

Henry VI through a Postcolonial Lens

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Abstract

This article seeks to question if Shakespeare's Henry VI (the character as well as the trilogy) can be satisfactorily subjected to a postcolonialist critique, especially in light of RSC's decision to cast David Oyelowo as the late medieval monarch. Henry VI has always been a paradox: his insistence on pacifism plunged England into a long and bloody feud called the Wars of the Roses. But placed as he was at a crucial juncture of European expansionism, is it possible for his pacifist politics to acquire greater significance as a commentary on English involvement in the tussle for global power? What was the role of the church in enabling and manipulating European interaction with people in Asia and Africa? These are the issues this paper will explore with the help of Shakespeare's retelling of a man widely vilified for being one of the worst kings of England.

Keywords: postcolonial analysis; Shakespeare studies; postcolonialism and Catholicism; postcolonialism and Christianity

David Oyelowo was on a train to Barbican when his manager called him to tell him that the Royal Shakespeare Company wanted to meet him to discuss a part in *Henry VI*. Which role did they want him to play in *Henry VI*, he asked her. "Henry VI," she said. "Yes," said Oyelowo. "Henry VI," said his manager again. "Yes, but which role?" David persisted. "Henry VI" (Oyelowo 1).

As the first Black man to play an English monarch for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2000, David Oyelowo stepped into shoes previously worn by groundbreaking Shakespeare actors like Ira Aldridge, James Earl Jones, and Paul Robeson. Soon enough RSC would sign Papaa Esseidu on to play Hamlet, and Denzel Washington would star in and as Macbeth. Dramatic works like *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, *The Tempest*, and *Richard III* open themselves to postcolonial interpretations satisfactorily. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, scholarly works began to reveal

how critical re-readings of Shakespeare could not be separated from the racial ideologies they reflected and contained (Jerry Brotton refers to Anne McClintock's argument about 'postcolonialism' being a reductive term in his essay 'This Tunis, sir, was Carthage': Contesting colonialism in *The Tempest* in *Postcolonial Shakespeares*). And although noted academics refuse to separate colonial and post-colonial Shakespeares, it is a useful division for anyone trying to understand what words like race or ideas like Eurocentrism meant in the sixteenth century. There is no single postcolonial point of entry into Shakespeare's works; we cannot tell if Shakespeare was championing or silencing the colonized. There are as many postcolonialisms as there are Shakespeares.

The popular trilogy on Henry VI resists colonial and postcolonial interpretations. Unlike *Julius Caesar* or the previously mentioned *Coriolanus* or *King Lear*, the universe of *Henry VI* is ruled by a stubbornly English civil mutiny. The Wars of the Roses are a series of bloody family feuds very distinct from other insurrections and revolutions. Henry VI - an inept ruler who went through bouts of severe mental illness before being deposed and ultimately murdered - is a posthumous holy man. During his long rule he lost all the French territory won by his father Henry V and plunged his country into an acute financial and political crisis. His mental illness was unusual as well: in August 1453, he 'lost his wits' completely. He stopped speaking and responding to others. When his newborn son Edward was presented to him, he looked away. This was not the only episode. He had a series of breakdowns that rendered him completely unfit to carry on royal duties. The birth of the prince strengthened the dynasty but Yorkists were never going to overlook the fact that a Lancastrian king was too ill to even preside over parliament. The conflict we now call the Wars of the Roses began around 1455, with the warring dynasties clashing every alternate week in different parts of the battered country. On 4 March 1461, Henry VI was deposed and Edward IV took over the throne of the country. He was restored to the throne for a short while in 1470 before Edward finally imprisoned him in the Tower of London and had him murdered (Wolffe 3-21).

Within a short while, posthumous miracles were attributed to the well-intentioned but feeble king who had been so brutally humiliated and stripped of his powers. A cult developed around the royal martyr, and became successful enough to be comparable with the Canterbury cult of Thomas Becket (Bowie 113). Roughly a hundred years after the phenomenal popularity of the cult, an unknown dramatist selected as the subject of his first play the events of the rule of this pious, sometimes-unhinged medieval king. Shakespeare's representation of Henry VI clearly sets him apart from his martial father Henry V. Henry VI is a complex Christian philosopher in Shakespeare's trilogy, with his very specific Catholic beliefs and Christocentric way of life. We're reminded of his conception of kingship very early on in *1 Henry VI*:

O, how this discord doth afflict my soul!
 Can you, my Lord of Winchester, behold
 My sighs and tears and will not once relent?
 Who should be pitiful, if you be not?
 Or who should study to prefer a peace,
 If holy churchmen take delight in broils?
 (Act 3, Scene 1, 1 *Henry VI*)

We may treat this as a sentimental call for peace (which it is) but it is possible that Shakespeare is underlining a perfectly valid critique of political behavior in late medieval Europe. Standing as we are, therefore, at the beginning of West Europe's efforts to colonize Asia and Africa (Cape Verde became the first European settlement in the tropics in 1462), it is tempting to place England's attempts to defeat France in the larger picture. As Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin state in their introduction to the brilliant study '*Post-Colonial Shakespeares*', 'The negotiations and contestations of culture, and the battles for agency mentioned above, were often enacted via Shakespeare's work and reputation. Colonial masters imposed their value system through Shakespeare, and in response colonized peoples often answered back in Shakespearean accents. The study of Shakespeare made them 'hybrid' subjects, to use a term that has become central to post-colonial criticism and which is increasingly used to characterize the range of psychological as well as physiological mixings generated by colonial encounters. Many post-colonial critics regard the hybridity of colonial and postcolonial subjects as a potentially radical state, one that enables such subjects to elude, or even subvert the binaries, oppositions and rigid demarcations imposed by colonial discourses' (Loomba and Orkin *Introduction*) Henry's staunch Catholicism is a perfect example of how this mixing - the royal and powerful/the humiliated and dispossessed - subverts the discourses of imperialism. This is fundamentally different from the way Caliban, or Othello, or Shylock symbolize the tension generated by the intermingling of races. The character of the pious king is used to expose the many contradictions in the Christian conception of kingship; theories around warfare, in particular, were open to manipulation. Who is to say God endorses Henry V's battle of Agincourt and condemns the Yorkists' offensive attacks during the Wars of the Roses?

The same anxieties can be traced in a postcolonial interpretation of *Henry VI*. The church's position on royal piety (too much religious devotion in a king could be unacceptable to the Holy See) and sacrality remind us of the persistent connection between sacrality and holy war. In 1598, the links would have been easily made: throughout Asia and Africa, colonization was almost always accompanied by an effort to Christianize indigenous communities, although responses to these missions were hugely varied (Kaplan 1-3). But the manipulation of canon law to serve the Church's political purposes was common to Rome's attempts to retain their hold

over places in Europe and abroad (Davis 384). The purpose of this argument is certainly not to conflate evangelization and colonialism, or to discuss the intersections of religious and political colonialism. But on the eve of Elizabethan rule in England, religious colonialism meant more than England's trading and missionary activities all over the world. It was part of a divinely-ordained scheme of things. This had been Christ's final directive to his followers: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20) "If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" says St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:16. What the scriptures do not recommend or propose is the subjugation of people in the process of spreading the Good News.

By the middle of the thirteenth century, Pope Innocent IV had formulated a doctrine of divine government that justified papal intervention far beyond what the just war theories permitted. According to him, the psalm "the earth is the Lord's" was a legal fact (Davis 385). This was not untoward. Divine power branched from God to his agents on earth, the foremost of them being the Christian King (emphasis on Christian since Rome had the authority to reconceptualize it at will). This gave the pope the power to invade non-Christian countries for the safety of Christians, or to abolish idolatry. In the centuries that followed, the church unsurprisingly overstepped their boundaries multiple times, going as far as to divide land between various European powers to rule. This danger was something Aquinas had warned Christians about: missionary efforts could step on justice when backed by government administration (Davis 388). In the decades before *Henry VI* was written, friars like Antonio de Montesinos, Bartolome de Las Casas, and Alonso de la Vera Cruz were championing the cause of the indigenous people (Davis 387-388). There was no simple understanding of whiteness as a marker of 'racial superiority' in the sixteenth century (Jews were a problematic people on that count).

Shakespeare's *Henry VI* is a man who owns the maximum amount of land in England (as a king) and is dispossessed of his divinely granted land (as a deposed king). Does this mean all deposed royals symbolize the tensions of interracial mingling? No, as Shakespeare's other deposed king Richard II or retired king King Lear prove, it depends on the person's own conception of their relationship with their 'divine power'. *Henry VI*'s pacifism facilitates a dialogue between two opposing moral philosophies. Kingship and empire are observed through a lens of having and not having. Theoretically, a king's office cannot be stolen or taken from him (Kern 5-10). It is a God-given identity and purpose. But the land given to a king on the basis of this identity can be taken away. An indigenous person's identity is non-transferable, but the resources he's entitled to are easily transferable, as we have experienced for centuries. Rules around possession in

kingship are complex, but it is a good analogy for understanding that our identities are connected to what we own.

There are colonial undercurrents running through discussions of the Anglo-French wars in 2 *Henry VI*. When Gloucester and the Cardinal of Winchester falter because they cannot imagine returning Anjou and Maine to France, Henry simply says that the arrangement pleased him. His insistence on peacekeeping is significant as an allusion to the multiple civilizing missions every European nation was embarking on. His call for pacifism is rooted in a very Catholic piety:

Why, Warwick, hath thy knee forgot to bow?—
 Old Salisbury, shame to thy silver hair...
 What, wilt thou on thy death-bed play the ruffian,
 And seek for sorrow with thy spectacles?
 O, where is faith? O, where is loyalty?
 If it be banish'd from the frosty head,
 Where shall it find a harbour in the earth?
 Wilt thou go dig a grave to find out war,
 And shame thine honourable age with blood?
 Why art thou old, and want'st experience?
 Or wherefore dost abuse it, if thou hast it?
 For shame! in duty bend thy knee to me
 That bows unto the grave with mickle age.
 (Act 5 Scene 1, 2 *Henry VI*)

Conventional wisdom looked at battles as a divine trial - the victorious side was necessarily right. But the Wars of the Roses was a battle of attrition; armies remained parked in tents waiting for their general's orders, while the monarch waited for his lords to arrive with happy tidings. This insight into the reality of civil war (which is characterized by this tedium as much as by physical violence) sets the trilogy apart from Hall or Holinshed. Despite the play's narrow setting, Henry's appeal extends to the Englishmen involved in colonizing the Americas during the early seventeenth century. The presence of two warring sides keeps reminding us how slippery 'possession' can be; Henry's willingness to part with his possession makes him an ideal missionary. The term 'mission territory' is volatile: true mission work is ministering to people without faith in Christ irrespective of geography.

Christianity - the face of early modern colonialism - was a major justification behind the tussle for global power. Henry's preference for peace above his own kingdom can be read as a critique of all expansionist ambitions. Escaping from the defeat at St Albans, Henry tells his wife that

they couldn't 'outrun the heavens' (Act 5 Scene 2, 2 *Henry VI*). It is impossible to proclaim that Shakespeare was deliberately building an anti-colonialist discourse through his portrayal of Henry, but we cannot deny the anxieties it dredges up from early modern travelogues, homilies, sermons, and missionary memoirs in favor of colonialism.

Roughly four hundred years after *1 Henry VI* had debuted on the London stage, David Oyelowo described how he understood Shakespeare's purpose in writing the play as unhistorically as he did: 'Shakespeare's main concern in writing these plays was not to give a history lesson, but to tell compelling stories full of intrigue, love, lust, death, betrayal, and above all, the insane pursuit of worldly power over spiritual fulfillment' (Oyelowo 13). The young man of Nigerian descent was also taken aback on realizing, after months of war workshops, that all Henry VI would ever do with his sword was knight people. This uncharacteristic pacifism highlighted another facet of Henry's for Oyelowo: his loneliness. Shakespeare's Henry VI's Christian virtues isolate him from his more accusatory courtiers throughout the play. This was something Oyelowo might even have related to. When Daily Telegraph reported Oyelowo being selected to play the part of Henry VI, the piece quoted an Oxford University don as saying that it was necessary to be accurate in our representation of the text. 'Moves like these leave us open to ridicule. King Henry VI wasn't black and shouldn't be cast as such,' said the quote (Oyelowo 27-28). The odds faced by the first Black man playing Henry VI were substantial. He chose to wed political reality to moral ideology, and Oyelowo's Henry is one who was constantly swimming against the tide.

Yet the biggest compliment Oyelowo thought he received after the first performance of the first part of *Henry VI* was the fact that no review mentioned the colour of his skin in relation to his performance. It may have been a clever way to emphasize the medieval martyr's quintessential otherness, although neither actor nor director discussed their decision in that light. When examined in the context of postcolonialism, Henry's speeches can be read as a rejection of all Christian arguments in favour of empire-building. This brief discussion has hopefully revealed how Shakespeare highlights the instability of Christian discourse on just war by undermining the pursuit of worldly success at the cost of divine favour. While it is unclear if Henry is speaking to all the missionary efforts of Rome, the Molehill speech is a soliloquy about the plight of the dispossessed all over the world:

Sometime the flood prevails, and then the wind;
 Now one the better, then another best;
 Both tugging to be victors, breast to breast,
 Yet neither conqueror nor conquered:
 So is the equal of this fell war.
 (Act 2 Scene 5, 3 *Henry VI*)

In a political whirlpool, it doesn't matter who's fighting whom. Henry wishes he were dead; there was nothing left in life except grief and woe. Gradually he launches into a beautiful poem about the peaceful life of the 'lowly' man, the life that bloodthirst has torn apart. Henry's ideology turns the Wars of the Roses into a metaphor for the destructiveness of expansionist techniques. Specific locations like St. Albans, Towton, or Coventry do not change the focus we have on what is clearly a Christian understanding of 'possession' and the limits of possessing. On some levels, the sacrality of 'God's land' was a political tool in the hands of the church, but because earth is God's 'footstool', all land is sacred. Proposing the Gospel is God's work, but taking over a place politically is a problematic move. Henry VI's political stance remains a paradox. He is still the king whose pacifism began a bloody civil insurrection. But Shakespeare's reading of the Wars allows us to dissociate him from his political role. A weak king, after all, is an extraordinarily undramatic subject for a playwright to base a trilogy on. A postcolonial interpretation of *Henry VI* turns this king's political failures into a valid moral position, considering the effect expansionism had for centuries after Henry's death. In the end, there can be no 'completeness' in identification (identity comes from the Latin word '*idem*', meaning 'the same') because identity is a limit. Henry is a Christian king, but he is also a victim of mental instability, a martyr, a posthumous miracle worker, and a subject of medieval devotion. Shakespeare's representation expands the limits of these identifiers, and points us towards the dilemmas implicit in some of these ideas. Why is an Oxford don unsettled by an actor of Nigerian descent playing a medieval English king, when the very meaning of 'act' in this instance is to perform a part? There are Shakespearean plays that respond to the crisis of English involvement in colonial efforts in a more direct way. *Henry VI*, on the other hand, is an example of the far-reaching nature of such devastating strategies. It carries crucial traces of the sinister part played by the church in such endeavors and hints at the necessity of a different notion of Christian kingship. By doing this, it also redresses our easy presumptions about the political 'failures' of Henry VI and his involvement in the Wars of the Roses.

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