/plantagenet.htm>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English\\_monarchs\\_family\\_tree](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_monarchs_family_tree)  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/interactive/timelines/kings\\_queens/index\\_embed.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/interactive/timelines/kings_queens/index_embed.shtml)
8. Henry VI became a king at the age of nine months. What challenges face a nation ruled by a child king? What are the challenges of being one? Who makes decisions on behalf of the underage king until he is old enough to make his own decisions? What was the legacy left to Henry VI by his famous father, Henry V? How might it have been difficult for Henry VI to live up to that legacy? Research Henry VI's relationship with his

uncles and great-uncles, the Duke of Gloucester, the Duke of Bedford, the Duke of Exeter and the Bishop of Winchester. What did each stand to gain from influencing the young king? Which had his best interests at heart? Which were concerned for the welfare of the country? Which had other agendas? These and other websites provide information:

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

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

9. In presenting historical events, what obligation does a writer have to be true to the facts? What are the pitfalls of fictionalizing events and presenting them as history? Of fictionalizing historical characters and presenting them as biography? Find examples of modern-day films that have taken liberties with history and individuals to create a more compelling story.
10. If you were to produce *Henry VI, Part One*, what devices would you use to show the audience which characters are on the French side and which on the English side? How would you differentiate between the Yorkists and the Lancastrians? Supporters of Gloucester and of Winchester?

## Resources

### Books:

*Shakespeare's English Kings* by Peter Saccio

*Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare* by Isaac Asimov

*The Sunne In Splendor* by Sharon Kay Penman

*Wars of the Roses* by Alison Weir

*Joan of Arc: In Her Own Words* compiled and translated by Willard Trask

*Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* by Marina Warner

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

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>

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

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

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

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

## After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research about the historical events dramatized in *Henry VI, Part One*. How has Shakespeare altered the historical facts, personalities and timelines? What are his reasons for these alterations? What is gained? What is lost? What was happening in England about 1591 (when Shakespeare wrote the play) to which he may have been responding? How is he adjusting history to shed light on contemporary events? To what extent are events of our time (early 21st Century) reflected in the story that Shakespeare tells?
2. Describe the extent of the English territories in France as the play begins. Compare them with the English-held lands at the conclusion. Why do the English feel entitled to French lands? Since the French apparently pose no threat to England, why are the English fighting in France?
3. What was the English attitude toward the French at the time Shakespeare was writing? How did it color his depictions of the French?
4. What key elements of the play are introduced in the first scene? What is the atmosphere of the scene, and what effect does it have on the rest of the play?
5. Chart the changes in attitude of the French in Act I, scene ii. Explain each change.
6. To what do the French attribute Joan's power and success? The English? What justification do the French have for blaming her for their defeats?
7. For each battle, describe the combatants, the location, the objectives of both sides, any notable occurrences, and the outcome. What distinguishes each battle from all the others?
8. While the play is named for King Henry VI, who is the leading figure? Explain why. If you were to rename the play, what would you call it?
9. Describe King Henry in his first appearance (Act III, scene i). What events cause him to grow and change? Find instances when he reveals his youth. Which behaviors can be

attributed to his being young? To his piety? To his awareness of his obligations as king? Identify those times when he is humiliated. How does he respond? Why do people feel free to humiliate their king?

10. What qualities are essential to a good leader? What qualities make an ineffective one? Which of these qualities does Henry possess? Talbot? Joan? The Dauphin? How does each express his or her leadership? What other examples of leadership are shown in the play? How do the leadership choices made by Henry VI set the stage for the Wars of the Roses?
11. Define honor. What does honor mean to Talbot? To his son? Joan? Henry VI? Somerset? Plantagenet (York)? Suffolk?
12. What is patriotism? What is nationalism? How are both ideas presented in *Henry VI, Part One*? What role does the Hundred Years War play in advancing these ideas in France and England?
13. Which characters have the good of England at heart? Which are out for their own ends? Which serve as a chorus, commenting on the actions for the benefit of the audience?
14. According to Act II, scene iv, how do the Wars of the Roses start? What is the historical basis for this scene? What specifically are Somerset and Plantagenet quarreling about? Explain the political significance of choosing one rose over the other. Think about a time when you were forced to choose a side. What did you have to give up? What are the far-reaching consequences of your choice? What does it mean to see the world in an us/them, win/lose, right/wrong configuration? Find modern conflicts that parallel the Red Rose/White Rose contention.
15. Summarize Edmund Mortimer's explanation of Plantagenet's claim to the throne of England (Act II, scene v). Why has Mortimer spent his life in prison? What has his desire for the crown cost him? What did it cost Plantagenet's father? Why does Mortimer pass that desire along to Plantagenet?

16. Compare Shakespeare's interpretation of Joan of Arc with your historical research. In Shakespeare's portrayal of her, which details are historically accurate? Which are fabricated? What accounts for Shakespeare's deviation from the facts? Historically, what did the prosecutors at her trial fear most? Contrast their fears with those in Shakespeare's version.
17. In what ways does Joan defy the accepted roles allowed to her sex? How does this cause some people to revere her and others to fear her? How is it possible for some people to think she is a sorceress while others think she is a saint? What extraordinary powers does she possess? Compare Joan to Queen Elizabeth I. What are the challenges for a female leader in a male-dominated world? What are the consequences for a woman who assumes power?
18. Compare Talbot and Joan. What does each symbolize within the play? What parallels exist between them? Contrast her methods of fighting with his.
19. To what extent is Joan responsible for Talbot's defeat and death? To what extent are the English responsible? What responsibility if any does Talbot himself bear?
20. What are the codes of chivalry which Talbot represents, which are dying out at the time of the play? What qualities does he reveal in his encounter with the Countess of Auvergne? To what extent is his outmoded code of behavior responsible for his final defeat?
21. What has young John Talbot learned from his father? What dilemma does he face in his final battle? What will he gain and what will he lose if stays to fight? What will he gain and lose if he flees from the battle?
22. Compare the three women in the play, Joan, the Countess of Auvergne and Margaret. How does each move beyond the restrictions that traditionally confine women's activities and power? What does each want? What resources does each use to influence the men in power and achieve her goals? What verbal skills does each employ? How successful is each?

23. What political points make up the overt reasons for the quarrel between Gloucester and Winchester? Over what covert matters are they contending?
24. Historically, how does Burgundy happen to be on the English side rather than the French? What arguments does Joan use to persuade him to desert the English and join the French? How does his shift in loyalties damage the English? How does it benefit the French?
25. What chivalrous qualities does Suffolk embody? On what particulars does he fall short? What are his objectives in persuading Henry to marry Margaret? Who stands to lose and who stands to gain by this marriage?
26. Compare church power to political power in the play. What is the significance of each? Which characters have power, and on what basis? What are they willing to do to keep their power? To increase it? To what extent does land equal power? Chart the shifts in power for the principal characters in the play.
27. What does it mean to be loyal to God? Country? King? According to the play, what are the rewards and the costs of these loyalties? Which characters swear (or have already sworn) loyalty, to whom and under what circumstances? Which of these oaths are broken, and why?
28. At the end of this play, how does Shakespeare set you up for the “sequel”? What stories are left incomplete?

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