The first Part of Henry the Sixt.

The First Part of King Henry the Sixth (1 Henry VI), as printed in the First Folio, can be dated any time between 1577, the publication date of the first edition of Holinshed and 1592, when Nashe mentions in Pierce Penniless that Talbot’s fighting prowess has been depicted on stage.

**Registration & Publication Date**

There are no entries in the Stationers’ Register for any play called ‘Henry VI’ until the publication of the First Folio in 1623, when eighteen plays appeared in print for the first time. Sixteen of these plays were entered entered in the Stationers’ Register on 8 November, 1623:


Chambers has argued, with every editor following, that the “thirde parte of Henry the sixt” refers in fact to The First Part of King Henry the Sixth as there had previously been entries for The First Part of the Contention of the Famous Houses of Yorke and Lancaster (2 Henry VI) in 1594, and for The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of Yorke (3 Henry VI published in Octavo 1595) in 1600. These earlier entries, it is usually suggested, made it unnecessary to enter the ‘first’ or ‘second’ parts for the Folio when the three plays were brought together as Henry VI plays.

The earliest text of 1 Henry VI occurs in the First Folio of 1623.

**Performance Date**

Hanspeter Born argues that both the following references to performances of a Henry VI play in 1592 refer to Shakespeare’s 1 Henry VI. Philip Henslowe made an entry in his diary, “Harey the vj as performed by Lord Stranges Men on 3rd March 1592”. The play was marked “ne” and drew enough audience to have it repeated on fourteen occasions to June 19th, and twice in January of 1593. It is thought that this entry refers to one of Shakespeare’s three Henry VI play(s) as there is no record of any other play about Henry VI. The annotation “ne” is often thought to refer to a new play, but whether “ne” means newly composed, newly acquired, newly licensed, performed at Newington Butts or something else, is not known.

Another likely reference to 1 Henry VI occurs in Thomas Nashe’s pamphlet Pierce Penniless his Supplication to the Divell (dedicated to Lord Strange, first impression 1589; the quotation which follows is from the second impression, SR 8 August 1592):

How it would have joyed brave Talbot (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred years in his Tombe, he should triumph againe on the Stage, and have his bones embalmed with the tears of ten
thousand spectators at least (at several times) who, in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh from bleeding.

Since Talbot fights and dies heroically in 1 Henry VI, but is not known to feature in any other play, it has been argued that Henslowe and Nashe are referring to 1 Henry VI. The phrase “Terror of the French” appears to echo the Shakespeare play at 1.4. 42, while at 3.3.5, Joan allows: “Let Talbot triumph for a while.” Although King Henry has a small role in 1 Henry VI, the play encompasses only the first twenty years of his reign. Since it follows the historian Edward Hall closely, the author would follow Hall by including the name of the king somewhere in the title.

If the Henry VI plays were written in their historical sequence, Part 1 would therefore predate the reference in Greene’s Groats-worth of Witte (SR, September 1592), where the author asserts:

for there is an up-start Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.

The reference to “tiger’s heart” appears to parody a line which occurs in Richard Duke of Yorke (and 3 Henry VI).

O tiger’s heart wrapped in a woman’s hide
3H6 1.4.137

The reference in Groatsworth appears to confirm the suggestion that 3 Henry VI had been performed by 1592 (although Born suggests that Greene may be quoting from a play that had not yet been performed). Bullough argues that the plays may have been written in sequence, in which case, 1 Henry VI would therefore have been completed by late 1591. Gary Taylor develops an elaborate argument for the first performance by Lord Strange’s Men at the Rose Theatre on 3 March 1592. Harlow has argued that the play must have been written by 1593 as Nashe includes a number of words and phrases from the play in his Terrors of the Night.

None of the Henry VI plays is mentioned by Meres in 1598. It is possible that the attribution was unknown, or that the plays were thought inferior, or that Meres simply omitted them from his balanced list of six comedies and six tragedies, or perhaps, as Chambers suggests (245), because it was performed before Meres came to London.

**Sequence of Composition**

It is not known in what order the Henry VI plays were composed. Bullough, Tillyard, Cairncross and Born have argued that 1 Henry VI was planned and written as the first in the sequence in early 1592, closely followed by Parts 2 & 3.

Counter arguments advanced by Chambers, J. Dover Wilson and especially Greer have persuaded a majority of commentators that 2, 3 Henry VI were composed before 1 Henry VI. Firstly, in 1 Henry VI, Sir John Talbot has the most lines spoken by any character in the play (407); second place is held by Joan (255). Talbot plays a very important and heroic role as commander of the English forces in France. He is ennobled (3.4) before dying in battle with his son (4.7). However, he is not mentioned in 2 Henry VI when Gloucester recounts the glorious feats of two dead warriors (“my brother Henry” and “my brother Bedford”, whose death is dramatised in 1H6 3.2), and praises five present nobles:

Have you yourselves, Somerset, Buckingham
Brave York, Salisbury and victorious Warwick,
Received deep scars in France and Normandy?

2 Henry VI, 1.1.75–83

A second reason for seeing 1 Henry VI as written later lies in the discrepancy in the dowry arrangements for Margaret of Anjou: there is no mention in 1 Henry VI of the surrender of Anjou and Maine, but this is raised at the outset of 2 Henry VI and is bitterly resented throughout the play. Greer deploys further arguments on the basis that events spanning thirty years are ‘telescoped down’ with historical discrepancies being glossed over, e.g. that Joan (d. 1429) and Talbot (d. 1453) did not confront each other in battle.

Another reason for supposing that 1 Henry VI was written at a later stage as a prequel is the apparent inconsistency in the character of Gloucester (“ruffian in the first and almost statesmanlike in the second”, Knowles, 114) although not all commentators have noticed any disparity; the actor, Richard Cordery, who played
Gloucester in the RSC productions in both 2001–2 and 2007–8, did not notice any such. Indeed, he and the ensemble saw the eight plays from Richard II to Richard III as a coherent set of eight plays, ‘an octology’ (reported in Smallwood).

**Attribution and Collaboration**

A major complication in dating this play has been the question of authorship and the possibility of collaboration. There remains divided opinion on whether Shakespeare was entirely responsible for the Henry VI plays, with special doubts over 1 Henry VI. This can be seen in recent editions by Hattaway (“Shakespearean” in his Cambridge Edition) and Burns (“co-authored” in his Arden Edition) E.K. Chambers wrote that his doubts on the authorship and sequencing of 1 Henry VI as a trilogy were dispelled when he had the good fortune to see the three plays enacted on the stage. He was not persuaded by the stylistic tests (see below) but thought “weight must be given to the numerous similes and metaphors from natural history and country life, some of them literary, but others testifying to direct observation” (287).

Bullough prefers a sole author, Shakespeare, who planned the Henry VI trilogy as a whole:

> My own view is that Part 1 was probably written first, but was revised after the other parts had been composed and that they must have been written before Easter 1592.

Andrew Cairncross argued for the aesthetic and artistic accomplishments of 1 Henry VI in its own right. He also followed E.M. Tillyard in arguing for Shakespeare’s sole authorship of all three plays in the same order as the Folio, basing this on the thematic structure, and unity of the plays. Tillyard had promulgated the so-called Tudor Myth and seen a grand process of history culminating in the accession of the Tudors enacted in the 1, 2, 3 Henry VI–Richard III tetralogy as part of God’s plan. However, this view has lost favour, with more emphasis on individual actions causing civil dissension, and weak central authority with consequent losses of territory. Despite reservations about Tillyard’s view of the ‘Tudor Myth’, Hattaway argued for single authorship.

Edmund Malone was the first to question Shakespeare’s authorship of 1 Henry VI. J. Dover Wilson argued for multiple authorship involving Nashe (1567–1601) and Greene (1558–92). Greg accepted the possibility of co-authorship but asserted his belief in revision: “Most likely the play was originally an independent piece, and was altered to form an introduction to the Contention plays (parts 2 and 3).” The theory of for collaboration has been extensively expanded by Gary Taylor (1993), who argues for collaboration with Nashe and two other authors, a view cautiously accepted by Burns.

Burns (2000: 73) points out that those who see merit in the plays tend to argue for Shakespeare’s sole authorship and those who see no merit, tend to argue for group authorship.

To make a broad distinction, editors and critics who have valued the play have tended to present it as by Shakespeare, those who haven’t see it as by a group of writers who may or may not have included him. Further, scholars of the first persuasion tend to see the plays as a planned three or four part sequence.

Sir Brian Vickers has applied his thorough approach in the analysis of style to the case of 1 Henry VI. In reviewing previous studies of attribution, he notes that in Act 1 there are a large number of stylistic features which suggest Nashe wrote the opening act, e.g. the grammatical inversion of subject and object as:

> Wounds will I lend the French, in stead of Eyes (1.1.87)
> Here by the Cheekes Ile drag thee up and downe (1.3.51)

With reference to a wide variety of features, Vickers concludes that this play was collaborative, with Nashe writing Act 1 c. 1592 and Shakespeare revising Nashe’s play c. 1594.

**Sources**

Bullough (followed by Burns) cites the chief historical sources of 1 Henry VI as Hall, whose history was more ‘official’, rather than Holinshed:

> Edward Hall, The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke (1548–50). Hall’s account, which is much longer than Holinshed’s, occurs in the chapter ‘The troublous season of King Henry the Sixth’. The play does not follow historical events but “darts
about the period in a bewildering way” from the accession of Henry VI in 1422 to his marriage to Margaret in 1445 (with the death of Talbot in 1453). Talbot and Joan of Arc are ranged in bitter rivalry although they never met in battle and Joan was executed in 1429.

Raphael Holinshed, The Chronicles of Englande, Scotlande, and Irelande (first edition, 1577; second edition, 1588). Boswell-Stone writes that for most of the chronicle material used in I Henry VI, Holinshed paraphrases from Hall so closely, that it is “impossible to determine which of the authorities were used”. It is possible that the dramatist could have consulted the first edition as the following details, found only in the second edition, are few and small: (a) Joan’s sword was chosen from “old iron” (1.2.101), but Shakespeare may have consulted the same histories as the revisers of the 1587 edition, perhaps the French Chronicles of the Burgundian historian, Monstrelet, which give a hostile, anti-French version of Joan; (b) Joan’s claim to be “with child” at 5.4.74 (not in Hall): Bosewell-Stone notes that the Holinshed revisers took this suggestion of pregnancy from Polydore Virgil’s account and Shakespeare could have found it there instead.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, Historia Regnum Britanniae Book VII, Ch xxii–xxiii, was used for an extended reference to “stout Pendragon” (3.2.93). The dramatist might also have used Richard Grafton, A Chronicle at Large, (1568), which is largely derived from Hall. He seems to have consulted Robert Fabyan, The New Chronicles of England and France (1516) for details involving the Lord Mayor of London (at 1.3.57ff and 3.1.76ff).

The historical Talbot died in 1453 at Bordeaux over twenty years after Joan was burnt at the stake at Rouen. The bold and anachronistic comparison between Talbot and Joan may have been suggested by a visit to Rouen, since Talbot’s epitaph in the Cathedral gives a complete list of his titles. Such a visit would be consistent with the somewhat incongruous list of titles given by Sir William Lucy, in search of Talbot, who has just died on stage – a sort of unintended obsequy. Boswell-Stone compares the full text of both:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shakespeare I Henry VI, 4.7.60 [4.4.170]</th>
<th>Talbot’s epitaph at Rouen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>But where’s the great Alcides of the field, Valiant Lord Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, Created, for his rare success in arms, Great Earl of Washford, Waterford and Valence; Lord Talbot of Goodrig and Urchinfield, Lord Strange of Blackmere, Lord Verdun of Alton, Lord Cromwell of Wingfield, Lord Furnival of Sheffield, The thric-victorious Lord of Falconbridge; Knight of the noble order of Saint George, Worthy Saint Michael and the Golden Fleece; Great marshal to Henry the Sixth Of all his wars within the realm of France?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here lieth the right noble knight John Talbott Earle of Shrewsburye, Washford, Waterford and Valence, Lord Talbot of Goodrige, and Vrchenfield, Lord Strange of the blacke Meere, Lord Verdon of Alton, Lord Crumwell of Wingfield, Lord Louetoft of Worsop, Lord Furnivall of Sheffiled, Lord Faulconbrige, knight of the most noble order of St George, St Michaell, and the Golden fleece, Great Marshall to king Henry the sixt of his realme of France, who died in the battell of Burdeaux in the yeare of our Lord 1453.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Boswell-Stone, followed by Tucker Brooke, asserts that the only complete list is found in Rouen; other lists are not only incomplete, but also appeared too late to be used as a source for the play, viz., Roger Cotton’s *Armour of Proof* (1596), Richard Crompton’s *Mansion Of Magnanimity* (1599), and Ralph Brooke’s *Catalogue and Succession of Kings* (1619). In the absence of other written sources, it appears that the inscription in Rouen Cathedral was used as the direct source for this passage.

**Literary Allusions**

There is a broad range of literary allusions in the play. Shaheen discusses Biblical references in *I Henry VI* (283–299). He argues that the author uses the Geneva Bible at 2.1.21 “God is our Fortress” (all other versions have “castel”). However, the wording of the Geneva Bible is not followed at 1.5.9 “Heavens, can you suffer hell so to prevail” which follows other versions. The author alludes to Plutarch’s *Lives* (1.2.139; 1.4.25). Arthur Golding’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* (1567) is echoed at 1.5.43 “Astraea’s daughter”. The use of Greek stichomythia (a dialogue in alternate lines) indicates classical imitation, perhaps of Seneca. Joan’s desperate plea at 5.4.74–5

*Joan:* It was Alençon that enjoyed my love.

*York:* Alençon! That notorious Machiavel!

York appears to echo Innocent Gentillet’s attack on Machiavelli *Contre-Machiavel* (1576) which had been dedicated to the Duke of Alençon. The English translation of Gentillet did not appear until 1602. The playwright also appears to allude to William Averell’s *A Mervalous Combat of Contrarietie* (1588) at 2.3.58, “How can these contrarieties agree?” and to Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* I–III (1589) at 1.1.124 “Here, there, and everywhere, enrag’d he flew” but the direction of borrowing is not fully established in either case. Other possible allusions include Agrippa, (d. 1535) *Of the Variety and Uncertainty of Artes and Sciences* (translated by Sanford, 1569) at *I Henry VI*.1.2.1–2, and Froissart (d. 1410) *Chroniques* (translated by Berner, 1523–25) at 1.2.29

**Orthodox Dating**

Almost all scholars agree that *I Henry VI* was written in the early 1590s: Chambers and Bullough proposed 1591; Cairncross and Hammond preferred 1590; more recent editors (e.g. Wells & Taylor, Knowles, Burns, Cox & Rasmussen, Jowett and Michael Taylor) follow Dover Wilson, in assigning the later date of 1592. Vickers suggests that Act 1 was written by Nashe c. 1592 (after 2, 3, *Henry VI*) and that Shakespeare added Acts 2–5 c. 1594. Hattaway, however, believes the play was written just after the Armada, c. 1588–9. Honigmann argues that the play was composed in 1588. Wiggins dates the play to 1592, ascribing much of it to Kyd and parts of Act 1 to Nashe. He claims that after 1594, when the play had passed from Strange’s Men to the Chamberlain’s Men, Shakespeare added various scenes to anticipate the two plays he had already written on *Henry VI* (III: 161-2). Thus Shakespeare was merely a reviser of another play.

**Internal Orthodox Evidence**

*I Henry VI* is one of the four Shakespeare plays to be written completely in verse (the others are *3 Henry VI*, *King John* and *Richard II*) and 314 lines are in pentameter rhymes, thus rhyme approximates to 10% of the lines in the play. Plays that are considered to be in the dramatist’s late period contain more prose. Rhyming couplets are generally used to indicate the end of a scene and in the three scenes (4.5, 4.6 & 4.7) involving Talbot and his son John, (historically a middle-aged man). These scenes (4.5.160) are composed in rhyming couplets, and have the quality of a poem or ballad, which has been inserted into the play. Some commentators believe these speeches are not Shakespearean (or perhaps not worthy of Shakespeare).

The few speeches by lower-class characters in *I Henry VI* are in blank verse, unlike *2 Henry VI* where there are 171 speeches in prose, especially in the Cade Rebellion scenes. In the *King Henry IV* plays, Falstaff speaks in prose; Prince Hal speaks both verse and prose; while King Henry IV, who is exalted and traditional, speaks in verse.

Lastly, *I Henry VI* has the lowest number of feminine endings in the Shakespeare canon, at 8%. Feuillerat and others have identified this
versification marker as a highly predictive indicator of chronology, the lowest being the earliest. This would make *I Henry VI* Shakespeare’s first play. Of course, if the play was co-authored, revised or both, then these tests have little reliability.

**External Orthodox Evidence**

Opinion has been divided as to whether Shakespeare was using *I Henry VI* to refer directly to contemporary situations in Elizabeth’s reign. Some believe that the situations are only general analogous to events in France or Ireland or to the person of Elizabeth herself. Other commentators have compared Henry VI’s attempts (and failure) to retain his father’s conquests in France with Elizabeth’s attempts to hold lands in Ireland. Highley (42–3) compares Talbot’s death due to factionalism within the conqueror community with the rivalry in Dublin between the New and Old English groupings, as lamented by Sir Henry Wallop in 1585.

Bullough outlines parallels between events in the play and English campaigns in France and the Netherlands 1590–92 (developed in detail by Leah Marcus). A small army under Willoughby was successful in Normandy in 1590. Sir John Norris was sent with another force to Brittany in 1591 and Essex left with an army to besiege Rouen 1591–2. He notes that the play depicting gallant English deeds in a divided France and featuring various sieges would have been topical until Essex’s recall in partial disgrace in April 1591. A hand-written account, *Journal of the Siege of Rouen*, was quickly produced (probably by Sir Thomas Coningsby) and might have provided background details.

**Internal Oxfordian Evidence**

Ogburn notes that York’s contemptuous reference to “Alençon! That notorious Machiavel!” seems to resonate less with the character of Alençon in the play (who is simply pro-French) and more with François, Duke of Anjou and Alençon, suitor to Elizabeth (c. 1579–81) who was subsequently believed to be responsible for the French Fury at Antwerp in 1583. The attack on Antwerp provoked widespread condemnation and Alençon was said to have acted from selfish, cynical motives. Such a reference would have gradually lost relevance after Alençon’s death in 1584.

Ogburn constructs a further argument in favour of an earlier date from insights given by J. Enoch Powell. Powell noted that, “the relish and verve with which Shakespeare’s characters speak **Pierce Penniless** (1592), Nashe was indicating that chronicle history plays were well established:

First, for the subject of them, (for the most part) it is borrowed out of our English chronicles, wherein our forefathers’ valiant acts (that have lain long buried in rusty brass and worm-eaten books) are revived, and they themselves raised from the grave of oblivion, and brought to plead their aged honors in open presence; than which, what can be a sharper reproof to these degenerate effeminate days of ours?

Since Nashe also seems to refer to *I Henry VI*, Oxfordians deduce that the play was also well established by 1592 and not newly composed. Ribner believes that only a small number of history plays (none of which was Shakespeare’s) had been performed on stage by 1592, the publication date of *Pierce Penniless*; however, few plays on Ribner’s list were derived from the Chronicles: Legge’s *Ricardius Tertius* (a play in Latin, which is only known to have been performed in Cambridge in 1579), Peele’s *Jack Straw* (1587–90), the anonymous *True Tragedy of Richard the Third* (1588–90), Peele’s *Edward I* (1590–1) Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1591) and the anonymous *Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* (1588) and *1, 2 Troublesome Raigne of King John* (1588–89). Therefore, Oxfordians have argued, Nashe must have been referring to Shakespeare’s Henry VI plays in the above passage.

**Oxfordian Date**

Oxfordians believe that the play dates to c. 1587 as one of Oxford’s later history plays. It depends on the assimilation of a very wide range of sources (not necessarily including the *Journal of the Siege of Rouen*) which Oxfordians believe would have been available to Edward de Vere but not to a dramatist newly arrived in London. Similarly, the author’s use of Plutarch and the Geneva Bible also link with Oxford, who bought an expensive French translation of Plutarch along with a Geneva Bible in 1569. They further argue that in
the language of ambition, intrigue and policy is not synthetic or theoretical – it could only be drawn from the experience of political struggle.” Powell illustrated his points with quotations from 1 Henry VI. Since this play is usually taken to be earlier than William Shakespeare of Stratford was ever known to have been in court, it is argued that 1 Henry VI was the work of someone with inside knowledge of court machinations, hence Oxford. 2 Ogburn believes that play reflects the intrigues surrounding the Queen in the 1580s but, were not nearly so pressing in the 1590s.

**External Oxfordian Evidence**

Oxfordians find support for a date soon after 1586, as this was the year when Edward de Vere began to receive his £1000 annuity granted him by the Queen (Nelson, 300–2). It has been proposed that this payment was for the anonymous composition and performance of patriotic drama while England prepared for the Spanish Armada. 1 Henry VI would be particularly relevant in 1586–7, to try to unify the English against a common foreign enemy.

Eva Turner Clark agrees that the play was probably a collaboration and inclines towards 1587, linking the play both with Sir Philip Sidney and with Mary Queen of Scots. She notes that the play begins with the extended mourning for Henry V, mirroring the laments after the death of Sidney. A further parallel can be adduced from Sidney’s complaint about the lack of money and supplies for his campaigns with the messenger’s speech in 1.1 about the loss of Paris and Rouen. Similarly, the execution of Mary Queen of Scots (8 Feb 1587) aroused much controversy and it has been suggested that Shakespeare dramatised the execution of Joan, as both expedient and deserved, to support the judgment passed on Mary; Oxford was one of the commissioners at her trial (Nelson, 302). The analogy with Mary Queen of Scots would have been most apposite in the years leading up to her trial and execution in 1587.

Leah Marcus (not an Oxfordian) has also explored the resemblance between Joan in the play and Elizabeth as shown in her public persona. Shakespeare greatly developed Joan’s historical importance, perhaps to draw comparisons with Elizabeth. Both were women in roles traditionally reserved for men; both claimed divine guidance. Both were praised excessively by their followers and vilified by their enemies. Oxfordians argue that for a dramatist to make such an obvious portrayal of the Queen would have required official authorisation and that the comparison would have been diminishing in importance by the 1590s.

**Conclusion**

1 Henry VI (as printed in the First Folio) can be dated any time between 1577 (the publication of the first edition of Holinshed) and 1592, when Nashe mentioned in Pierce Penniless that Talbot’s fighting prowess had been depicted on stage.

**Notes**

1. Winifred Frazer (N&Q, 236, 1991, 34–5) noted that plays are sometimes marked “ne” twice and so could hardly be ‘new’ second time around. Foakes and Rickert (Henslowe’s Diary, 2003 xxxiv, 2nd ed) have suggested that the phrase means ‘newly licensed’. Neil Carson in A Companion to Henslowe’s Diary (2004: 68) has considered the subject at length but concludes: “All such speculation is unverifiable.”

2. J. E. Powell kept copious correspondence on the Shakespeare Authorship Question, which is now held at Churchill College, Cambridge. In the Independent newspaper of 11 February 1998, Douglas Johnson (Professor of Modern History at Birmingham University) wrote further to the obituary by Patrick Cosgrave and Professor Denis Kavanagh, 9 February:

Enoch Powell was still opposition spokesman on defence matters when I invited him to lecture at Birmingham University . . . . When we reached the house on Edgbaston Park Road which bore the sign “Shakespeare Institute”. “What’s this?” he hissed at me, with noticeable disapproval. After I had explained, he became scathing. “You don’t believe in the boy from Stratford, do you?” He was transformed. There was a wild gleam in his eyes, he gesticulated, and quotations from the plays poured out, each one demonstrating that the author was a statesman with experience of power rather than “the boy from Stratford”.

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