

**William Shakespeare**

*The First Part of Henry the Sixth*

**Santa Cruz Shakespeare 2020**



King Henry VI by Unknown English artist. Oil on panel, circa 1540.  
NPG 2457 © National Portrait Gallery, London

**Dramaturgy Resources**  
**prepared by Ariane Helou**

## BEFORE THE PLAY BEGINS

Several years before the events of the play, King Henry V led a military campaign in France. It was the latest phase of the Hundred Years' War, a multigenerational conflict between the royal families of England and France over their rival claims to the French throne. Henry V's major victory at the Battle of Agincourt, and subsequent marriage to a French princess, resulted in large swaths of French territory coming under English rule.

Now Henry V has died; his son, the future King Henry VI, is too young to govern. His uncles rule the two parts of the kingdom in his place: the Duke of Bedford as Regent of France, and the Duke of Gloucester as Lord Protector of England. The absence of a powerful king in England has created an opportunity for the French to reclaim the lands that Henry V had seized.

Meanwhile, tensions are rising between two branches of England's royal dynasty, each with a competing claim on the throne: the House of Lancaster and the House of York.

## IN THIS DOCUMENT

A brief overview of the **context** of the play (p. 2), including short summaries of its two central conflicts: the **Hundred Years' War** (p. 2) and the **War of the Roses** (p. 3).

A **"Who's Who"** of the main characters (p. 5), with some context about their roles in the play and their historical counterparts.

And in a separate document in our Google Drive folder, some wonderfully detailed **family trees** from *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays* (edited by Michael Hattaway, Cambridge UP, 2002). This is a terrific resource, and you can download the book for free: <https://b-ok.cc/book/907861/0d065b>.

## THE CONTEXT OF THE PLAY

*The First Part of Henry the Sixth* kicks off a tetralogy of plays about **the War of the Roses**, a generational conflict between two branches of the Plantagenet dynasty—the Yorks and the Lancasters—over the succession to the throne of England. That's the large-scale narrative that we see play out across the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*. In *1 Henry VI*, we see the York-Lancaster conflict unfurling against the backdrop of **the Hundred Years' War**, a dispute between the ruling families of England (Plantagenets) and France (Valois) over their rival claims to the French throne.

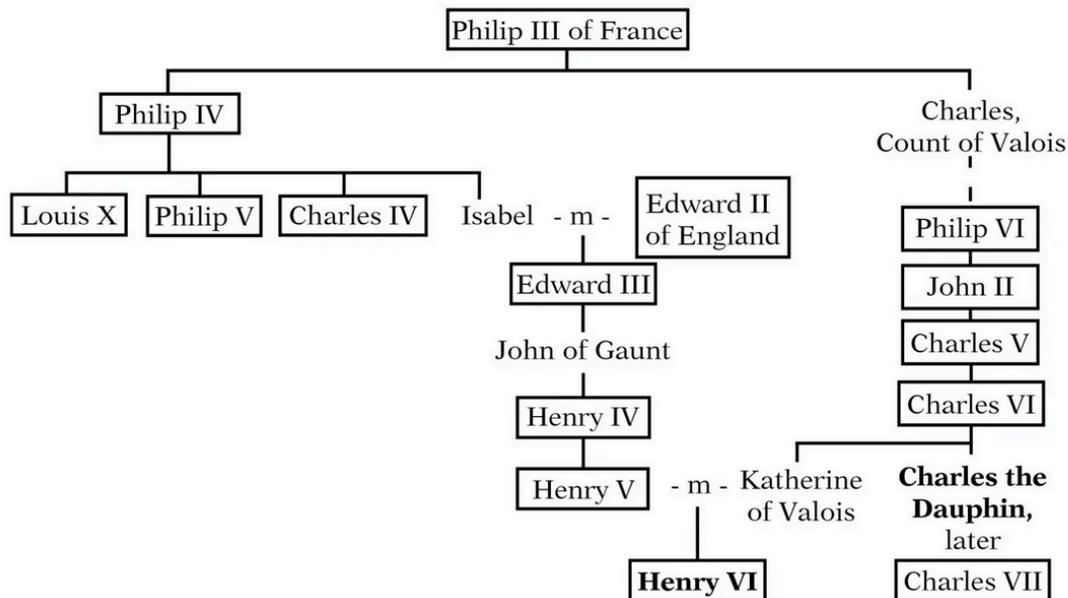
So there are two central conflicts in *1 Henry VI*: the war between England and France, and the war within England. The England of this play is threatened both externally, by the French claim to territories it controls, and internally by its warring political factions. These developing clashes, and the tension between them, drive the play's narrative. **In sum, what's at stake is England's power and its emergent national identity, both on the international**

stage (as England struggles to maintain a foothold on the Continent) and within its own borders (as the York-Lancaster rivalry threatens destabilization). The latter continues to be at stake through the rest of the tetralogy.

It's impossible to give a comprehensive coverage of either of these major political upheavals with just a couple of paragraphs, but here's a basic overview to get us started.

### THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR (1337 – 1453)

As the name states, this war lasted for over a century, with five generations of English kings going to battle over their claims to rule France. The inciting incident was the death of Charles IV of France in 1328; he died without a son or heir. His sister Isabel was married to Edward II of England. Their son, Edward III, stated his claim to the French throne as the nearest in the line of succession to the king of France. (See the family tree below.) The problem: in 1316, **French law had ruled that women could not inherit the throne and that succession could not pass through the female line.** (The legal precedent went back to the Salic Law established by Clovis I, King of the Franks, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. If you remember your *Henry V*, this is the subject of Canterbury's epic speech in Act 1, Scene 2. But that law was not formally invoked in the context of royal succession until the 14<sup>th</sup> century.) The English Plantagenet claim to the French throne was rejected by Edward's cousin, Philip of Valois, a descendant of King Philip III of France on the *male* line. The French declared him the rightful king, and he was crowned Philip VI.



Source: <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/henry-vi-part-1/graphic-englands-claim-to-france/>

For over a hundred years, the Plantagenet and Valois houses warred over their claims to French lands and rule. Periods of conflict alternated with stretches of peace. A truce of over 20 years ended with Henry V's campaign into France and his major victory at Agincourt in 1415 (the subject of Shakespeare's *Henry V*). This introduced a period of English supremacy; Henry V married a Valois princess, and much French territory, including the province of Normandy, came under English rule. It was decreed that Henry and Catherine's heir would rule England and France.

But Henry V's victory was short-lived. He died in 1422, and his heir, the future Henry VI, was still an infant. The death of the old French king, and the power vacuum in England during Henry VI's minority, created an opportunity for a French resurgence. **That is where *The First Part of Henry the Sixth* begins**, though it plays fast and loose with the historical timeline. The historical Henry VI was less than a year old when his father died, and six years passed between the death of Henry V and the ascendancy of Joan of Arc and Charles VII (the siege of Orléans, where Joan led the French troupes to victory, took place in 1428 – 1429). Shakespeare's play ages Henry VI by some years, imagining that he is an adolescent by the time of these events, and compressing the time that passed between the death of Henry V and the siege of Orléans.

After the siege of Orléans, England made fewer incursions into France; by 1453, Rouen and Bordeaux had been reclaimed by the French. (Again, the play collapses the timeline, giving us the sense that the battles of Orléans, Rouen, and Bordeaux happened around the same time, while in reality they took place over the span of about twenty years.) England still held Calais, but no other Continental territory. The Hundred Years' War came to an end shortly before the War of the Roses erupted, and that continued conflict was in part responsible for preventing England's continued incursions into France. But England held onto the *idea* of France for centuries more; as historian Peter Ackroyd notes, "Only in the nineteenth century did the English throne renounce its claim to the French crown."<sup>1</sup>

### THE WAR OF THE ROSES (1455 – 1483)

Like the Hundred Years' War, the War of the Roses was not a single conflict, but a series of battles over the course of decades. But the origins of the conflict precede those dates by a couple of generations. It starts, in fact, with King Edward III (the English king who made the claim for the French throne that kicked off the Hundred Years' War). The rival factions of the War of the Roses descend from two of Edward III's younger sons: the House of York from Edmund Langley, 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of York (1341 – 1402), and the House of Lancaster from John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster (1340 – 1399). (See the family trees from the *Cambridge Companion*.) John of Gaunt was the father of Henry Bolingbroke, who deposed his cousin King Richard II and succeeded him as Henry IV. At the outset of *1 Henry VI*, the Lancasters rule; over the course of the play, Richard Plantagenet, grandson of the first Duke of York,

---

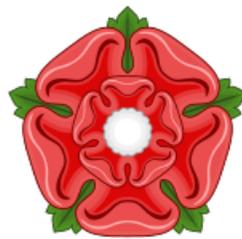
<sup>1</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Foundation: The History of England*, Vol. 1 (Macmillan, 2011), p. 609 (page numbers are from the e-book edition, which you can download for free: <https://b-ok.cc/book/1293426/d95ef0>).

learns about his family's political history from his uncle Mortimer. The discovery that his line may also have a claim on the throne motivates his actions for the rest of the trilogy, and his son eventually ascends to power as Richard III. The Lancastrians seized power back when Henry Tudor defeated Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth field and was subsequently crowned King Henry VII. Henry VII then married Elizabeth of York, uniting the two houses and establishing the Tudor dynasty.

The name "War of the Roses" comes from the heraldic symbol of each branch of the family: a white rose for the House of York, a red rose for the House of Lancaster. In *1 Henry VI*, the scene in the Temple Garden (Act 2, Scene 4) dramatizes the origins of the conflict, as the English nobility declare their allegiance to York (led by Richard Plantagenet) or Lancaster (led by the Duke of Somerset) by picking either white or red roses.



The white rose of York



The red rose of Lancaster

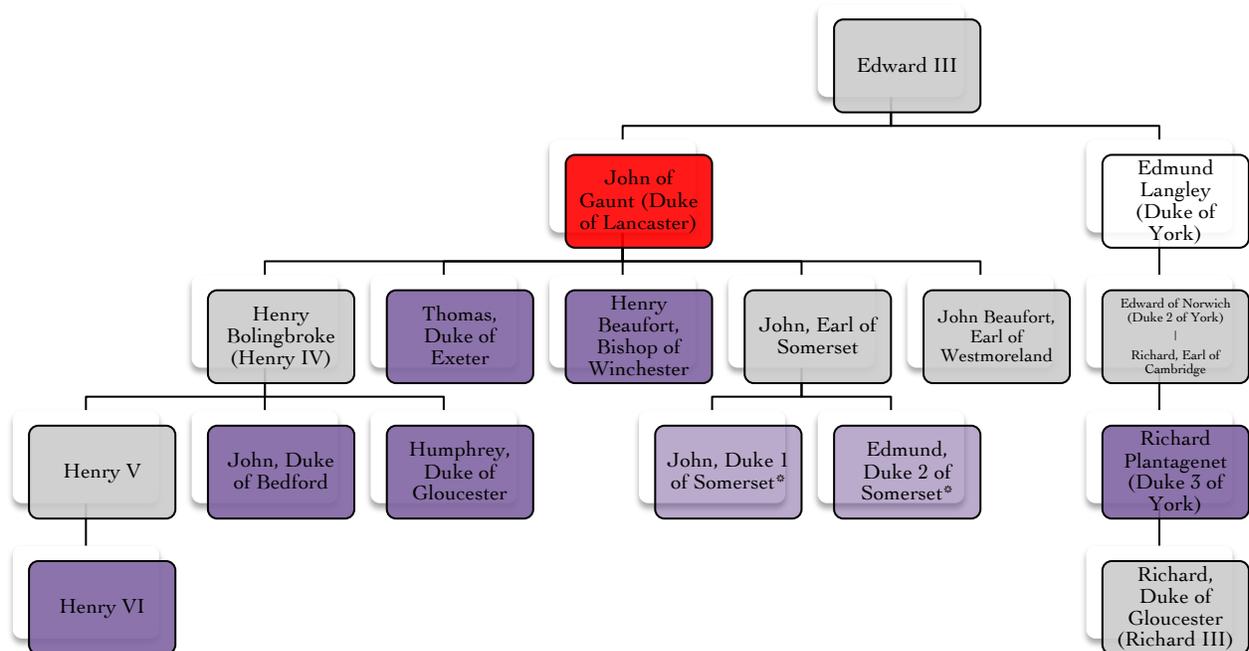


The bicolor Tudor rose

## WHO'S WHO

The spellings and titles below are from the Folger online edition, which is the basis for our script. The biographical information comes primarily from the Oxford edition of the play, edited by Michael Taylor, and from the *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, edited by Michael Hattaway.

### THE ENGLISH



Here is a vastly simplified family tree. The characters who appear in this play are in purple.  
(\*The two historical Somersets form a composite character in the play.)

**KING HENRY VI.** The only son and heir of Henry V and Catherine of Valois (1421-1471).

The historical Henry VI was only nine months old when his father died in 1422.

Shakespeare takes artistic license with the chronology, so the young king is an older child at the time of his father's death and has reached marriageable age by the end of this play. The historical Henry VI married **MARGARET OF ANJOU** in 1445, when he was 24 years old and she was about 15. He was deposed by Edward IV in 1461 and restored to the throne in 1470. (He also appears in *2H6* and *3H6*, which dramatize the later events of his reign; we see his funeral procession in *R3*, Act 1 Scene 2.)

**LORD TALBOT, AFTERWARDS EARL OF SHREWSBURY.** Talbot (1388? – 1453) was a renowned soldier, and this play showcases him as a heroic figure. Shakespeare’s contemporary, Thomas Nashe—who some scholars think may have contributed to writing some parts of *1 Henry VI*—wrote in 1592:

How would it have joyed brave *Talbot* (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lynes two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, and have his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least (at several times), who, in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding.<sup>2</sup>

**JOHN TALBOT, HIS SON.** The elder Talbot had two sons named John. The eldest, from his first marriage, succeeded him as the second Earl of Shrewsbury; but the John Talbot of this play is likely Talbot’s son with his second wife. He held the title Viscount Lisle, and died fighting alongside his father at the Battle of Castillon (the final conflict of the Hundred Years’ War) in 1453. (Incidentally, John Talbot’s mother—the second wife of Talbot *père*—was Margaret Beauchamp, daughter of the EARL OF WARWICK.

**DUKE OF GLOUCESTER, THE KING’S UNCLE, AND LORD PROTECTOR.** Given name: Humphrey of Lancaster (1391 – 1447). Youngest son of Henry IV. “Lord Protector” is a title that gives him powers akin to, but not equal to, Regent. After the death of Henry V, while Henry VI was still a minor, Gloucester was responsible for overseeing things in England while his older brother **BEDFORD** governed France. Gloucester’s story continues in *2 Henry VI*. (He also appears in *2H4* and *H5*.)

**DUKE OF BEDFORD, THE KING’S UNCLE, AND REGENT OF FRANCE.** Given name: John of Lancaster (1389 – 1435). A younger brother of Henry V, who served as Regent, that is, governor in place of the king. His job is not only to govern England’s French territories, but to keep those lands under English control. The historical Bedford oversaw the trial and execution of Joan of Arc. (He also appears in *1-2H4*.)

**DUKE OF EXETER, THE KING’S GREAT-UNCLE.** Given name: Thomas Beaufort (d. 1427). He is, like most of the Henry VI’s older male relatives, another one of the King’s guardians. Exeter was an illegitimate son of John of Gaunt. Gaunt had several children with his mistress, Catherine Swynford, all of whom had the name Beaufort. The Beauforts were legitimized after Gaunt and Swynford married in 1396, but were not eligible to inherit the throne. (He also appears in *H5*. The Exeter in *3H6* is a different guy. Cairncross suggests that Shakespeare may have played this role, although he doesn’t specify whether he means the Exeter of *1H6*, or of *H5*, or both.)

---

<sup>2</sup> From Thomas Nashe, “The defence of Playes,” part of a pamphlet titled *Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the Divell* (1592). Quoted in *The Norton Shakespeare*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 3322. The editors note that “the Tragedian” Nashe mentions may have been Richard Burbage, who is thought to have originated the role of Talbot.

**CARDINAL, BISHOP OF WINCHESTER, THE KING’S GREAT-UNCLE.** Given name: Henry Beaufort (d. 1447). Another of John of Gaunt’s illegitimate children, and brother of **EXETER**. He was an extremely powerful and wealthy high-ranking church official, “the type of unscrupulous, ambitious Roman Catholic prelate whom sixteenth-century Protestant audiences in the London theater loved to hate.”<sup>3</sup> He was promoted from Bishop to Cardinal in 1426. In this play, Winchester is at political odds with his nephew **GLOUCESTER** (see in particular Act 3, Scene 1). (He also appears in *2 Henry VI*.)

**DUKE OF SOMERSET.** Shakespeare takes some historical license here and conflates two different characters: John Beaufort, first Duke of Somerset (1403 – 1444), and his younger brother Edmund (1406 – 1455), who inherited his title after the former’s death. In this play, Somerset is the major antagonist of **RICHARD PLANTAGENET**, and their conflict sparks the division into Team Lancaster (Somerset) and Team York (Plantagenet) in Act 2, Scene 4. (He also appears in *2 Henry VI*. The Somerset in *3H6* is a different guy.)

**RICHARD PLANTAGENET, LATER DUKE OF YORK, AND REGENT OF FRANCE.** As noted above, Plantagenet (1411 – 1460) was descended from the first Duke of York, who was the fifth son of Edward III; on the maternal side, the Mortimer line, he is descended from Edward III’s third son Lionel, Duke of Clarence. Some of Plantagenet’s backstory is revealed in conversation with his uncle **MORTIMER** in Act 2, Scene 5, in particular that his father Richard, Earl of Cambridge had been executed by Henry V (dramatized in *H5*, Act 2, Scene 2). **KING HENRY VI** grants Richard the title Duke of York in Act 3, Scene 1. Richard is convinced of the rightness of his claim to the throne; the name Plantagenet, used by the English ruling family since the reign of Henry II in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, “is an attempt to give himself an aura of royal legitimacy.”<sup>4</sup> (He also appears in *2-5 Henry VI*.)

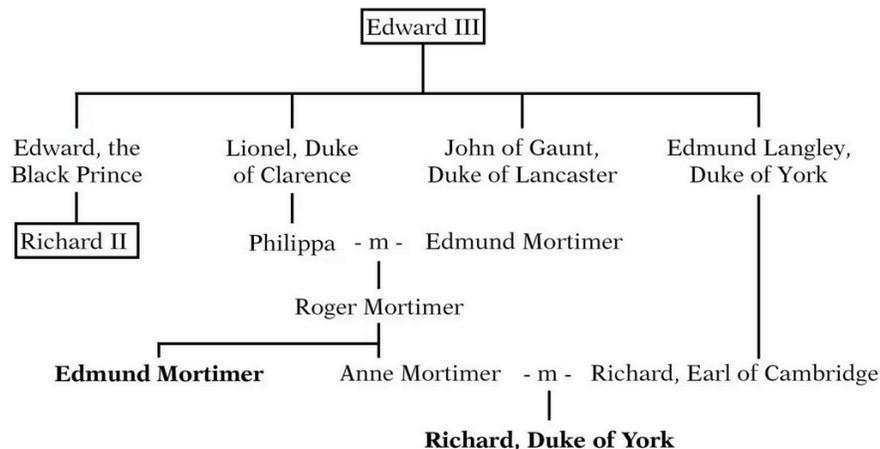


Image source: <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/henry-vi-part-1/graphic-ancestry-of-richard-plantagenet-duke-of-york/>

<sup>3</sup> Michael Taylor, ed., *Henry VI, Part 1* (The Oxford Shakespeare; London: Oxford University Press, 2003), 91.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, p. 92

**EARL OF WARWICK.** Another conflation of two historical people: Richard de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick (1382 – 1439), and his son-in-law Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick (1428 – 1471). Beauchamp is the primary source for the character as he appears in *1 Henry VI*, whereas the Warwick of *2 Henry VI* is based more on Neville. The historical Beauchamp was responsible for educating the young Henry VI. In this play, his primary function is as an ally of **RICHARD PLANTAGENET**, with whom he sides against **SOMERSET**.

**EARL OF SALISBURY.** Given name: Thomas de Montague or Montacute (1388 – 1428). He was a military leader under Henry V, and by the time of this play he is, like **TALBOT**, a renowned and able soldier. (The Salisbury in *2H6* is a different guy.)

**EARL OF SUFFOLK, WILLIAM DE LA POLE.** (1396 – 1450.) Another veteran of Henry V's wars. Made Duke of Suffolk after the events of this play, in 1448. In this play, we see him arrange the marriage of **HENRY VI** and **MARGARET OF ANJOU**; attraction to Margaret seems to be his principal motivation, but Suffolk is also in favor of peace with France. (He also appears in *2 Henry VI*.)

**EDMUND MORTIMER, EARL OF MARCH.** He was Richard Plantagenet's uncle, the fifth Earl of March (1391 – 1425); this character may also be a conflation of other Mortimers (his uncle the third Earl of March, who appears in *1H4*, and/or his cousin Sir John Mortimer, executed in 1424). Mortimer reveals to his nephew some of their family's complicated political history, which is one of the motivations for Plantagenet's actions in this play and its sequels. Mortimer's retrospection is also part of the play's broader sense of nostalgia for the reign of Henry V: "Jailed, lame, old, and dying, Mortimer in this play joins Bedford, Salisbury, and Talbot as a representative of a disappearing heroic past."<sup>5</sup>

**SIR WILLIAM GLANSDALE** and **SIR THOMAS GARGRAVE** are soldiers and allies of **SALISBURY**. They die in battle with him.

**SIR JOHN FASTOLF.** Although the Folio spells his name "Falstaffe," he is definitely not that guy (not least because Falstaff dies in the first act of *Henry V*). Fastolf (ca. 1378 – 1459) was an English nobleman who assisted **BEDFORD** in governing France during the minority of **HENRY VI**, and was appointed governor of the French provinces of Anjou and Maine in 1423. Fastolf led the English troops to a decisive defeat at the Battle of Patay in 1429; the Tudor chroniclers who recounted those events blamed Fastolf for his cowardice, and Shakespeare follows their lead in his characterization of Fastolf.

**SIR WILLIAM LUCY.** In 1435 he was the Sheriff of Warwickshire (a local officer appointed by the Crown). Taylor notes that the chroniclers do not mention his presence in France during the events dramatized in this play.

**WOODVILLE, LIEUTENANT OF THE TOWER OF LONDON.** Richard Woodville (d. 1441) was a supporter of Winchester, and was Team Lancaster. He was the grandfather of

---

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, p. 93.

Elizabeth Woodville, who would go on to marry King Edward IV (Team York) in 1464. (She appears in *R5*.)

**VERNON, OF THE WHITE ROSE OR YORK FACTION.** A young nobleman who sides with Plantagenet in the Temple Garden scene (Act 2, Scene 4). He may be loosely based on Sir Richard Vernon (ca. 1390 – 1451), speaker of the Commons in the parliament of 1426.

**BASSET, OF THE RED ROSE OF LANCASTER FACTION.** Basset is a lower-ranking member of the nobility, loyal to Somerset. This character was likely invented for the play, but the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography includes an entry for a Peter Basset (fl. 1415-1437), an English soldier and chronicler who wrote about his experiences fighting in France during the Hundred Years' War.

### THE FRENCH

**CHARLES, DAUPHIN OF FRANCE.** Heir to the French throne (“Dauphin” means “prince”) and the future Charles VII (1403 – 1461). He was the brother of Catherine of Valois, who married Henry V. (Note: the Dauphin in *Henry V* is a different guy, their older brother Louis, who died in 1415. In fact, Charles was fifth in line to the throne, and became heir after the death of his four older brothers.) Their father, Charles VI, died in 1522, the same year as Henry V. The English claimed that Henry VI, then an infant, should rule over both kingdoms, but Charles and his supporters disagreed. Charles retained the title of Dauphin while he and his supporters worked to take the throne until the French victory at Orléans allowed him to claim the throne; **JOAN OF ARC** led him to be crowned at Rheims in 1429.

**JOAN LA PUCELLE, ALSO JOAN OF ARC.** Jeanne d’Arc (1412 – 1431), anglicized as Joan of Arc, was a peasant girl from northeastern France who was instrumental in the French victory in the siege of Orléans. (*Pucelle* is an archaic French word meaning “virgin” or “young girl”; she was popularly known as *la pucelle d’Orléans*, but her family name was d’Arc. However, in English, “pucelle”—often spelled in the Folio as “puzzel”—had a decidedly pejorative slant, meaning something like “slut.” The language that other characters use to describe Joan is full of double entendres that play up the pejorative or objectifying sense of her name.) Joan claimed that, beginning in her early teens, she had received divine visions of saints who instructed her to ensure the **DAUPHIN** would be crowned king. She eventually succeeded in gaining an audience with the Dauphin in 1429 and persuading him to give her an army. She led the French to victory at Orléans, and the Dauphin was crowned Charles VII in Rheims. The following year, however, she was captured by the Burgundians—a French faction allied with the English—who imprisoned her, transferred her to English custody, and put her on trial for heresy. Joan was convicted and burned at the stake in 1431. She was declared a Catholic martyr in 1456, and canonized as a saint in 1920.

While there is a great deal of art and literature that celebrates Jeanne d’Arc as a folk hero, her treatment in *1 Henry VI* expresses sentiments that are not only anti-French and anti-Catholic, but deeply misogynistic. In some scenes she demonstrates strength and integrity as a warrior, but in others she is vilified. The scene of her performing witchcraft in Act 5 is

problematic, as is her collapse into desperation at her trial. (She is arguably the least consistent character in the play, and some scholars point to this discontinuity as evidence that the play was written collaboratively by multiple authors.)

**REIGNIER, DUKE OF ANJOU AND MAINE, KING OF NAPLES.** René of Anjou (1409-1480) was a towering figure in 15<sup>th</sup>-century France: patron of arts, poet, prince. Over the course of his life held a number of impressive titles (some functional, some honorary), including Count of Piedmont, Count of Provence, Duke of Lorraine, and King of Jerusalem and Aragon. However, as other characters in *1 Henry VI* note, Reignier's impeccably aristocratic credentials did not correspond to great wealth. He is the father of **MARGARET OF ANJOU**, who marries **KING HENRY VI**.

**MARGARET, HIS DAUGHTER.** Margaret (1430 – 1482), a major character throughout the tetralogy, is introduced at the end of *Part I*. Her marriage to **HENRY VI** is engineered by **SUFFOLK**, who became Margaret's political ally and, in Shakespeare's version of events, her paramour. In fact, Suffolk stood in for the King at the marriage, which was conducted by proxy while Margaret was still in France. (She also appears in *2-3H6* and *R3*, the only character to have a speaking role in all for plays.)

**DUKE OF ALANSON.** The historical Jean II d'Alençon (1409 – 1476) fought in the Hundred Years' War as a teenager. In 1424 he was captured by the English and imprisoned; he sold all his lands in order to buy his ransom. Freed in 1429, he quickly became an ally and supporter of **JOAN OF ARC**. Alanson in the play is similarly devoted to Joan.

**BASTARD OF ORLEANCE.** Given name: Jean, Count of Dunois (d. 1468). A cousin of Charles the Dauphin, and, as the name suggests, the illegitimate son of the Duke of Orléans.

**DUKE OF BURGUNDY.** The historical Philip, Duke of Burgundy (1396 – 1467), also known as Philip the Good, supported the English; Henry V had named him co-regent of France, alongside **BEDFORD**. In this play, Burgundy reverts his loyalty to France because he is so impressed by **JOAN OF ARC**. The historical Burgundy did also abandon the English cause, but not until 1435; in fact, it was his supporters who captured, tried, and executed Joan in 1431. (He also appears in *H5*.)

**COUNTESS OF AUVERGNE.** Not based on a historical figure; this is an episode that seems to have been invented for the play, rather than taken from one of the chronicles. (There was also a real Countess of Auvergne, or rather several; at the time of the siege of Orléans, it was Marie I, whose reign began in 1424 and who would have been in her mid-50s.)