Destabilizing Shakespeare: Reimagining Character Design in 1 Henry VI

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Destabilizing Shakespeare:
Reimagining Character Design in 1 Henry VI

A Thesis Submitted to
the Department of Student-Designed Interdisciplinary
Majors and Minors
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree in
Costume Design

by
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May 2021
Acknowledgements

I could not have poured my soul into the following pages had it not been for the inspiration and support I was blessed with from an innumerable amount of individuals and organizations, friends and strangers.

First and foremost, I would like to extend the depths of my gratitude to my advisor, mentor, costume-expert-wizard and great friend, Sabrina Notarfrancisco. The value of her endless faith and encouragement, even when I was ready to dunk every garment into the trash bin, cannot be understated. I promise to crash next year’s course with lots of cake.

To my readers, Lina Wilder and Denis Ferhatovic - I can’t believe anyone would read this much of something I wrote. Your commitment and feedback strengthened all my intentions, and gave me new force to continue pursuing my interests.

Brooke, if Shakespeare needs to write a new play about a hilarious set of identical twins I’m sure we’re first in line. Thank you for being my personal driver, second pair of eyes, mask holder, and occasional pin cushion.

Lastly, it would be impossible for me to list all the small and large moments that filled me with the passion that created this and continues to light me. Standing in the pouring rain on a week night show with a dozen other students, watching *Henry IV Part 1* at *The Globe* while an autumn storm blew around us. Walking back into the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse after intermission of *Richard III* to find the theatre darker and the air smelling like birthday candles as the light drew into the second act. Sitting on the porch alone, watching *The Show Must Go Online* as the words fill the silence and drift away into the night. All these offered threads I happily followed, and continue to chase after until I can catch them again.
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Forward: Why Shakespeare?

The goal of this thesis is to examine the destabilizing potential of costume design in shifting the cultural construction of how we view Shakespeare – both the canon of plays and the imagined Shakespearean world. To do this, I have divided this thesis into three parts: the first part provides background information about various performance conventions for *1 Henry VI* and the medieval fantasy genre, the second part addresses my production concept, and the third part showcases my final design ideas, which includes three realized costume designs and corresponding exhibition. First, however, I must retrace and explain: why Shakespeare? In many ways, his plays and characters speak to me on a level that is astounding despite the centuries in between. Yet at the same time, I can’t ignore the moments of racism, sexism, and homophobia, as well as narratives of colonialism, whiteness, and masculinity that saturate each and every work. Why this body of work should (or shouldn’t) still be in performance today, is far from my own internal struggles but a hot topic for debate amongst academics, theatrical companies, performers, and audience members alike. Widely heralded as the great universal playwright – speaking to all people at all times – Shakespeare plays and performances have long remained veiled by a troubling exclusivity that is getting harder to ignore. Even despite recent press coverage over balanced or inclusive casting, societal notions of what Shakespeare is and what performance should look like continue to remain detrimental to the creative potential behind the text. If nobody holds a copyright on his works, then why does it still feel like a certain group owns him?

Shakespeare – meaning simultaneously the man, the plays, the performances; are put on a pedestal as the epitome of ‘high culture’. They are studied in the classroom from middle school onward, and nearly every actor’s essential training tool in drama programs across the country
and around the world view his work as the gold standard of theatrical and literary greatness. As the crown jewel of Western (white) culture, Shakespeare’s plays are allowed to tyrannize anyone they interact with. They are often so much more powerful on their platform of cultural superiority than those who study them. The fantasy of Shakespeare, what his supposed intentions were and the sway of his credited authorship subjects students, performers, directors, and designers to a toxic relationship with a 456-year-old dead guy. Since our first exposure to him in grade school, we’ve all been indoctrinated by the lingering effects of Bardology; a Victorian era worshipping of Shakespeare as the sole expert and source for the human condition. Student complaints that he’s boring are easily dismissible responses that put the fault on that of the learner, not the text itself. If you don’t like, understand, relate to, empathize with or comprehend Shakespeare, then you must be dumb, right? Connecting with Shakespeare can be satisfying, but before indoctrinating future ticket buyers we should first ask ourselves why it’s so difficult to form that connection. Struggle that goes beyond understanding the language may be proof that Shakespeare is not giving today’s students the knowledge they seek, or that his ‘universality’ is simply not speaking to them specifically. The hierarchy which places Shakespeare as the top dog on stages and in classrooms is something that professor Ayanna Thompson, Director of the Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies and President of the Shakespeare Association of America, wishes to shift or “destabilize.”

To destabilize does not mean to destroy, vilify, or denigrate; rather, it means to shift the foundation so that new angles, vantages, and perspectives are created.¹

Thompson argues that in order to make Shakespeare work for us, we need to stop working for Shakespeare. Only through knocking the bard off his pedestal can practitioners, designers, students, and fans interact with the works in a conversation where their needs are prioritized.

Shakespeare’s shadow often blocks out the light of new works, not only because he’s the acclaimed master of all theatrical texts, but because the cultural significance of the canon continues to ensure his domination of the world’s stages, both renowned and regional. The destabilizing process that Thompson outlines above can use this power to empower rather than disempower. While Shakespeare’s plays aren’t inherently relevant (and something we must accept moving forward), theatre artists have the ability to command them as a vehicle for their own voices and concerns – while benefiting from the lucrativeness of tying themselves to the Shakespeare name. Described as the “Burberry of the cultural sector,” it is likely that Shakespeare will continue to find its way onto the stage – at least until its problematic themes are no longer relevant for further discussion in our society.

This is why my thesis chooses to focus not so much on the daunting *why*, but instead on the promising *how* of modern-day Shakespearean performance. After spending the first couple of paragraphs bashing the guy, you may be surprised why I picked *1 Henry VI* at all. For centuries, the imagined world of Shakespearean performance has been controlled by gatekeepers, worshipping the playwright and wielding claims of historical accuracy to reinforce the exclusively that surrounds his body of work. Railing against any challenges to their prejudiced notions of what it is – and what is not “Shakespearean,” this subset of bard fanatics fear a ‘woke’ movement is on its way to cancel their beloved cultural icon, while other audiences –

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3 Dominic Cavendish, in “The Woke Brigade are Close to ‘Canceling’ Shakespeare,” *The Telegraph*, February 9, 2020, reports on his fear that wokeness, which he defines as a social justice mindset, is coming close to killing the
renowned scholars to casual fans of the canon – continue to question the cultural capital freely given to this body of work even when confronted with all of its problems. The current intervention of the theatre industry by the COVID-19 crisis and the Black Lives Matter movement, only served to quicken the long-overdue conversations around how Shakespeare has been weaponized, worshipped, and wielded by the biggest performance venues to the walls of the classroom.

Unable to have these dialogues in person or in the rehearsal room, amidst a global pandemic where virtual platforms have quickly become the standardized means of all social interaction, an increasingly digital engagement with the adaptive legacy of Shakespeare can be observed. Social media sites like Twitter, for example, have contributed to this global reckoning of the playwright’s legacy. Even the most unassuming tweets such as one published by @BuzzFeed which reads “Taylor Swift could have written Romeo and Juliet, but Shakespeare couldn’t have written ‘Blank Space’” are destabilizing enough to cause controversy. In a quick scan of the replies (amongst jokes that the playwright has been really quiet since Taylor entered the scene) are disgruntled users questioning how that could be true given that Shakespeare is studied in every school and Swift only writes ‘tacky love songs’. The tweet by BuzzFeed challenged the idea that Shakespeare is serious, high culture that is forever speaking to the human experience and unrivaled by time. Another powerful online tool in disrupting the authority of Shakespeare is the rarely studied genre of fanfiction. I won’t get into all of that yet, but note that fan works are destabilizing in the ways in which they engage with the text and use it as a catalyst, while prioritizing their own expression in presenting alternate readings of the text.

bard - citing unconventional casting practices and challenges to the author’s authority as key factors in denigrating Shakespeare.

As a result of the interests I’ve described here, my work will respond to the creation of Shakespearean meaning through the displacement of Shakespeare. While he may have spent his time during the bubonic plague writing some top hits, I’ll be spending my Coronavirus quarantine trying to subvert them.

Introduction: Costume Design for Shakespeare

Costume has always been an integral part of performing Shakespeare. One historical account even records that Philip Henslowe, owner of the Rose theatre (where *Henry VI Part 1* was actually first performed in 1592) once shelled out £20 for a single black velvet cloak, while at the same time only paying around £6 on average for each new play. In the original productions, with a few exceptions, the plays most likely would have been performed in clothing that was Elizabethan or Jacobean — even the histories were depicted as happening in the modern day. Since Elizabethans had strict laws in place regarding what people could wear, costumes became identifiable markers of a character’s status and place in society. Performers simply wore what was fashionable for the time, and what was available – often hand-me-downs from the noble classes or donations from the actor’s own closets; easily readable by an audience, even if they were often at odds with the time period in which the play was being set.

Since nearly all original Shakespeare productions would have been performed in modern dress, it may be a bit surprising that today’s costuming standard leans towards a reliance on

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7 Sumptuary laws maintained the social structure by controlling what people of certain classes could wear. If a servant was gifted the clothes of a noble as a form of payment, they might then sell them to the theatre because they could not wear the luxurious clothes themselves. Richard Paul, “Here is a Play Fitted,” Designing Shakespeare, Folger, *Folger Shakespeare Library*, ep.21.
Elizabethan dress and aesthetics. Pumpkin breeches, farthingales, and frilly ruffs are to be expected, and in many cases sought after, as a part of the experience of attending a Shakespearean performance. The less hardcore may instead channel a referential flavor, with character looks that feel historical but are also fashionable to our modern eye, perhaps with some modern accessories playfully thrown in. On the other end of the spectrum, some productions attempt to recreate Elizabethan-era production values by replicating the cosmetics, underpinnings, and other ‘authentic’ costume production and styling practices used during the late 1500s. Although it is not common for theaters to replicate the production practices common during Shakespeare’s day, the ones that do also often experiment with historical rehearsal methods, acting aesthetics, and all-male casting. This illustrates how scholars and laypeople alike continue to be fascinated by the original concepts and intentions behind the plays that were staged during Shakespeare’s lifetime. Yet, the weight of upholding the impossible ideal of ‘historical accuracy’ – and the marketability of claiming authenticity to the source, can burden a production by prioritizing Shakespeare’s ‘intentions’ over how a contemporary audience is connecting with the play.

In order to open possibilities for Shakespeare’s characters and what’s in their closets, I’d suggest putting away the idea that an ‘authentic’ performance can ever be truly achieved. As historically accurate a recreation may feel it will consistently be met with a historically inaccurate audience. Early modern plays like Shakespeare’s were performed in specific conditions in their own moment, carrying specific cultural assumptions meant to engage

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8 This is dependent on the theatre, audience, and period of performance. For example, the production photo archives of the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon from 1960-2019 reveal only 30% of shows are performed in some form of Elizabethan, Jacobean or Medieval dress. However, 68% of history plays are performed in this specific set of historical costumes. Interestingly, The American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia features Elizabethan/Jacobean/Medieval costumes in 54% of its productions with an astounding 88% for the history plays. From “Past RSC Productions,” Royal Shakespeare Company, 2021, and “Production Archive,” American Shakespeare Center, 2021, respectively.
audiences of their own particular time⁹. This is not to say that period clothing cannot be a powerful tool in engaging audiences with history and cultural heritage, and it’s important to note that original practice can hinge on different concepts of authenticity¹⁰, the interpretation of which can lead to further critical engagement. That being said, the devotion to building a nostalgic and romanticized past is a crutch that performances often lean on; barring true interrogation and exploration into the world of the play. It’s important also to consider the detriment of having a fixed image of the Shakespearean performance world when considering how clothing may support its exclusivity.

It seems like a certain group owns Shakespeare. Not only in the way that it is cast, not only in the way that it is spoken or how the lines should be broken down - but the way that it can be experienced and the clothing that the cast members should wear.¹¹

Accepting that the conditions of the original performances can never again be replicated, it can benefit the plays to look beyond the context of their own time. One of the costume designer’s jobs in creating these characters onstage is to form a connection between them and the audience, evoking the underlying themes of the play in a way that would connect to their present day lives on an emotional level. Regardless of the spin the production chooses – even if it’s not modern dress, remembering to have a modern perspective can unveil new avenues for how an audience will connect with the play and characters. While audiences may already possess a strong expectation for what Shakespearean costumes look like, the shift in presenting something new challenges these preconceived notions in exciting ways. Costumes have the ability to add

another layer to the text which inspires the audience to extrapolate their own meaning, and start conversations that open possibilities for even further understanding.

While audiences have certain expectations about how Shakespeare should look, they also enter the theatrical space with cultural constructions regarding race and gender, and how they should be presented on stage. The constructed, fluid, and performative nature of identity which entwines much of the canon, is most on display in the costumes chosen for the characters to wear. Theatre can then become a space in which these constructions are explored, exclaimed, or challenged. I will be using three examples from recent Shakespeare productions to illustrate the transformative power of costume in this way.

In 2019, The Royal Shakespeare Company staged a gender-swapped production of the popular play *Taming of the Shrew*, famously misogynistic for both its lack of and treatment towards female characters, which the RSC turned the tables on by inverting both casting and subject. By choosing to cast women in all of the men's roles (a lot) and men in all of the women’s roles (just two), director Justin Audiberet transformed the world of *Shrew* into an imagined 1590s matriarchy, to offer a new perspective on hierarchy, power, and gender. It was then costume designer Hannah Clark’s mission to make sure audiences saw women and men’s roles from a different perspective and to shift their assumptions regarding gender roles. Using the grandiose silhouette of the Elizabethan era, Clark put female characters in corsets and farthingales that provided them with the physical space needed to convey authority, while their rich, heavy textiles further displayed their elevated status. By redefining the popular image of the confining nature of the corset, the cast was able to be empowered by it, “it was like armor. So instead of being a restrictive thing, it was a statement of power to the world outside.”

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I’ve discussed how costuming in this time period can be limiting in terms of creating new and more relevant character portrayals, these designs do the opposite by enhancing the dominance of women within the world that this production was reconceived. Clark’s costumes convey power through in the strength of her understructures and design choices which subvert the trope of the softly dressed submissive woman in many of Shakespeare’s plays.

An additional challenge that designers of Shakespeare face is more logistical, namely how to help an audience differentiate a vast multitude of characters amongst complex and often hard to follow dialogue. Most Shakespearean plays, (the histories in particular), present a whole cast of characters, and most production companies opt to cast actors in multiple roles to alleviate the need for a gigantic ensemble. Providing an audience with clues in the character design, particularly modern references, can reveal plot and dynamics, distinguish characters, as well as shape relevancy and connection. The primary need to make the text clear to an audience can present a window for bold design choices. “Subtlety is key, guys.” joked designer Grace Smart,
in a 2019 Instagram post\textsuperscript{13} below a photo unveiling a sneak peak of her designs for \textit{Henry VI}/\textit{Richard III} at The Globe Theatre. For much of the play, Smart dressed the warring houses of York and Lancaster in sports gear displaying their names and allegiances quite obviously. Not only was this decision profoundly helpful to the audience, but it also shows the infinite adaptability of Shakespeare characters to new time periods and contexts. Not to mention this choice also presents a new perspective on the themes of war and opposition that the play deals in.

\begin{figure}[h]
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Lastly, The Globe’s \textit{Henry V}, a play which is perhaps most cited when discussing Shakespeare as a tool for imperialism and colonialism, is led by actress Sarah Amankwah as the play’s namesake and king of England. By centering a woman of color in this narrative, the production

\textsuperscript{13} Grace Smart, (@graciesmart), Instagram, October 4, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/graciesmart/?hl=en.
presents audiences with a new vision for the history of a monarchy that they’ve seen played out over and over again. If Shakespeare is to be truly representative of England as a nation, it requires more diversity. Jessica Worrall’s designs for Amankwah place her in the luxurious red color reserved for royalty, and her look also features gold embroidered national symbols to further establish her as England’s ruler and as a part of the cultural heritage onstage in the play.


“Seeing someone like myself playing Prince Hal and Henry V is usually not the norm – it challenges a narrative that people are constantly exposed to” explains Amankwah, for Globe Magazine. The resonance of a black woman wearing this costume and centered in this role,

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“someone who in society is quite invisible” (Amankwah) makes a powerful impact on an audience. To further explain why this is, dramaturg Hailey Bachrach compares this representation to the popular American phenomenon, *Hamilton*.

Reclaiming the founding fathers for actors of colour is, on one level, problematic. For one thing, there is one historical person of colour in the entire narrative… just like August Wilson feared, white history becomes all that exists. But George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and even the once-obscure Alexander Hamilton are more than their literal historical presences. They are myths, edifices, emblems of America. And Hamilton says: this is yours, too. This has always been yours. For England, that’s Shakespeare.¹⁵

This inclusion in a cultural narrative, of which Shakespeare is a useful platform, is a challenge and opportunity that is presented to audiences and designers alike. As there is no single authentic version of how any of the plays should look, theatre presents us with a space to recalibrate, reinvent, and reconnect. Costume design is a significant medium through which these explorations are conveyed to an audience.

**SHAKESPEARE’S HISTORIES**

The play that I’ve selected to design for the purposes of this study is *Henry VI Part 1*, an early play, of which Shakespeare was but a contributor, delves into the foundations of the War of the Roses – featuring some notable persons from the pages of English history books. In order to contextualize this play, I must begin by explaining the subgenre of which it is a part – the Histories. The histories are often intimidating, since they are jam-packed with insider references and historical tidbits that seem to require not only an understanding of the play’s own time period, but also a comprehensive knowledge of Elizabethan England that most audiences simply

don’t have. Although they can be read dry without considerable effort (as all of his plays require), the histories are not, as may be expected, a classroom history lesson to be observationally studied. Shakespeare himself was by no means a historian, nor does he try to disguise himself as one. In fact, the history plays are littered with numerous inaccuracies. It is not unusual for events to be out of sequence, or for twenty years to pass in a single scene, or for characters to live decades after they would have died – these are all accepted parts of the dramatic formula. Yet, the changes Shakespeare makes to the historical narrative run deeper than mere aesthetic restructuring. In a preface to *Henry VI Part I*, professor Michael Hattaway describes the history play as

> A dramatization of historical narrative that seeks to investigate not only the course of past events but the way in which they have now been perceived, to investigate sometimes by idealization and sometimes by demystification the power structures of its chosen period, and to draw parallels between and thereby anatomize, past and present political institutions and social realities.¹⁶

When considering whether or not the histories have something of relevance to give audiences of today, the distinction between history and historical performance must first be considered – although the boundaries are anything but distinct. In Shakespeare’s day, the histories were used to stage stories of the nation’s cultural myths, and can easily be written off as over-the-top patriotism, even to the point of propaganda – something that many of today’s theatergoers might be rightfully skeptical of. While they certainly have contributed to Shakespeare’s legacy as ‘the national poet’, audience members of his own time looking to be entertained by a pageant aimed at preserving the icons of English history may be somewhat disappointed when their dramatic character counterparts don’t measure up. Not to be discounted,

the plays do in many ways preserve the hallowed memories of some of England’s most untouchable heroes, but powerful figures are often invoked in the histories for the purpose of further examination, and there’s something so intriguing about the way they invoke the past to alter and create memory.

It’s somewhat common knowledge that Shakespeare lifted a majority of his plots from other texts, and this is perhaps most true in the histories and through the historical sources he references for plots and characters. Drawing on historical chronicles of the time, Shakespeare used medieval (or other) history to comment on his own time, with a large amount of reorganizing. The focus then becomes not so much on the history itself and its accuracy (or lack thereof), but on the ways in which it is told and being presented. The theatre was a place for people of all social classes to witness history, not just those who could read. Additionally, it was to be engaged within a community setting, where any viewer could develop their own opinions and discuss them with their peers. In a time of expansive social and political change, some Elizabethans were interested in the stability that history could provide to ground their rapidly changing sense of identity. For example, in the political scene of original audiences, Elizabeth I’s lack of an heir was causing a big panic in the public consciousness. As a result, thoughts about lineage and succession would have been quite political and relevant on the stage. For those theatergoers looking to escape their political fears and return to a romanticized past of strong, manly kings and their respectful advisors, Shakespeare’s plays both teased this fantasy and failed to provide it. Instead of presenting a stable history, the instability of Shakespeare’s histories lean into the culture’s current anxieties wherein the nation’s myths were unhinged to be reopened to public speculation. For instance, a lengthy history of a line of great kings reveals itself as

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debateable onstage when the audience watching it has become so accustomed to having Elizabeth I on the throne, and now must grapple with what defined gender when she assumed a man’s role that had been historically gendered. More than attempting to understand and educate the audience about the past, the history plays speak to a time outside of themselves, applying history to broaden introspection.

The theater of a world in transition, Shakespeare’s playhouse constituted an arena where cultural change was not simply represented but rehearsed and enacted. It was, in short, a place where history was made. 18

Similar to Shakespeare’s own legacy, historical figures are valued in the collective imagination for their reputation and image, much less for the details only those who study them know to be true. The ways in which history is presented, whether on the stage or in the media, have a powerful influence in constructing this image. Let’s take, for example, the name Richard III. For most, it conjures images of a wicked hunchback who killed his nephews in a grab for the crown, and is a widely debated example of Shakespeare’s influence on the reputation of historical persons. Be it factual or not, it’s at least a fair statement that a little dramatic exaggeration went a long way in how the historical figure of Richard is remembered today. Recently, this same debate of a drama seizing the perception of historical narrative can be found in the controversy over Netflix’s The Crown. When the popular streaming platform was advised to include a disclaimer that the show, which details events surrounding the royal family, was a work of fiction, Netflix declined. Amidst fear that fans would begin internalizing The Crown as an accurate portrayal, those involved continued to publicly insist the line between “our version”

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and the “real version”. Yet, the line between historical truth and how it is remembered is often difficult to pin down. This begs the question – is there even a line at all, or do we continue to make history even as we retell it? Unlike The Crown, where the events portrayed happened a few decades ago or even within the space of the viewer’s own lifetime, when dealing with medieval history, a past that feels so separated from our own time, sometimes it can feel that all that remains are connotations from the media. When time melds fact with fiction, our understanding of this past becomes increasingly complex.

To perform history is not to render the past more accessible, but to stage a confrontation with the past’s elusiveness that is both troubling and teeming with possibility.

Perhaps the most exciting part of the history plays, and why I’m drawn to them, is their role in not just challenging, but also creating history. There’s also something to be said for the way in which history is summoned through performance which contrasts the way it is read and understood when on the page. The stage was (and is) a place where the historical record might be reconsidered. The concepts of performance and history alter each other simultaneously, with the product being a new understanding of the past and what it means to the present. History in performance is then not only free to play with, but moldable to the current moment. Just like Shakespeare himself, ceasing to revere history can open up a realm of possibilities. In preparing to design these characters, I myself felt bogged down in the history and had to take a step back to acknowledge the aspect of performance. Actress Kristin Atherton might put it best, who when asked about her preparation for a role in an accessible and distinctly 2020 Zoom production of 1

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*Henry VI*, in which she played the famous English knight, reminded, “Read the text and everything you need is there. The historical John Talbot is a different guy to the one that’s in the play”. 21

A lot of work has to be put into making both Shakespeare and history relevant for a contemporary audience, challenging our relationship to the past and historical characters which leave so much to be still uncovered. While designing a history play, I often felt that the character’s historical counterparts was confining them to a specific set of roles – holding them back from the possibilities existing outside of their own context and circumstances. Yet, the character becomes so much more than just a reincarnation – growing as a persona that may dismiss the truth while being dependent on it. Erasure is a common danger, and the power they wield over viewers is a unique situation, one that will likely continue to be debated about. Yet, despite their often obvious fictiveness, people can’t seem to get enough of watching this history unfold again.

**HENRY VI PART 1**

Often criticized as the weakest play in the Shakespeare canon, if that gives you any insight into its fan reception, the very first part of Shakespeare’s very first tetralogy is an early history play that details the lead up to the famed War of the Roses. This means that it does not include the events of the war between the noble houses of York and Lancaster, as does the more popular Henry VI Parts 2 and 3. All of this is then not to be confused with the much more

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acclaimed Henry IV trilogy, which follows the charismatic prince that some Tom Hiddleston fans may be familiar with. No, 1 Henry VI indeed presents a rather unlikeable cast of medieval characters doing a whole jumble of things in a disjointed and often confusing way. Perhaps the most significant factor in the general dislike of this play is the debate over its authorship. Henry VI Part 1 is generally accepted as a collaboration piece between Shakespeare and some of his fellow contemporary playwrights, such as Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Nashe, among others. Since it was first performed in the 1590s, Shakespeare as a playwright was still yet to be established as “Shakespeare the icon,” although the need for a Part 1 as a prequel to the series does show some success to the already popular parts 2 and 3. It may be on the margins of the canon now, but believe it or not, 1 Henry VI was a hit in its day – and actually remains one of the few plays with a recorded audience response.

How would it have joyed brave Talbot,” wrote Nashe, “to think that after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb, he should triumph again on the stage and have his bones new embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least, who, in the tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding.22

Here, Nashe speaks to the appeal of reincarnated historical figures channeled through actors on the stage, and the powerful effect that this conjuring ability of a history play produces for its viewers. However, the ways in which the play spoke so well to Elizabethan audiences also presents some of the reasons why it is so difficult to find its relevance applicable elsewhere. While theatregoers at the time hailed the valiant actions of their forefathers, the play’s heavy reliance on the topical and local events of their time dampened its potential for the coveted title of ‘universal’. The rampant patriotism, which was once a point of praise, is now irrelevant to

22 Thomas Nashe, Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the Divell (London:1592).
many of today’s theatregoers. It is believed that the script was hastily written in response to the national excitement of the moment, as a way to turn a quick profit. However, although it was enjoyed by desperate Elizabethans seeking to validate their hereditary privilege, it probably left many of them feeling a bit unsatisfied. So, if 1 Henry VI is a museum piece only once enjoyed in its own time, is it too outdated in its cultural constructions to give us anything today? That’s certainly not a wrong answer, but I do believe it’s more complex than that.

Synopsis

Referred to as the first tetralogy in reference to the order in which it was written, the play’s events actually occur after the more popular saga of Henry IV Part 1/ Henry V trilogy – if it’s confusing, think about it like the Star Wars prequels which were similarly less valued although both do admittedly have their moments. Set in the late Middle Ages and spanning over a decade of historical events, and nearly as many locations across palaces and battlefields in both France and England, 1 Henry VI is a blockbuster complete with an absolute revolving door of characters. The play fictionalizes the brewing tensions that would later lead up to The Wars of the Roses, a series of English civil wars fought for control over the throne which was led by two rival houses, Lancaster and York. The play opens with a funeral for King Henry V, eulogizing him as godlike for his contributions to English nationalism and lands obtained in France during the 100 Years War. Yet, the mystified heroic past threatens to die with him, as the leaders he leaves behind are majorly self-interested, power hungry, and all around villainous in their treatment of not only each other, but the fragile nation they’ve been empowered to protect. Not to mention, England is now run under an impressionable king, Henry VI, who is only a child and not particularly hyped to be inheriting the family business. Meanwhile, in France, a stereotypical
construction of villainous frivolity, Charles is named king to launch a counter campaign to get some of those lost lands back.

In this conflict, each side presents their fighter characters – those who appear to get the most done on the battlefield while the others devote their time to primarily sitting around and arguing. On the English side, Talbot, a chivalric knight and swoon worthy bad boy, faces off against the French badass and occasional saint, Joan of Arc; who like most strong female Shakespeare characters, also happens to be a witch.

Back on English turf, the young king Henry is supervised in his early rule by his uncle and protector Gloucester, and by the leader of the church Winchester, where the two’s constant bickering will ensure young Henry has enough trauma to last a lifetime and impact his leadership. However, Gloucester and Winchester’s catfights are not to be overshadowed by the real internal English conflict brewing between nobles York and Somerset, who convince their followers to take sides by the plucking of a colored rose symbolizing their loyalty. Spoiler alert: this doesn’t pan out well for England, as the dick measuring contest soon conflates into a famous medieval war – but you’ll have to stay tuned in the following plays for those juicy details.

The play doesn’t have a conclusive ending – it’s just a cliffhanger that leaves messy loose ends everywhere. Talbot is dead (spoiler alert), taking along with him all of English honor, and Joan has been captured and burned at the stake for her crimes of, well, being a major character while female. In the end, a tenuous peace has been made with Charles, but it’s pretty clear England is not the triumphant winner. Henry is set to marry Margaret of Anjou, a French woman with all the titles and no money, which is an unpopular match that only creates more division in the houses and gives power hungry men additional justification for their ensuing actions. I
should mention here that Margaret, not to be easily dismissed, waits in the wings for her role across the next four plays as a leader, fighter, and all-around queen in every sense of the word.

So, the play ends without an ending, its own narrative structure unreliable for expectations or the usual storytelling conventions which may be anticipated. The cracks to authority which begin to spread and break throughout the play will continue through the War of the Roses in Part 2 and 3, and finally come to a height in Richard III, where stability is ultimately destroyed in a quite spectacular way, and left to be built again.

Sounds pretty simple – Shakespeare and friends lifted a plot from history and audiences went nuts. Yet, what drew me was why it was so fictionalized, to the point of fantasy, and how those changes in detail contributed to a rebranding of collective historical memory, putting an audience into a narrative for reconsidering their own identities. Perhaps more importantly, was asking the question if 1 Henry VI could do the same thing for audiences nearly half a millennium later.

Textual Analysis

1 Henry VI is a world of disorder – every scene an episode into a national emergency of constant skirmishes, battle cries, and plenty of mangled gore that might mildly intrigue a true crime podcast junkie. To be honest, the play is largely chaotic, even if you have the SparkNotes open while you’re reading it. It’s hard to keep the characters straight when they enter for one scene only to die in the next. Sense of time and place is as changeable as the narrative, and years may pass from one scene to the next. In some undefined battlefield one moment, the next act could cut to a palace, a tower wall, or the outskirts of town very casually as more alike to a film than a play. Denied a protagonist to really focus in on, or a defined beginning, middle, and end, 1
Henry VI is a whirlwind of personalities and random poetic bits that I personally find endearing, if not it’s reasons for being an outcast from its canonical siblings.

While the whole point of historical chronicles at the time was to hype men up by documenting all of the glorious things they had done in the past, it is somewhat surprising that this first tetralogy has an interest in female characters, albeit misogynistic. This is even in contrast to Shakespeare’s later plays, where his representation of women onstage declines. In 1 Henry VI, women are not kept on the sidelines but often take on roles that are typically performed by the male characters in later plays. Whether it was his collaboration with other playwrights who created these characters, or a response to the audience's interest in them of that time, organizing the historical sources around a set of strict binaries, the text presents not only English vs. French, York vs. Lancaster, but also men vs. women. This binary opposition is part of what makes the play so troubling, but also worth further examination. If there are boundaries however, you can expect them to be transgressed throughout the play, as while they strongly exist, they are never unchallenged laws. Onstage action like Joan’s defeat of men in single combat (which she does, multiple times), challenge the gender constructs that create identity in a patriarchal nation state such as the world of the play. Women who step out of their designated roles in society, – and that’s pretty much all of them in this play – are agents in destabilizing the systems of gender hierarchy that are essential to the stability of this world. Joan is likely the most destabilizing character because she understands these binary boundaries not as absolute laws, but mere obstacles to the mission before her. In the face of brutal punishments, the play’s female characters exist in the text as a constant challenge and threat to the established patriarchal order.
Additionally, in *Henry VI*, the go-to figure of the patriarchy, the king, who shares the namesake of the play, inverts the anticipated pattern for strong male authority. Power, something that masculinity has long trademarked, is left up for grabs. While arguably strong female characters do by no means make the play feminist, particularly as many (if not all) of them build on stereotypes designed to keep powerful women subservient, i.e. they are all witches, or at least reduced to the controlling wife or devious French women trope, there is a move to include women in the realm of politics by acknowledging their contributions to shaping history. Of course, decentering a male king gives them some more room, and highlights the failures and shortcomings of the patriarchy. Elizabethan audiences might have expected to escape from their political reality for a while, only to be stuck watching those same concerns play out on stage for a few hours. The play originated in a time when the cultural constructions regarding gender were at odds with a female ruler at the head of the nation state. After the successive reigns of the Tudor queens, Elizabeth I’s long rule contradicted a sex/gender system in which women were not predisposed to power. The anxieties around giving women power, and the fear that this transition would emasculate men, plays out on the stage of the history play. The actions of female characters move beyond familiar binary roles, and in some cases, this is not only lifted from history but created specifically for the play. A prominent example is Shakespeare’s decision to radically cut Talbot’s life short; going against the chronology of his sources just to allow Joan to appear in an intense scene where she stands over his dead body, mocking him in triumph as he lies slain and bloody. Instead of this poignant moment, the authors may have opted to stay closer to the historical timeline and allow Talbot a moment of victory over the death of such an unruly woman – for surely the audience would have applauded and felt more satisfied by that? This particular altering of history to provide this particular interaction tells me that aspects
of the culture and politics were applied to theatre in a way that was more complex than modern
eyes might give it credit for. It’s also important to note that the concept of a gender binary being
crossed in both directions throughout the play – be it Joan of Arc dressed in male attire and
taking on men’s roles, or Henry, who some scholars point to as having ‘effeminate’ qualities,
opens a conversation for introducing nonbinary characters as represented in history. Just as one
character may not belong to a specific group, it does not automatically mean they fit in the other,
and even though the text builds this binary, it also shows its desperate attempts to categorize
complex characters within two narrow spheres of social construction. Figures of confusion to
other characters, these characters are powerful destabilizers of the historical narrative and thus
their design is open to a myriad of different interpretations.

In order to understand the impact this might have had on Elizabethan audiences, we must
turn to what would have been on the public consciousness at that time. A poignant scene features
Joan, dressed in battle armor, defeating the English knight Talbot in single combat. After kicking
his ass, she leaves him with an identity crisis.

My thoughts are whirled like a potter’s wheel.
I know not where I am now what I do (1.5.19-20).24

While the play may privilege the patriarchy and uphold white male codes of chivalry, it is not
without some scrutiny of their effectiveness. The power system in charge is flawed, but so too
are the efforts to overthrow it. The conflict over power in the play is also a study in how power is
fictionalized in the memory: as a heroic and simple ideal, but in the audience’s contemporary
reality, it is complex and potentially dissatisfying. The play questions the government and the

23 Campos, Miguel, “An Effeminate Prince: Gender Construction in Shakespeare’s First Tetralogy,” Universidad de
motives of those in charge, something that would have been quite radical. It also considers biological succession in presenting a child who is thrown into power, leaving claimants such as York to make his moves to ascend the throne. It also asks if investing a single person with so much power and authority is ever even ethical – while it’s true that Henry isn’t wielding his power for evil, his irresponsibility coupled with simply possessing it seems to attract villainous behavior in those around him. In response to The Globe’s 2019 production of a condensed Henry VI trilogy, Time Out Magazine reviews “it’s a brilliant study in the fine line between thuggery and politics”. This illustrates the illusions of stability and civilized order that masks a courtly underbelly of greed, brutality, and deception. Every generation in the play passes on this intense revenge until it would be hard for any one character to state beyond general terms what, exactly, they’re fighting for. The aristocratic ideals built into the code of the country ideals of heroism and honor, are presented as lovely prose sentiments where convenient, but fail to actually move the people in power when push comes to shove. Additionally, personal ambitions often trump political ideals when power is up for grabs. The play investigates what it is like to have power, and it’s pretty obvious that it doesn’t automatically equate to happiness or even stability. Many of the characters are born to power and privilege, while some can earn it, and others are prevented from ever having it because of certain unchangeable aspects of their identity. It questions the values placed on allegiance to monarchy/government vs. loyalty to family/peers. Audiences ready to connect their identity to a show of England's past prestige and power would have been met with an embarrassing lot of weak kings, slimy counselors, and the blindly loyal subjects forced to do their bidding; perhaps causing them to reconsider their romantic sentiments.

The way in which this dramatic lead up to the War of the Roses, where the English noble houses of York and Lancaster duke it out for the crown, is marked by fictions of the motives and intentions of historical figures, and their saucy inner monologues. Such fictions have drastically shaped the way in which this conflict is perceived, perhaps the best example being the coining of the term *War of the Roses* as a direct referent to a scene is *1 Henry VI*. The very presence of the two factions onstage bubbles up the thought that historical fact is contested and perhaps shouldn’t automatically be trusted. The winners write history, and all that. It shows the country was not all unified together – not only was it unstable, but the whole nation wasn’t even on the same team. Perhaps a flaw of multiple authors, but contributing to this reading is a shifting and unstable sense of events and characters. In fact, there are many contributions to the ways in which the narrative repeatedly disrupts the stability of its historical construction. The characters themselves seem to be metacognitively aware that they are participants in the creation of history even as they are in the process of creating it. For example, Talbot’s death on the battlefield alongside his young son John is a choice on the desire to curate a future narrative. “Talbot and John privilege their historical legacy over the capacity to “be” and make more history;” quotes Walsh, “the future, absent narrative of their deeds takes priority over a continuing living presence”. In addition, the characters themselves look back to an idealized past of *Henry V* that they can never return to, reflecting the audience’s own struggle to connect back to the character’s timeline without first looking inwardly at their own. Both audiences and characters seek satisfaction in an idealized past that is withdrawing further and further away from them with the passage of time.

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Is true historical representation unable to be sustained in performance? Is performance a valid method for presenting the past, or is it too dangerous to the actual historical narrative? In Shakespeare’s England, history writing was being discredited by the printing industry, so the concept of a debatable history would have been a vital part of an audience trying to make sense of their heritage from all the jumbled pieces they had before them. Alternate accounts of the events and persons being published ensured that no one text had final authority on the narrative of the past. Additionally, the stages of the playhouses were places where those not literate or privileged to purchase the historical texts could have access to their history. Just as we destabilize Shakespeare through the idea that his texts are unstable and unchangeable, it may also be worth considering how stable our concept of history is. On the stage, anyone can put on a costume and become a part of not only telling history, but assuming and creating it.

A Note on Characters

Since Henry VI is not the strong center to which the rest of the narrative holds onto, this allows for a cast of large, distinct, and individual personalities that make designing this play so exciting. Illusions of authority and stability crumble apart to make a stage where the hierarchy of leading characters is often unclear, creating a multitude of strong figures who compete for the audience’s attention.

“A revolving door of characters” describes actress Sarah Amankwah from the tetralogy’s performance at Shakespeare’s Globe in 2019.27 Even though this particular Globe production removed Part 1 in order to condense Part 2 and Part 3 into a single performance, this speaks well to the rapid rate in which characters are introduced and expelled by the narrative. With no

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one character claiming the role of protagonist, every person in the narrative could hold a significance and must be watched carefully – which can be confusing. In the case of many productions which feature smaller ensembles, actors may be required to not only double up on roles, but play as many characters as the action demands, sometimes as many as a dozen or more.

Something I found particularly compelling, although it no doubt increased the character count, was the way in which ordinary people were interwoven into the texts amongst the kings, knights, and nobles. Largely nameless, and often entering only once to deliver a single message, these characters have a significant impact on the plot simply by sharing their opinions and moral insights relating to the central events of the play.

Shakespearean texts are reconstituted as playscripts designed for performance in a volatile theatrical setting where the erasures in the official historical record could be restored and the voices silenced by the repressions of the dominant discourse could speak and be heard. 28

While Shakespeare by no means allows everyone to speak, and each character’s voice is ultimately subject to an author, this illustrates the potential for the history play genre as a whole. These inserted characters are often lower class, and as a result, their sentiments have not been recorded by any textbook. History books are not really places for extrapolation, questioning, and the imagination, unlike history in performance on the stage. These minor characters are in many ways the most free as their actions are not fixed to a specific historic set of behaviors.

It is the characters whose actions are not predetermined by the history books and they insist on another perspective apart from that of the warring nobility, often powerfully the perspective of basic humanity itself. 29

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Introducing these characters into the narrative challenges the notion that the wealthy and powerful were the only players in the creation of history. Including them creates a larger and more complex view of history, and I think society would benefit from multiple outlets through which to explore and grapple with their own history, and that includes extratextual perspectives. It is also worthwhile to ask what we think history and the historical figures we study should be teaching us? Everyone has complex reactions to the individuals who make powerful contributions to history, and theatre traffics the past as a vehicle for reflecting on our current moment and future.

At the same time, the major characters are complex in a way that makes them difficult to wholly support or hate. “They’re all cutthroats; they’re all power- hungry” states an actor who played the villainized York in one interview. While a common criticism of the play’s characters is that no single one stands out as someone to truly care about – all have their own somewhat redeemable moments amidst selfish qualities. Revenge is key to the self-destructive vacuum that the whole play collapses into.

Shakespeare portrays injuries, insults, and wrongs as psychic traumas for which revenge seems, to the victim, the only remedy. Characters who have been victimized or violated, who have suffered malicious harm, look to revenge as a means to restore a sense of selfhood.

This play is exciting from a character and costume perspective because the creation and sustaining of identity, along with evidence that their nature is unstable, is constructed in all of the play’s major figures. The energy put into defending personal reputation over fixing the root problem is a mistake many of the characters make, worsening the state of their own nation to boost the image of their own prestige.


Fans React: \textit{1 HENRY VI} Today

\textit{If you want a not so historical play filled with war, quarreling noble men, a valiant soldier, a gullible child king, and the somewhat disappointing appearance of a woman soldier all wrapped in pretty language, this may be your next great read.} \footnote{Kaleigh, “Henry VI, Part 1,” Community Reviews, \textit{Goodreads}, April 19, 2020.}

On December 2nd, I posted an Instagram poll to ask if any of my followers, who I’ve tried to keep as collaborative participants in the design as much as possible, were familiar with \textit{Henry VI Part 1}. Before achieving results, I’d given a hint with a posted photo of the stack of library books I’d been consulting for the project, “Modernizing Joan of Arc”, “Women Who Ruled”, and “Fashion in Medieval France” among the titles. Some asked if I was doing George Bernard Shaw’s \textit{Saint Joan}, or \textit{The Lark} by Jean Anouilh – even the hit Elizabethan-inspired musical \textit{Six} was suggested. Those who guessed the Henry VI tetralogy referenced parts 2 and 3, or the more popular conclusion piece, \textit{Richard III}. However, a somewhat surprising thirty-three percent out of the 201 voters attested to have at least some familiarity with the play. \footnote{Carly Sponzo, (@pinkparisdesigns), Instagram, December 2, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/pinkparisdesigns/?hl=en. I should note that the demographics of this poll, as well as the later Instagram collaborations I will be mentioning, consist of an audience of 75.9\% 18-34 year olds, with 88.1\% identifying as female, mostly located in the United States.} Based on my study of audience response to \textit{1 Henry VI} prior to the poll, I’d actually expected this number to be lower. Although, I suppose my page, which has previously featured my past designs for Shakespeare plays as well as fanart, would attract the kind of audience who might know a thing or two about this somewhat niche history play.

The play is not often in performance, and when it is it's almost always tied to the latter half the trilogy (Parts 2 and 3) – often cut to pieces in service of this more popular War of the Roses saga. When the tetralogy is blended together – blurred into one giant ‘Henry amoeba’, to
coin one fan’s phrase, it’s usually Part 1 that gets hacked to shreds in favor of the other plays. Whether equated to the notoriously unpopular Star Wars prequels like earlier or Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit, 1 Henry VI* feels like a great narrative that’s been back stretched and spread too thin for the sake of the box office. Too many subplots, too many characters (over 60!), and a tedious cycle of alarrums make a stage success feel out of reach for the play as a stand-alone. It might have been a blockbuster in 1592, but that appears to have been its last time in the spotlight. Even existing on the sidelines of Shakespeare studies, the play’s extensive candidate list of potential authors has earned it the connotation of inferior by prestigious scholars and casual fans alike.

The idea that this text is too weak and volatile to stand on its own has in many ways held it back from the level of engagement that it may not deserve, but at least merits. Erasing the play as its own awkward puzzle and subjugating it as a piece of a larger body steals from it the potential for new investigations in its role to destabilize the canon.

After I’d poured over the much academic and scholarly texts offering in depth analysis of the play, it’s history, authorship, and a nuanced psychological analysis of every character and their numerous bad decisions, it was time to turn to my most valuable resource – *Tumblr*, *Twitter*, *Instagram* and all the blog and book review platforms at the deepest parts of the internet I could find. A quick search through #HenryVIPart1, or the first few pages of comments on the book review site *Goodreads*, gives the impression that readers are not thoroughly impressed with this play (somewhat unsurprising). Time and time again, fans felt unable to connect with its cast of characters, whose saturation into the conniving, backstabbing world of the play made them easily unlikable. People were pretty unified in agreeing that it was no *Hamlet*, a play that has subsequently garnered not only extensive academic recognition but also its own library of
fanfiction and character art. Yet, amidst the play’s online condemnation also exists a record of insights into the aspects modern readers still find entertaining, or otherwise worth posting about.

1 Henry VI’s Female Characters

_Honestly, as deeply offensive as Taming of the Shrew is, I’d rather reread that one than this one. Both are sexist but at least Shrew has some funny dick jokes._  

Joan of Arc

_Joan is pretty cool. But like I didn't care about anything else._

It is impossible to discuss fan response to 1 Henry VI without discussing the overwhelming response to the character of Joan. Joan has become such a beloved and iconic character that the American Shakespeare Center renamed their 2015 production “Shakespeare’s Joan of Arc” (which of course was followed by “The Rise of Queen Margaret” – Henry VI Part 2, in 2016.) When I participated in a reading of the play over Zoom, with the local New London Shakespeare company Flock Theatre, they were so compelled by the character of Joan that they almost unanimously decided to take a break from their readthrough of the tetralogy and introduce Shaw’s Saint Joan to gain an additional perspective on the character. In a scan of the comments on Goodreads, where readers can rate, review, and read to determine what literature to explore next, I discovered that many people had, like myself, been surprised to discover that Joan of Arc had even been a Shakespearean character. Not only has Joan been given the Shakespeare

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treatment, but she’s also been equipped with a series of cracking speeches, and the stage time that would make the rest of the play’s characters jealous. A point of much dismay among readers, however, is the play’s attempt to villainize Joan and dismiss her with derogatory sexualized language, and of course, some light conversation with demonic entities. A notable scene in the play that continues to upset many fans, presents Joan attempting to save herself from burning at the stake by claiming that she is pregnant before continuing to list an array of potential fathers, indicating that she slept her way through the entire French army. Although it’s generally understood that this trashing of Joan stemmed from popular sentiment at the time Shakespeare was writing it, it’s no less disappointing or inexcusable (though some fans try and pass it off to another author to free the bard from such a stain). In nearly every comment or post which mentions her, there is also a strong desire for Joan’s character to have been given more space in play, ideally placed in a prominent spot as the show’s tragic heroine.

When I was reading the list of characters, I saw that Joan of Arc was playing a part in the plot and I got excited because I mean, who doesn't like that story? I was interested about what ol' Bill would do with her character, and I was really hoping for some awesome monologues from her. But here's the thing: I was expecting a level of artistry that I don't think Shakespeare had developed yet. Even if he was still somewhat an amateur at this point in his career, I don't understand how he could have missed the mark so much. What he needed to do was push Joan of Arc into the forefront of the plot- he needed to make her a great tragic heroine. This play could have been exponentially better if he had done so, I believe. I like what I got from Joan in this play, but it could have been so much better.\(^\text{36}\)

So, she’s generally agreed to be the most interesting character, even despite these moments of slander by Shakespeare and Elizabethan society at large. Placing Joan in the center of the narrative would serve to alleviate the problem of having no protagonist, reviewers claim. Even as she’s not given the prominence readers wish, the praise of her lines and actions illustrate

how much attention she steals away from the other characters in the scenes she is in. In an attempt to be hilarious to “ancient Englishmen,” the treatment of Joan in the text undermines the play’s relevance and universal outreach. I suppose it would simply be too embarrassing to admit her detrimental impact on the English army, so discarding her as a witch is an attempt to dehumanize her, making her character more palatable to Elizabethan audiences; albeit inexcusable to the modern fan. Against Shakespeare’s original ‘intention’, many readers even felt compelled to root for Joan of Arc and by proxy the rest of the French army, over the much unlikable squabbling English forces. I dare say I think the play would be even less popular now had it not been for her, and I’ve seen lots of comments that would back me up. Some readers even explicitly stated that they either chose the play because she was a character, or because her moments were compelling enough to buy tickets to stage productions just for Joan specifically.

The modern-day perspective on Joan is varied, but unarguably different from Shakespeare the author and his Elizabethan fan base. Layered in with a few disturbing comments about how attractive a female warrior is for the male gaze (urg), are really special comments like “Joan of Arc listens to girl in red and that's on internalized homophobia”.

Let me take a moment to explain why this comment is remarkably destabilizing. One, it brings up the point of Shakespeare’s own sexuality; a debate that could shift perspective to celebrate the recurring but often downplayed queer themes in the canon. Though this is a more complex topic then I’ll get into here, and could really be its own thesis as answering it requires a more in depth understand of Elizabethan society, ideology, and terminology, I feel it’s a personal question that many Shakespeare fans ask, and how it is answered can be impactful.

I’m beginning to wonder if it really is so anachronistic to think about the sexual orientation of historical people. I’m not sure I’m satisfied any more with our rather

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convoluted academic discourses about sexual subjectivity. When we queer the whole Renaissance, we obscure genealogy. The LGBTQ woman or man of today who seeks in the past for ancestry instead finds a well-meant dead-end: we are told that one of the things that makes us who we are did not exist four centuries ago.

If not an authorship, when looking at a fanbase that is sexually diverse it’s important to consider how they might perceive characters and then if that perception is validated or at odds with what makes it to the stage. Challenging society’s rigid gender roles, contemporary LGBTQ fans have recognized Joan, in the text and as a historical figure, as a role model for a community that often doesn’t see themselves represented that far back in history. She’s even included in a 2017 LGBTQ history book for teens, “Queer, There, and Everywhere: 23 People Who Changed the World”. Her status as a religious figure who has strong faith in God but also cross dresses is a blur between two categories that, especially today, feel very oppositional.

Performing a “queering” (or re-appropriating/re-imagining/claiming based on available evidence) of religious texts and lives is one tactic LGBT people have widely used throughout history to see or find themselves and each other in a world where they have been forced to remain hidden. It is a way to celebrate and honor those who did not live “straight” lives and to discover role models and trail blazers who may have been obscured, forgotten, or stripped of their queerness.

Joan of Arc, historically and as a character in the play, is both powerful and dangerous because the historical distance and ambiguous details of her life make her easily applicable to a variety of causes, from LGBTQ representation, to white supremacy.

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Margaret

If you’re not familiar with Margaret’s *1 Henry VI* – *Richard III* command of the stage, then you may be wondering why I’ve highlighted her in my designs. Her brief introduction in the final scenes of the play as a future bride to the young king feels insignificant next to the surrounding power plotters trying to sell you on the sequel. Imagine there’s dramatic music playing when she enters the stage in her big cameo after the credits roll, because she’ll be kind of a big deal for the next series of plays. Despite it all it’s nice to know that *1 Henry VI*’s female characters translate well to modern-day fans, even if they are robbed of stage time and subject to a plethora of misogynistic quips.

Making certain assumptions about the source material opens avenues for new ways of interrogation, and opens the doors to the emotionally relevant connections that are needed if the play is to have a future on the stage. While historical counterparts complicate this, the texts provide the groundwork for extrapolation beyond what is explicitly stated, and invites fans and professionals to discuss which parts are most useful to them in that current moment. Margaret particularly attracts fan attention, as a character whose role across four plays is not only admirable, but leaves more stories of her brave spirit and powerful command to be requested. Of course, that begs the question – who will write them? I won’t get into the incredibly destabilizing potential of Shakespeare fanfiction, mainly because there isn’t much fan fiction happening for *1 Henry VI*, unfortunately. As “an act of subversion by a disempowered audience,”42 or simply just a creative outlet toying with premade characters, a predominantly female or genderqueer community has and continues to contribute to the archive of a huge male cultural icon. Whether

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it’s putting her in an alternate universe (AU) where her potential as a character can really shine outside the boundaries of the text, or expanding on and reshaping moments within that text, I cannot discuss Margaret’s modern legacy without paying tribute to the fan fiction writers, creators, and artists who continue to keep her ‘she-wolf’ spirit alive.

“Few, if any, are engaging with these texts because they are innately dissatisfied with them” reminds Finn, “rather, what draws them to Shakespeare’s particular treatment of history is its potentiality”. In fact, most fans just want more from the text than Shakespeare is giving them – again smashing the idea that he is universal and can provide all encompassing works for exploring all of human nature everywhere. Whether it’s swapping the gender of characters, adding female characters, or expanding on the roles of the female characters present in the text, and even setting the play in a new time to escape Elizabethan gender norms, the transformative nature of fan work is not to be underestimated. My study is to see if I can do with costumes what they can do with text. While the internet is free from the expectations that often constrict most theatrical performances, and that’s an essential part of what makes it a groundbreaking site for reinvention and interpretation, I seek to pay tribute to the spirit of subversion they embody, if only in references. Clothing, I think, can alter the text without ever changing the words. While I am somewhat beholden to the text itself and did not adapt it, the engagement with gender politics in Shakespeare’s histories online has made me understand the yearning for new representations of these plays and the need for representation in a genre that has avoided it for too long.

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Henry VI

Another character that generates response is Henry VI himself. It would be fair to say that most of the comments are quite harsh – he gets bullied for making bad decisions and having no backbone – all of which is pretty accurate. He’s just a nice guy without a clue, trying to be everyone’s friend – the exact opposite of what readers expect among the qualities of a Shakespearean king. Whether seen as a play ruiner or merely annoying, Team Henry gets easily overshadowed by the bigger personalities in the play. However, his naivety is somewhat endearing, and many point to his role as a tragic figure – a sad child in a world of deception he fails to see and understand. Termed “Henry Jr. Jr.” by one online reviewer, this is a character who has huge shoes to fill, and is left with no figure to teach him the ropes. A ten-year-old child trying to get his relatives to stop arguing is at least a moment of pity for the young boy. He doesn’t seem to be able to do anything right, but his good intentions can’t exactly absolve him from doing wrong. I am curious though with reviews that characterize him as an “effeminate pansy,” and what can be inferred about the masculinity and power associated with the role from them. Suggesting that Henry may have had more success “banging heads together” or other such violent authoritative actions hint not only at the perception of physical strength as a leadership quality, but also the only tried and true method for settling disputes within a hyper-masculine society. Ascending to the role of king at just nine months old, Henry rules in the play as a young teenager, despite the rapidly condensed timeline forcing him into maturity.

I found the “origin” of the War of the Roses to be rather like an awful teenage male locker room pissing contest. Or maybe a popularity contest at a male prep school golf practice. Just silly.47

Comments such as this are indicative of the play feeling crowded by toxic masculine personalities, and centered around one that doesn't quite fit, and was something that had to be explored further through Henry’s design.

Talbot

In a play that lacks significantly on heroes, a fearsome knight in shining armor is appealing, despite his fatal flaws and often “extra”ness – or “doing the most for often little reason,” to quote Urban Dictionary. I’m pulling this character out specifically for this section, not only as a foil for Joan in the play but because he evokes an emotional response from readers that is second only to her (and perhaps Margaret) in fan reviews. This is particularly seen when it comes to the tragic scene of his death alongside his son on the battlefield, after a frustrating sequence in which he is abandoned by those too busy being prideful jerks to send aid. I’ve often encountered this scene as a turning point for how readers connect emotionally to the play. This moment of pure grief is undeniably human next to the lead up of heavily fictionalized exchanges thus far. Showing chivalry as a deeply troubled ethical system, Talbot introduces an intriguing dynamic to the moral codes of the play. He is still viewed as cool by many in the fan community, in a way I’d imagine similar to how the Elizabethan audience would have seen him- a “4th grade boy’s” vision of a badass knight with super dope weapons. The fact that he often has a definite article placed before his name, and is fancy in being one of the only characters to speak in prose, makes “The Talbot” a fun character indeed.

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Reactions to all of the characters on social media are also embedded in a referencing of other pop culture fandoms. *The Hollow Crown* often makes its way into *1 Henry VI* reviews for obvious reasons – it’s star studded cast, with already large fan followings from other domains of interest, performs the whole first tetralogy in its second season. Additionally, *Game of Thrones* was often used in comparison to the play because it follows similar tropes and medieval fantasy aesthetics. Beyond that, any number of modern references could pop up – Monty Python for the play’s often ridiculous medieval style language, even Star Trek for its Shakespeare-like conventions. Those who don’t get bogged down by the frustration of historical inaccuracies liken the play’s fantastical elements to their favorite shows, books, and franchises. Popular culture is important in shaping the ways people understand and interact with Shakespeare – whether reading it in preparation for the upcoming season of *The Hollow Crown* or comparing Jothrey and Henry’s immature rule. Some use the play simply to understand their primary fan interest better, appreciating the source material as connected to and not separate from the text but part of a larger understanding that prioritizes their own interests.

There was also an appreciation expressed for the play allowing readers to see Shakespeare working as a young writer, and the rocky text’s revelation of his human flaws in an altogether imperfect narrative full of underdeveloped characters. It shows that he had different strengths, perspectives, and interests at various points in his life just like any other creator.

I'm here to defend this play, which, for some reason, appears to attract more flak than almost any other in the Bard's canon. Okay, it's not Hamlet, but so what? Please Please Me wasn't Abbey Road - authors have different skills and different approaches at different periods of their career.50

However, the assumption still prevails that all the best parts of the play were written by Shakespeare, because he is the greatest of all time, and incapable of making messy verse

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mistakes even in the early stages of his career, right? Debates over preserving the integrity of the ‘original’ text dominate over and often block the way of conversations about the themes and characters. What was most concerning was a movement, even in young fans, to uphold Shakespeare’s supposed ‘intentions’ and keep him as the unproblematic writer, above the biases of even his own time period. Beyond simply pardoning Shakespeare for all the parts of the text deemed poor writing, as well all the boring bits, commenters followed claims like ‘Othello isn’t racist but trying to teach us race, and The Taming of the Shrew ‘should be read ironically’. 51 Given the text, it’s hard to argue Joan is a proto-feminist character, and whether Shakespeare wrote the parts that degrade her or not, he nonetheless agreed upon and benefited from them. Joan was by no means the only character impacted by the popular sentiments during the time in which they are all touched. The nationalistic undertones are especially detrimental to all of the French characters, who are stereotypical and one sided. This portrayal is particularly upsetting for modern Shakespeare fans who are familiar with and have great admiration for the playwright’s ability to depict conflicting points of view in ways that generate developed characters on all sides. I found the French characters particularly difficult to design because of this; their two dimensionality unfortunately left little to unpack.

It's a pity, this would easily be a 5 star play if both the French and the English were depicted more realistically: showing that there was bravery and willpower on both sides. 52

In some ways, being canonized as a Shakespeare play has held 1 Henry VI from the kinds of critical discourse it would likely benefit from. We’ll never know what parts he wrote or didn’t write, so we should start holding him accountable for every part instead of only giving him credit

for the good, unproblematic ones. It’s time to stop making excuses for Shakespeare and start making solutions.

However, many readers were glad to ignore the authorship dispute all together, instead choosing to focus on the characters, themes, and how they personally found connection into the text, no matter who wrote it. After all, modern shows and movies have a plethora of writers, and that is hardly discussed as a factor in their overall merit. Comments like “if he had help, so what” and “whoever wrote the play” express the desire to not waste energy on a debate that feels separate from the text itself. On the verge of directing the trilogy in a recent season, artistic director of the RSC Gregory Doran declared:

> Who wrote Shakespeare? I don’t care. Ultimately we’ve got this fantastic body of plays and I don’t care who he, she or they were in a way because we’ve got them.53

This naturally angered purists because it removes the author’s control from the text, freeing those who interact with it, but also taking privilege away from a creator, who is staunchly defended by other privileged people.

So, as I said, the play is not often in performance, and when it is it's almost always tied to Parts 2 and 3 – often cut to pieces to fit the more popular saga, sometimes even wrestling from it characters that, while singular to this play and may not function well in conjunction with the whole shebang, are the strongest candidates to its success onstage. Sharing this frustration, the American Shakespeare Center’s *Shakespeare’s Joan of Arc* made a point to not only keep but center the characters that are unique to this play only.

Some of the more famous conflations over the years have even eliminated Joan of Arc and Talbot in order to take the three plays down to two. WHAT?! It’s like saying “I like the Beatles, but their catalogue is too large, so we’re going to remove all the John Lennon

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songs.” Or “I like the three original Star Wars films, but they’ve got too much material in them to be popular; so let’s cut out Han and Chewie so we can slice them down to be only two movies.” WHAT?!

It’s the unique questions of identity, historical and present day, that I believe make it much more engaging than it’s often given credit for. While it’s hard to not resist making jokes about the play’s flair for the ridiculously dramatic and its often chaotic collaborative verse, embracing the flaws in 1 Henry VI is far more exciting than locking it away in the vaults for good. The engagement of fans, although notably smaller than the cult followings of Hamlet or Macbeth, speak to the play’s potential.

**MEDIEVAISM AND THE FANTASY GENRE**

My research into the 1 Henry VI, it’s characters, and complex anthology of online reactions, while still ongoing, led me to make the next steps in the design process. Before I began putting pen to paper or choosing fabric, I first had to conceptualize the overall look of the production as a whole. I was at first drawn towards a fantasy concept, because that genre not only centers around the appeal of invented history, but also attracts large fan followings. As fantasy is not inherently tied to any historical narrative, it has more freedom to be speculative and transformative. By emphasizing the fictions in the play, I hoped to reveal its disconnect with truth in favor of focusing on character. However, I soon learned that medieval history was anything but neutral.

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The medieval fantasy concept has become really popular lately. Think about what comes to your mind when you think of the medieval era. Swords, castles, kings, magic, spiraling cathedrals, maybe some dragons? The Middle Ages exists in a mythic realm of the imagination in Western society – finding themselves no longer just worshipped by niche cult followings, but now in the mainstream of cultural consumption. Perhaps this can be attributed to its lack of technology that society may feel overburdened with today. Even J.K Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, though itself not set in the medieval realm, banishes muggle technology from the wizarding world to retreat into its castle-y school of magic. Perhaps it is because contemporary society lacks the honor, courtesy, and strict moral compass some feel a nostalgic past had – *chivalry is dead*, as they say. Maybe the established, all encompassing, unquestioned authority figure of a king feels simpler than the dissatisfying nature of politics in our lives. After all, simplification is the key appeal (and danger) that this time period offers to weary travelers. Of course, the bloody sword fights and gory dungeons that have also become staples of a violent medieval imagination that awakens a desire for morbid entertainment.

Regardless of the reasons, shows like *Game of Thrones, The Witcher, The Hollow Crown, Vikings*, films like *The King, Lord of the Rings, Maleficent*, the novels they came from, and the subsequent video games, *Dungeons and Dragons, World of Warcraft*, and all the spin-offs and dupes that follow have created a culture where the imagined medieval is in vogue. The historical distance between ourselves and the Middle Ages makes it an appealing ground for abstraction and exploration, being somewhat removed from the entanglements of choosing a more recent setting. All of these examples are by no stretch of the imagination to be considered works of nonfiction, or even historical fiction. While historical authenticity can mean and look a variety of different ways, pop culture seems to favor an emotional authenticity that prioritizes viewers
feelings towards the time period over what we know to be true or untrue. Actually, many of the
ones I’ve mentioned take inspiration from Shakespeare’s works, or respond to the same events
he was writing about.

With the Middle Ages we already have a basic idea of the politics and some of their life
styles but not so much that it’s familiar and we can fully relate to the world. As such,
authors can take an event like The Wars of Roses, multiply the amount of houses engaged
in the issue, add Dragons, White Walkers and Children of the Forest and you have A
Song of Ice and Fire.  
The opulent production designs of these works are to be admired – gowns dripping in
gold, deliciously textured armor plates, soaring aerial views of armies and wildernesses full of
adventure. Not to mention magic, which has inextricably been linked to the medieval time period
in fiction everywhere. However, the more that I researched about the medieval fantasy genre, the
more its inherent flaws bubbled up to the surface. The problems this genre presents are not
unlike the ones that the play of my study itself presents. For one, medieval fantasy is also
uncomfortable nostalgia for a past that is not only out of reach, but inaccurate. The way the gap
between reality and the imagination is filled exists at the core of the genre’s troubling nature. It’s
narrative organization around good vs. bad and the simpleness of enemies and heroes is part of
fantasy’s appealing disassociation from the modern world, where it may feel villainy is more
hidden and complex. This strict opposition binary is most clearly comparable to 1 Henry VI in
the divide between the English and the French armies, but also between the English houses, and
even between genders. The binaries are characterized by the demonization of otherness, and this
is a slippery slope to assumptions, stereotypes, or caricatures. Evil, in both the medieval fantasy
genre and the play, is often applied as a characterization for anything that is different, and those
characters then become marginalized in their point of view. A prominent example in popular

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culture are the Orcs in *Lord of the Rings*, a dark outsider group that must be defeated to maintain order.

As a result, these works are rarely diverse, welcoming, or even realistic, which collectively paints a less dynamic and accurate depiction of the Middle Ages. Although, concerningly, claims of historical accuracy have been wielded by producers and fans alike as justification for exclusivity.

One Forbes piece argued that while diversity is important, calling out a franchise ‘based entirely on British history and mythology is completely counter-productive’ and, ultimately, ‘to the detriment of the story’. Reaction below the line and on fan threads was mostly variations on a similar theme of historical accuracy and the challenge that black actors present to the audience’s ability to suspend disbelief. Because, presumably, ice zombies and dragons are perfectly plausible, but fully rounded non-white characters would be a stretch too far?56

Prevailing ideas about the Middle Ages, despite their falsehoods, have not stopped readers and writers from buying into the stereotypes they present. The tenuous concept of history is a theme both in the genre and in *1 Henry VI*. History is both a story being told, and something which refuses to have a singular point of narration; and every point of view holding a different version may make for a better and more accurate history, but a messy story. The escapist tendencies of the genre are perhaps misleading when today’s audiences will naturally seek to impose their own historical moment onto it. Despite the supposedly speculative and unattached genre of fantasy, commenting on the concerns of society at the moment of its creation is unavoidable. For example, fantasy icons Tolkien and CS Lewis, whose work still shapes the genre today, were writing at a time of prosperity in the British empire, so racism is subsequently inscribed into their stories, whether intentionally or not. It may be some time before we start seeing a more diverse, more realistic depiction of the Middle Ages in popular culture. Yet, as

much as this past time period is a fictitious product of invention, it’s also in a fluid state of reinvention. As we shape and revisit the past, it’s potential for shaping our future only grows.

Although Shakespeare’s influence on creating many of the popular ideas about the Middle Ages cannot be understated, a more recent movement that many of these products capitalize is medievalism – a romanticized version of the Middle Ages that was created by a movement of Victorian romantics, steeped in the same idealism many of these depictions revel in. In the early nineteenth century, the “dark ages” connotation of medieval times was reinvented with the idea of a culture of heroic deeds in the service of attractive maidens and knights on steeds. Amidst a flair for gothic architecture, an iconic example of the medievalism aesthetic is captured by the Victorian painter Edmund Leighton whose works include pieces like *God Speed* (1900, Figure 4) and *The Accolade* (1901).

Figure 4. *God Speed*. Painted by Edmund Leighton, Oil on Canvas, 1900, Private Collection.
The medieval world he paints celebrates the romantic view of the era’s chivalry with strong, masculine knights and thin, delicate and fair-skinned maidens. This view has been used as evidence by alt-right groups arguing that the Middle Ages was a uniformly white nation, and is used to bolster beliefs in the supremacy of whiteness, Christianity, and gender roles. It must also be addressed that Medieval studies are attractive for white supremacists because of this circulation of inaccurate portrayals. This is not only by the Victorians, and not only within academic circles, but today – on the steps of the capitol. On January 7th, literary historian Dr. Mary Rambaran-Olm tweeted this caption to accompany an image of the capitol rioter dressed in costume as a Viking (Figure 5).

#medievaltwitter, so for those medievalists who have blocked us for continuing to show how medieval imagery, language, white-washed history is being used by white supremacists, come get your boy⁵⁷

Figure 5. Supporters of Donald Trump enter the U.S. Capital. Photograph by Saul Loeb, January 6, 2021. Getty Images, Washington, DC.

“It’s no secret” states Sarah Luginbill, “white supremacists love medieval European history.”

There was never a time when Europe was an exclusively white, all Christian standalone population, but fantasy literature and entertainment continues to reinforce this notion; developing a false public conception that continues to shape future works. This myth is not specific to small, illusive groups, but permeates almost every version of the Middle Ages that we consume.

For the last several years, neo-Nazis and hate groups across the globe have co-opted and twisted various aspects of the Middle Ages to serve their own agendas. At the core of this “history-based” white supremacist argument is the idea that Europe should return to its “medieval” origins as an all-white and all-Christian entity. But medieval Europe was never a homogeneous place and acting like it was fuels modern violence done in pursuit of a fantasized and false “purity.”

People of color and various religions were all very much a part of the society of medieval times. Acknowledging that even fictitious portrayals of history shape our understanding of it, the lack of representation in this time period is not only inaccurate, but weaponized. Medieval fantasy, and even classroom content has been crafted around a Eurocentric narrative that is built on falsehoods in which contributions made by medieval scholars of color are silenced by online hate and violence. This racism, which is inherent to the field, makes it difficult to address this widespread and inaccurate version of history. In addition, modern representations of, or even scholarly works interrogating the Middle Ages are subject to trafficking by white supremacist groups and users even under educational pretenses. While the genre itself might feel childish with its magical tropes and seemingly simplistic offer of escape, it’s impact on our collective understanding of the past is not to be down-played.

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The conversations around representation are, however, ongoing within the culture of fans that amplify the genre. Fantasy is one genre that is largely at the influence of its fans. Often going beyond an author’s intention, fandom response is highly influential to the fantasy work that is produced. While backlash in fan communities over the lack of representation can and has brought about change, fantasy is also susceptible to the racism, sexism, and homophobia of its biggest supporters. Hate can be fandom specific, and it is important to understand the toxic influence of fans has substantial power, even over the creators of the very work they follow. Fantasy author NK Jemison, whose multicultural worlds and characters are pushing a change in the genre, explains the ignorance of fandoms long controlled by white men and tied to society’s prejudices.

I hear all the excuses: things were just like that back then. There really were 90% men in medieval Europe and they were all white and somehow they magically got silk from East Asia and we don’t know how that happened, we’re not going to talk about that.60

Jemison, whose introduction to the fandom began in writing through online forums, also describes being horrified by the level of hatred that was casually passed around amongst fans – even “speculating openly about the humanity of black people, or women”. To cite an example of one of the most toxic fandoms, one only has to look to the massive franchise of Star Wars. It may not be a medieval fantasy, but the armored stormtroopers, royals, and innovative sword fights provide many similar tropes, albeit in space. The franchise’s most recent trilogy saw immense social media backlash centered around racism and misogyny for its casting choices. Actresses Daisy Ridley and Kelly Marie Tran deleted their accounts following an outpouring of online harassment and death threats. In this instance, Disney colluded with fan response by

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cutting Tran’s character to a practically nonexistent role in the last film in the series, as well as slowly downplaying the role of actor John Boyega’s character to distinctly less than originally projected and marketed. Blockbuster films are not the only targets of such comments though, and social media criticism over casting also impacts theatres, like the unwelcome online reception to Manhattan Theatre Club’s casting of Condola Rashad in Shaw’s Saint Joan in 2018. As an example distinctly related to heritage, history, and the play, we can even look to the French city of Orleans itself. In their annual festival, which celebrates Joan of Arc’s victory in breaking the siege in 1429 (the very event that is depicted in the play) the city holds a traditional parade. In 2018, The city of Orleans named a mixed-race teenager, Mathilde Edey Gamassou, to play Joan of Arc. She was chosen for her qualities likened to the saint, for being a resident and student in Orleans for 10 years, and also a devout Catholic who gave her time to the community in an effort to help others. As selected, Mathilde would ride on horseback through the city, dressed in armor as was the tradition of performing history that dated back almost six centuries. The announcement prompted a stream of online racist abuse from those who felt that French history was being ‘unfairly rewritten’, and that the choice pandered to “diversity propaganda”. It was viewed this way by alt right users who were very particular about who could, and could not, be the vehicle to channel that history through.

On the cusp of designing my own medieval fantasy piece, I had to first be aware of the expectations that confine the fantasy genre. I then could seek to discover clothing choices that, at

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the very least, do not reinforce that bias. A frequently criticized example of this is the way that
the Dothraki characters in George RR Martin's British medieval fantasy, *Game of Thrones*, are
dressed. In *Game of Thrones*, people of color are marginalized to a violent nomadic tribe that is
essentially clothed in an anonymous assortment of fur scraps and rags. While this design choice
was made in accordance with the status as to how they are scripted, disappointment was
expressed as to the lack for this group of the gorgeous, thoughtful costuming seen elsewhere in
the show. Understanding that this genre continually perpetuates stereotypes in its construction,
my project will strive to create a thoughtful design for every character, as opposed to relying on
expectation and genre tradition to guide my choices.

**FANTASY ROLE PLAYING: FROM MEDIEVAL TIMES DINNER THEATER TO DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS**

I don’t know about you but I fear this whole thing has felt somewhat of a tangent so far;
and I bet you’re wondering when I’m going to start writing about the actual costumes. The
answer is soon, but not yet. This final point will bring me to my production concept, where it all
connects and my journey to get there will make more sense. I first must consider: why do the
medieval times seem to attract so much reinvention in our modern era? This of course includes
theatrical and even (especially) recreational reenactment. I did for a brief period consider setting
*1 Henry VI* in a Medieval Times-style family dinner theater, featuring entertaining jousts and
eating with your hands. Luckily you’ll be spared that, although I’m not ruling out the general
thought behind that idea. In thinking about how medieval and medieval-inspired time periods
function as *entertainment* in our society, I started to explore these enactments, and the essential role that costume performs within them.

Renaissance Fairs are some of the most prominent spaces where the past is being reinvented and reimagined through performance. Although primarily set in Shakespeare’s own time, it would not be unusual to see medieval knights, tall henin hats, or a hoard of Vikings make an appearance in these historically inspired events. Often outdoor weekend festivals catering to a public audience wherein participation is highly encouraged, Renaissance Fairs use costume as an essential part of creating the illusions of time travel. Their setting can be equated to that of a medieval fantasy theme park for all levels of creative and historical *inspired* engagement.

Figure 6. *Friends in a variety of costumes attending a fair.* Photograph by Melissa Fossum, Arizona Renaissance Festival, Phoenix New Times, AZ.

The use of a large and fairly undefined time period makes it impossible for encounters between participants to claim any kind historical accuracy in their performance, as I’m certain no
records of how a twelfth-century knight would charm a fifteenth-century lady, or other such exchanges exist. In addition, fairies, demons, elves, wizards and pirates are known to walk the grounds alongside even the most faithful of historical reenactors, shattering all attempts at suture into the actual Middle Ages. Creatively, it seems anything is possible as long as you can costume it, and it all contributes to this environment of mystery, intrigue, ridiculousness, and, (perhaps most importantly) welcoming all people who want to participate and have fun. The attitude of “you can be anything” is a mentality that encourages those who participate to assume new roles as they immerse into the created fantasy world. The community generally encourages this self-exploration, often regardless of historical and modern constructions of identity. The kind of play and improv this ensues is a performance in and of itself. In fact, anyone with a costume (and likely an entrance fee) has an invitation to be included in the show, making it perhaps one of the most interactive examples of performances around. One of the best things about these kinds of events, and something I’m personally drawn to as a designer, is the wonderfully anachronistic way they blend the historical with the modern, for even with the best intentions of accuracy, it’s impossible to create a complete illusion of the past in a world of cell phones and referenced franchises. This medieval/modern conflict is essential to the renaissance faire aesthetic, and can often be seen in the juxtaposition which acknowledges the existence of contemporary even within an illusion of the past, often through a myriad of ironic references.
A notable example to mention when discussing Renaissance fairs, the worlds they build, and the creative identity building they foster is the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA). The SCA creates a complex illusion at events across multiple countries, with an entire system of its own politics and hierarchy; creating a place where the fantasies of its members can be fulfilled, whether it be romances, power, or playful duels, there is something for everyone.

[the SCA] takes images of and ideas about the Middle Ages, reworks them, adds to them, changes them through performance, and uses them to create communities and selves in which the medieval and modern intersect in a very postmodern way.⁶⁴

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Constantly being undermined by a cell phone ring or a visitor who didn’t commit to dressing up, fairs exist outside of a strictly defined view of the Middle Ages and instead, lean into the construction of an alternative medieval history. This new construction exists in fantasy and the imagination more than it does in historical fact. Like the fantasy genre, renaissance (or other period) fairs are purely farcical spaces, offering a chaotic and temporary escape. Here, patrons fashion themselves into a variety of economic and social levels of an imagined past world, they dress as prostitutes, merchants, courtiers, and high-ranking nobility in elaborate garb – often displaying the participants’ own skills and talents in garment construction. Many of the stereotypical stock characters found at the fairs can actually be traced back to renaissance drama troupes utilized by Shakespeare himself. Although there is debate within the Ren faire community whether the creation of a living history museum is ideal, the general consensus seems to be that entertainment is the primary goal.

This leads me to a game that refuses to be excluded from the medieval fantasy conversation. *Dungeons and Dragons* (or D & D, for short) was first released in 1974 as one of the first tabletop role playing games, allowing each individual player to create their own fantasy character with which to journey through the game world. Ranging from wizards to warlocks, bards to barbarians, and everything in between, players form a group of characters that sets about adventuring on a storytelling campaign. In D&D, the narrative is organized by a *Dungeon Master* (DM) who narrates, referees, and lends their voice to the minor fictional inhabitants along the journey. Groups meet regularly for a few hours to collaborate and complete missions, maneuver obstacles, locate mysterious powerful objects, and kick some serious ass. Similar to unscripted exchanges at Renaissance fairs, players must impersonate their created characters as they roll each turn, immersing themselves into the fictional world of the game as they improvise
their actions alongside the group dynamic. The game, and those who play it, also use their storytelling and design skills in the professional world, as is the case with Marvel’s *Guardians of the Galaxy*, which features characters that can be practically mapped onto D&D campaigns. The game’s popularity has also seen a recent resurgence in popularity, due in part to a D&D scene featured in Netflix’s hit show *Stranger Things*.

![Figure 8. The Stranger Things Cast Play Dungeons & Dragons. Directed by Matt and Ross Duffer, “Stranger Things” Season 3, ep. 1, Netflix, 2019.](image)

Frequent pop culture references are evidence of a thriving Dungeons community, but one of the biggest factors in the game’s resurgence is social media. Livestreams by sites like YouTube have attracted millions of views, teaching the game through recorded improv performance. Today’s resurgence is marked by the release of a more accessible 5th edition and the user-friendly website *D & D Beyond*, which allows users to play safely during the pandemic in online games. At the forefront of popular culture, the game’s connotation of only being played by “basement
“dwelling nerds” has become succinctly outdated in the face of all ages of students and professionals desiring real human interaction and an outlet for the imagination to run free.

Of course, the game suffers from the same problematic constructions as much of the fantasy genre. “The sexualizing of young women, exoticizing of non-white characters and white savior storylines in the series are typical of the prevalent white-washing of medieval history” (Finn).65 Contrary to the beliefs of internet trolls who claim historical accuracy as ample justification for the lack of medieval representation in the media and on game boards, it is actually ignorance of factual history that perpetuates these racist portrayals. Finn points out that the more white medieval fantasy is seen, replicated, and unchallenged, the more normalized it will become and therefore the harder to infiltrate. Games like D&D, which in recent additions have strived to be more inclusive, have a history of erasing people of color from the medieval aspects of their inspiration which cannot go unnoted. Both in the last section and here, it’s discouraging to see activities that are so imaginative and freeing, yet innately mapped over with our own damaging human constructions, foiling their potential.

Navigating the problematic foundations inherent in fantasy, role players within games like D&D or on the fairgrounds of a Renaissance festival, are encouraged to develop individual alternative personalities that suture them into the genre. This is where character design shows its true importance, something that is similarly the heart and soul of costume design as I reach my concept reveal. These pretend identities are assumed directly with the donning of a costume, of course something that really drew me to them. Clothing in these spaces, which is almost always self-constructed/fashioned by the wearer, is the most powerful transformative tool. Cramer puts it this way:

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You can act like a king all you want, but if you’re dressed in parachute pants and a tank top, no one will take you seriously. Clothes, more even than attitude, are what make SCA members medieval.66

The removal of costume is therefore to break the illusion. If the world of the fair has constructed a new reality, then I suppose it frees the space to construct a new self to match. Adopting a “persona,” or an invented character that maybe would have lived in the past or more likely, the fantasy world of the event’s creation, participants then portray this character at these specific gatherings and will continue to develop it over time. Interestingly, Cramer noted that members may even choose to use their invented name only, making strong acquaintances only to never know the identities of their real-life counterparts. But exactly how alternative are these created identities? Michael Cramer, author of Medieval Fantasy as Performance: The Society for Creative Anachronism and the Current Middle Ages, is himself an avid participant in the creation of character for a fair, who asks the question/s:

Are SCA roles make-believe? Are they our true selves? A part of our true selves? How we’d like to see ourselves? Or, as my best friend would say, is it just a way to get babes?67

Here, he acknowledges that the roles he enacts in the specific moment of the fair give him status within the SCA, but that position and power translate to nothing of significance (at least externally) outside of the parameters of the simulation. The created medieval self is in reality merely a puppet for the ordinary person who invents it, the person who’s also aware of the mask (figurative, usually) they assume, and thus can never be fully absorbed into the past.

66 Michael A. Cramer, Medieval Fantasy as Performance: The Society for Creative Anachronism and the Current Middle Ages (Scarecrow Press, 2009), 87.
67 Michael A. Cramer, Medieval Fantasy as Performance: The Society for Creative Anachronism and the Current Middle Ages (Scarecrow Press, 2009), 64.
Oftentimes, as Cramer hints at, the traits of the imagined character are in some form a subject’s idealized alter ego, but also perhaps part of the subject’s inner impulses, repressed prejudices, and whatever else may seep its way into the created personality, even if those traits are less than desirable or acceptable in real life.

Role playing games, such as Dungeons and Dragons, are unique in that they allow individuals to create and assume characters, often outside of the constraints of ordinary society and maybe even freed from the roles they enact in their daily lives. Across my research, I heard many players remark that the act of pretending to be an alternate self actually allowed them to unlock real courage or other traits not known to be in their capability. Whether viewed as empowering, because creating new roles might just be crucial to exploring self-identity, or as escapist (not active change) – these games are reflective of an innate desire to explore alternative personas, if only temporarily. Similar to SCA events, these characters grow with time, developing further as the game is played over a series of sessions. Unlocking heroic qualities like strength, determination, and cleverness is part of it – but there’s an underlying fear that instead the players will uncover dangerous impulses and ideals that have been sitting dormant inside.

“Almost always the personalities of the characters turn out to be combinations of people’s idealized alter egos and their less than ideal impulses” quotes John Eric Holmes in a famous 1980’s article discussing the journey into a player’s mind entitled *Confessions of A Dungeon Master.* Of course this logic was seized upon by the 1980s panic over the game, where a concerned society connected playing the game to indulging in the murder, torture, robbery, arson, and even rape the feature throughout the game’s narrative. Additionally, Holmes noted that players become so tied to their characters that the death of their fictional self can even cause

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depression; an example of the complex but nevertheless inextricable link between make believe and reality in roleplay.

The alternate world these events and games offer is a rejection of the structures of ordinary society, if at least for just a few hours, they offer an escape from the constraining powers of the world – or doing nothing to actively change them, opting to fantasize away from social constructions and into an almost anarchist utopia of collective madness. However you choose to see or use their value, we must consider why our society seeks connection to the past in this way – is it just for entertainment? Or is there something to be said about trying to escape the constraints of society – systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, and class divides, and to find the freedom to make individual identity choices in an alternate reality? Is that even really possible? Likely no, but total escapism is almost impossible in a world where experiences in the fantasy realm are blurred with real life perceptions, shaping the way players think about and experience their everyday lives as a result of playing the game.

PRODUCTION CONCEPT

So how does this all connect? When conceptualizing how to destabilize Shakespeare, I needed my costume designs to revolve around a somewhat unconventional theme. Dungeons and Dragons, with its medieval fantasy aesthetics and storytelling character creation was an unlikely but surprisingly perfect fit to apply to 1 Henry VI. After much deliberation about how the genre upholds white supremacy and how the histories continue to solidify Shakespeare’s cultural superiority, I decided to make my concept for this design imbued in a D&D campaign – making the characters drastically less historical and a heck of a lot more fantastical. In my production, I’m imagining that the world of the play is a modern one, alongside the time wherein the
audience currently lives. A group of teenagers, students hanging out after school, then use Shakespeare to enhance the creation of their adventures, much in the way transformative fanworks do. Instead of a sprawling epic with the endless cycle of cast members that this play demands, I’ve opted for an ensemble of twelve. This cast would enact the participation in a game that encourages the imagination to fill in gaps not dictated by scenery and space. By reimagining this big dramatic lead up to the War of the Roses as a fantasy role playing game for the stage, it shifts the idea that Shakespeare always needs to always be serious, heightened, and academic.

The game, and the history play, both elude reality within the confines of their controlled space — whether this be around tabletop player pieces or on a stage. Perhaps nothing better fits the messy, winding plot of the play than if it was assumed to be contingent on dice rolls. While D&D players may spend most of their time trying to make up for a bad dice roll, the characters of *1 Henry VI* are likewise preoccupied with reclaiming what they’ve lost – be it trying to take back lands or enacting that sweet revenge that endlessly haunts them. The meandering nature of the plot, random side missions, and offshoot quests make the highly disorganized plot of *1 Henry VI* more like gameplay and less like a theatrical script that is performed or read. Below, I’ve included a visual that may help illuminate how this concept could be staged. As illustrated here, I’m imagining the set being designed like a Victorian gothic university library, which would give it a mythological medieval flair, that allows the narrative to assume an eerie sense of reality when modern elements are removed from the space.
A key point of contention in the play is that no one character is ever able to control the whole story. This is one of the most cited reasons as to why the play feels weak, but the same can be said for Dungeons and Dragons, a game with strong individual characters that don’t all operate in service of a protagonist. There is, however, a main storyteller player in the Dungeon Master (DM), which contrasts with 1 Henry VI. Which you will remember, is the person who both creates the campaign and narrates the adventure as the rest of the players navigate it.

Additionally, the DM can stand in to voice the extra characters that exist within the fantasy world, essentially speaking to the players to guide their journeys. I knew that the DM figure would have to find itself into my concept somehow, and it was actually surprisingly easy to
place. For one, there is no shortage of minor roles to be voiced in *1 Henry VI*. The often lower class, anonymous messenger, townspeople, and others who drop into the narrative throughout are not to be dismissed as unessential; in fact, these characters often change the course of the narrative in significant ways and insist on another perspective separate from that of the aristocrats and warring nobles. Having a DM-like character read their voices aloud, as opposed to a revolving door of actors sporting different accessories, would serve to enhance their impact by allowing audiences to focus on their words and bringing their imagination to the table to see them. The brilliance of this play occurs when the wealthy and the titled characters are left hanging on the words of a nameless individual who, erased from the history books, is duly recognized on the stage. As far as choosing a character who would essentially operate as the DM, I’d already been tracking a role that Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights had inserted as a narrator – The Duke of Exeter. Exeter had always drawn my attention in this play, a character whose historical counterpart had already died long before the events of the play had taken place, and someone who seemed so distanced from all of the other hotheads crowding for stage time. Used by the author/s to narrate, comment, and foreshadow, Exeter is always in the room, but rarely speaks directly to the others. His numerous ominous asides drive the story, but they often felt like disjointed puzzle pieces until I developed this concept. Like Exeter, The Dungeon Master is similarly responsible for the narrative flow. As DMs may sometimes use books to build campaigns for their group, my concept imagines the idea that Exeter co-opts Shakespeare to create an exciting adventure for their friends. Shakespeare is then not the priority, but merely a dramatic catalyst to new imaginings. I am excited by the myriad ways this play maps over the D&D world, or more accurately, all of the ways that the world of D&D maps on top of *1 Henry VI*. Of course, it doesn’t line up perfectly, since Shakespeare isn’t a player campaign, but I think
those incongruities are part of the beauty of it. The essential ideas, though, are very much the same. D&D players often do unexpected things which change the course of the adventure, similar to the characters in *1 Henry VI* who trade loyalties, have individual thoughts brewing, and make their own unique individual choices. In a rather poetic metaphor, players can only see what’s right in front of them, (in the online *D&D Beyond* remote areas of the map are literally blacked out) which aptly parallels the ways *1 Henry VI*’s characters are blind to the misfortunes that await them, and the history we are familiar with, that is altogether unknown to them.

One logical challenge that performing Shakespeare, and particularly the histories, presents is how to stage scripted events that often feel, well, unstageable. *1 Henry VI* features many different locations, and calls for large battling armies and a whole slew of side characters who appear and disappear just as sporadically. In a similar fashion, Dungeons and Dragons also conjures large skirmishes and sweeping landscapes, but for the few hours that it is played, all the participants agree to accept the world that is being created, even if they can’t physically see it. Shakespeare operates under this suspension of disbelief too – just look at the famous *Henry V* prologue. Here, the actors ask the audience to imagine that they see all the fields of France and all the soldiers, and to pretend that they see and hear the galloping horses and warring countries. The world essentially exists in both places in the collective imagination between the presenter (actors or DM) and the audience or players.

Additionally, the game’s humorous, almost child-like fantasy elements may seem distant from *1 Henry VI* as a ‘serious’, complex, history play. As someone who has spent just about all of their time focusing on the play’s characters, it was hard for me to see them on the pages of a history book and not the screen of a video game. After all, part of the reason I chose this play was because its characters were so much larger than life with such distinct, strong personalities.
that they seemed to already come out of a video game. You just can’t have a name like ‘Bastard of Orléans’ and not also be the perfect gaming avatar. Beyond that, every character is so committed to maintaining a high flung identity that it is often to their detriment. Heated arguments between characters who are stubbornly attached to their traits and morals do offer some moments of comedy though. Each character is so defined by the roles they enact within the play: a king, a knight, a villain, that they have little agency to move outside the roles they’ve created for themselves. This is not unlike how many D&D players must remain committed to the backstory that they have created for their own characters. Despite this, while we might not want to live the life of Joan of Arc, for instance, wouldn’t it be interesting to assume her role and traits for just a few hours?

Not that the players are even really real, I should clarify, because they are simply actors pretending to play D&D, who are pretending to be characters in 1 Henry VI (get it?). I think there is also opportunity in this staged production to give character interactions new meaning because of the players who are assuming them. The game is most fascinating to me because it allows players to be both themselves and someone else simultaneously. This opens up some really interesting possibilities for a performance, – not only because the character’s interactions will take on new meaning due to the players involved, but because by exploring their created alter egos, the characters will grow and develop throughout the play. Costumes can contribute to this concept as pieces are assumed to create realism or shed to reveal an obviously modern reality. Contemporary clothing signifiers will continually disrupt and de-suture the audience away from the historical past the play evokes. By this concept, the play’s characters act as puppets for a contemporary person, just like in Ren fairs or Dungeons and Dragons. It also contributes to the idea that the text is not an all-encompassing strict frame – the play is in more
ways like a billiard ball rack holding separate individuals together just for the brief instance of
time in which the play exists. Invading the text with fantastical D&D constructions runs the risk
of disrespecting the play, but no more than cutting it from the trilogy entirely, as is usually done
(if you don’t tell Shakespeare, I won’t either). Lastly, group dynamic is a huge factor in any
D&D group, so it would be fascinating to see the dynamics of a group whose chosen characters
are vying to take up space. All D&D characters have different abilities, as is true of all the
characters in 1 Henry VI who are likewise marked by their strengths and deep, deep, flaws. In
this way, the superiority of Shakespeare, his text and the weighty expectation, does not crush the
unique and individual dynamics of the campaign group who employ him to benefit their
enjoyment and self-exploration.

In conclusion, the concept to map D&D onto 1 Henry V would allow the play to stand on
its own – separate from the trilogy it’s usually molded into. A once difficult-to-leave-open
cliffhanger ending fits perfectly within a D & D campaign where players meet regularly to
continue the adventure. Overall, I believe that placing a history play in a distinctly fantasy genre
will simultaneously mimic and reject both, forming a new look at history, which brings together
both the old words of Shakespeare and the new understandings of fantasy role play as identity
and story creation through exploration.

As a final note, I’ve chosen to render this production with a female-identifying or non-
binary cast. This is because, while D&D is a worldwide phenomenon targeted at everyone,
women in particular have felt marginalized by the game’s male-dominated culture. I’ve modeled
the cast of my production after D&D groups such as the “Lady Knights”(2016), founded by
librarians at the Cincinnati Public Library for women, non-binary folks, and especially members
of the LGBTQ+ community. Here, library employees are committed to constructing props for players to use in order to make the game more exciting, further demonstrating the function of costume and accessories to the assumption of new identity and imaginative thinking. In their efforts to make the game more inclusive, the Lady Knights also provide new players with pre-made characters as opposed to the time-consuming process of new players having to create their own. This is what I’d imagine my ‘group’ doing, as the characters are already predetermined by Shakespeare, but the excitement lies in seeing the ‘players’ assume and develop them in their embodiment.

Figure 9. An example of an all female-identifying D&D group that has contributed to the resurgence through live streaming their games. Photograph by Girls Guts Glory, 2016. https://www.girlsgutsgloryrpg.com/.

As an image has been construed around the medieval times that women were not important, and that people of color or LGBTQ individuals simply did not exist (all which are not

69 Daniel Fishbayn, “This All-Female Dungeons and Dragons Group is Fighting Sexism Just by Existing,” Suggest.com, February 13, 2018.
true), placing this play in modern times gives it more freedom for a welcomed representation of diversity. I think it’s also important, considering how much women are sidelined in the history plays, and how little casting opportunities still exist in them, that casting not be aligned with traditional practices. After all, different casting doesn’t really change the story at all, and gender is just an aspect of each character as is status, position, i.e. York or Lancaster, etc.

AUDIENCE

While actors use costumes to help them embody a character, costumes truly exist for the eyes of eager spectators. How costumes communicate to an audience (and what they say) is at the core of any good costume design. Beyond defining time and space, costumes must also capture the emotional world of the play – the mood, the tone, and the drama. The best designs are the ones that include the audience by helping them track and further understand the characters; even loving or hating them more because of the way they have been designed.

\textit{1 Henry VI} throws audiences right into the action, shifting around on a jostley ride that ultimately leaves them hanging, with no sure ending to take with them. It’s a ridiculous whirlwind of characters, disagreements, and back and forth battles that force a viewer to exert themselves and pay close attention to simply keep track, or turn them off completely. Shakespeare is typically great about keeping the audience in cahoots with his characters, and \textit{1 Henry VI} is no different. In asides, the characters are in cahoots with the audience and the audience’s loyalty is constantly changing as backstories are revealed and conniving schemes are unveiled. For the most part, each character makes a compelling case for the motivation behind their choices, while the others are just lovable villains. I’ve mentioned many times that no single character ever truly seizes control of the narrative, nor wholly convinces the audience. Their
varied but viable perspectives illustrate to audience members the concept of contested history, and it’s deciphering these conflicting narratives that make viewers empathize with historians reconciling biased accounts.

I’ve mentioned how the wide-ranging scope of the play forces audience members to use their imagination in regards to settings and battles, even without the D&D concept. Elizabethan playhouses, such as the Globe Theatre, were not designed to replicate the settings indicated in the plays, but relied instead on the text to evoke the locale. Sometimes though, at least until an audience is sutured, the text can still be easy to tune out and get lost in. This is where costumes can sustain the attention of an audience, and foster their imagination, an essential piece of meaningful storytelling. I strongly believe that the audience is an integral part to the creation of the play, and of the history, at the moment of performance. Each audience member comes in with their own contexts that allow them to create new and varied meaning from a piece of theatre, producing a plethora of personal meanings at the very same time. However much a production may try to imbue a play with a central theme, message, or interpretation, there is no way to control what an audience member will take away from it and how much of their own connections they will supply to it. Audiences are not observers receiving meaning, but active participants in creating meaning for themselves. This dynamic between performance and audience is a relationship that requires both parties to work together to create the art. You might notice that I love to use the word unstable, but audience reaction and perception is just that – never predictable, always changing, and never guaranteed. What characters don’t say is sometimes as important as what they do, particularly when audience members supply filler information for gaps in the text based on the context clues they’ve seen (including costumes).

Although every individual could reflect upon a different meaning as they draw on their own
experiences, knowledge, and ways of thinking, a production’s design can inspire these
collections. For example, Shakespeare’s original audiences for *1 Henry VI* in the Rose Theatre
may have interpreted Joan of Arc as a subversive portrayal of the Queen, but others might have
seen other (or perhaps no) political implications. In a modern take, I myself came across a few
online comments discussing how the bickering leaders in the play are not so different from
certain politicians now. Even if I choose not to lean into that perspective with my design, the
minds of audience members may bring in outside relevancy as they make the play work for
them, and *1 Henry VI* is particularly open to that.

The play sets off chains of local associations, but without the subtle shaping and end-
capping which we might expect to control them given the sensitivity of the subject
matter. Its very unsettledness is its protection. It creates an open field for speculation that
audience response is scattered. We cannot know the author’s intent.70

Yet I find irony in juxtaposing the fantasy medieval role play of D&D with
Shakespearized history, and throwing in a slew of contemporary pop culture references to grab
an audience’s attention, to be at the very least entertaining, albeit a bit ridiculous. I think this
ridiculousness is important to acknowledge when presented with a canon whose problems
sometimes seem to arise or amplify when it’s regarded as too serious to be made fun of. This
lovable ridiculousness is what first drew me to the play, so it would be criminal to not highlight
it in my design. My first introduction to the play started in the form of a Zoom reading by the
company *The Show Must Go Online*; a virtual Shakespeare platform for global artists and
audiences that evolved in response to the Covid pandemic.71 I was delighted to peer into squares
of actor’s homes, where they wielded bananas and hair dryers as weapons, covered themselves in

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70 Leah S. Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Readings and its Discontents* (Los Angeles: University of

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2oOOWUiCe.
blood made from all varieties of jam and ketchup, and cowered behind cardboard castle pieces scraped together from Amazon packages and cereal boxes. It is this creative spirit and fun attitude that motivated me to pursue this particular design concept. Humor is something that is important in Shakespeare performances, and it often goes untapped to favor more highbrow readings, which is really a shame.

While a somewhat more comical and fantastical spin, I think this interpretation also lends itself well to the complex trappings of the history play. Of course, the modern clothing elements, textiles, and styling in my design constantly reminds the audience that they are watching a twenty-first century take on the Middle Ages, it still draws attention to that history at play. This concept encourages audiences to think about alternate methods of historical representation, rather than showing them a true replication of the past. Obvious fantasy elements invite skepticism of the play’s historical truth, while at the same time blurring fact with fiction to create drama and theatricality.

*1 Henry VI* should create some sense of community. Unlike in its original time it wouldn’t suit today's audiences to have that community be centered around a connection to England’s heroic past or a celebration of the history of its power. Beyond the theatre goer’s annoyance at listening to the person next to them loudly crinkle a candy wrapper, the audience as a collective unit of individuals is something to be longed for, especially when watching theatre online during a pandemic. The social nature and collective reactions of an audience is a unique form of human connection and interaction that creates an ephemeral moment in time, even if the production has multiple performances. While the etiquette of attending a Shakespearean performance today is still wrapped in exclusivity, theatergoing was originally less passive or observational. The configuration of The Globe Theatre, for instance, encouraged audience
interaction and engagement, and the plays were often written to accommodate the venue in this way. In many ways, they require an audience to respond as an additional participant, i.e. laugh, clap, etc. In my costume design, the contemporary clothing and references that I’ve worked into my fantasy-inspired designs help the audience to see themselves represented onstage, fostering a partnership between the audience member and the performance.

**Concluding Remarks**

Unless dramatically adapted, the play itself remains generally unchanged by time. If this centuries-old play is put before an audience who has changed, and the text refuses to budge, then it must be the design that alters itself. Readdressing the design of *I Henry VI*, which I’d like to reiterate is not just clothing, but the way the *characters* look, can reshape the historical and cultural narratives in the play itself. At least to a significant level, while still profiting from Shakespeare’s cultural capital. Questioning Shakespeare through design may have had its twists and turns, but I think it yielded some points of consideration within design and the fraught genre of history in performance.

In regards to the design itself, there’s strength and weaknesses to address having now completed it. While balancing the need to destabilize the play and to introduce some radically bizarre new concepts, one of my main priorities was to instill a sense of audience understanding. It would be hard for an audience to appreciate all the nuances of the design if they couldn’t tell what was going on in the play. My priority was therefore to make sure the audience could differentiate between either side; both within the English ranks, and between the English and the French. I tried my best using color to visually separate them, but the play arranges the sides in a confusing way. I was concerned that I hadn’t done enough to help the audience understand who
was on which side. In addition, there are limits to current rendering technologies, and in a real theatrical costume shop with a real budget for a real show, it’s unlikely that the final costumes will closely resemble the renderings. Some of the costumes I built even have variances. This is not only because, in a professional production, creating costumes is a collaborative process with a creative team (directors, other designers, and actors), but there’s also more of an effort to utilize what is already available, what can be created, and what can be found in costume storage, at the local thrift stores, on the internet, or in closets. That being said, unless there is a large budget, not every piece would be bespoke to the final production as I’ve done for my project. For many theatres, that would be too time-consuming and expensive, and in some regards unnecessary, since much of the design incorporates modern dress. In addition, I encourage anyone staging this concept to explore new pieces for different bodies and to find what speaks to the character best, not the original drawing.

While it is by no means encapsulating, I think this concept has potential and it’s something that I would personally be glad to see onstage. I, myself, was so inspired by all the fan posts I came across filled with brilliant imagined concepts for how a Shakespeare show or scene should be done and I often wish that the Royal Shakespeare Company or a similar high-profile company would casually happen upon these ideas and pick them up. I hope my concept feels like one of those fan ideas but on a bigger scale. It’s worthwhile just to imagine, even if it never gets staged. I also think I did a decent job of making all the characters feel unique and individual, even if they feel jarringly separate. This show has no monotonous background ensemble and everyone is big, larger than life and fighting for time on the page (or stage). I thus tried to be fair to everyone, and make them all look cool even if they were villainized, stereotyped, or diminished by the text. I also tried to look outside the text and to other sources to find who they
could become that would make sense to an audience and function logically with the play. This concept lends new potential to this play, which still holds a lot to be learned with regards to history in performance although it is often kept from the stage or inseparable from its more popular counterparts. Isolating *1 Henry VI*, with all its weirdly cool moments and deeply flawed dialogues was a struggle; but also a joy to view as its own entity. It could certainly be studied more, but I also would like to see it performed alone more, because I think it has something unique to offer. Its link to Shakespeare also may back its credibility with how society values theatre, supporting a creative inquiry. While the play itself is somewhat like product placement for Shakespeare, the rest of the design doesn’t have to be. Of course, my intentions with the designs are always subject to the interpretations of whomever is viewing them (something no production ever has control over), keeping the conversation around *1 Henry VI* going keeps the play itself alive. This design is just a piece of what I’d like to contribute to that conversation amongst the work of all the scholars, professionals, and fans I’ve been reading over the past year. Whenever I design a play, I’m also most influenced by what is going on around me. So, in addition to specific research that I did, I was open to anything exciting that seeped in, which kept me motivated to continue and certainly made this reading feel a bit sporadic (apologies). It’s this spirit of playful inquiry that I hope feels infused into every design.

One critique of Shakespeare repertory companies today is that they stage the classics alongside modern plays contributing to similar season themes, but not discussing how they clash with one another in terms of outmoded social constructions, language, and modern perception. I thought that choosing this very modern, digitally involved, and moment-specific theme would put Shakespeare and the present day into a jarring juxtaposition that would sometimes work harmoniously and occasionally feel disjointed and downright bizarre. I think this is important
because all plays can’t seamlessly transfer into a modern setting, if we’re acknowledging them for what they are. “It’s not like the play is a round peg and society today is a round hole” to quote Raphael Massie of the OSF podcast. 72 It’s not going to line up perfectly –Shakespeare has limits. This concept may not give any answers to the burning questions I posed here, but giving answers is not so much the job of theatre as is asking questions. Despite innovative designs, the text comes from a place of discrimination, exclusion, and privilege. It’s hard to strip back assumptions of the characters, due to the societal norms when the play was written and the society we currently live in today. 1 Henry VI may not be able to address everything an audience might want to know about their own culture and we have to let that perfect ideal go to move forward. Hopefully it’s interesting enough to people that it’s worth doing, and the questions it asks are worth considering.

I should also note that I obviously had more individual creative freedom because I was not working on a professional design, but more of a (mostly) independent, exploratory one. I did not, as a result, feel the pressure that some costume designers working for Shakespeare companies may feel when designing, and was not pushed to conform to the usual expectations due to revenue pressures. I was free to reinvent and imagine whatever I chose without substantial backlash, more like the creative liberty experienced by fan authors than the practical and structural obstacles of theatrical companies.

By responding to social media engagement and considering all the incredible fan theories about characters while designing, I hoped to foster a participatory environment where intended audiences were partners in the design process. Voting on choices, and commenting at each step

of the process, influenced my final choices. I tried to create polls and present information and images in the most creative and entertaining way possible to encourage this participation. Even if I couldn’t effectively communicate who a character was throughout the play and why I chose to dress them in a certain way, the comments I received gave me a sign that the designs were making people feel something whether they thought it was really cool or would like to wear it themselves. For the most part, I found fans were so open to new perspectives and ideas they hadn’t seen before and that was really a joy. They were my audience, not Shakespeare.

**The Exhibit**

Throughout this process, it was crucial that I keep my audience in mind. To this end, I applied for and was granted space in the Charles Chu reading room in the Shain Library at Connecticut College to exhibit my work. Since the pieces needed to be eye-catching to garner attention, the final costumes are a bit more developed than the production concept demands. My concept calls for a ‘shitty cosplay’ theme but I didn’t want my audience to focus on amateur-looking construction. Instead, I wanted to evoke strong, immediate reactions from students who weren’t familiar with the play as well as from those who have read the play and were curious about my design choices. Just like during a live performance, the costumes should be perceived as performative so that those who view them become the audience.
I was delighted to see the many thoughtful responses by visitors who filled out the accompanying exhibition survey I created. In the survey\textsuperscript{73}, I provided images of my costume renderings and asked visitors to give their impressions of what type of character would wear the costumes and what story they felt the costumes conveyed. Most of the viewers, despite not knowing the context of the play, were able to accurately describe the meaning behind the costumes. Comments were anonymous so I cannot credit the correct responses to particular individuals, but viewers were able to grasp that the costumes were about power, even treason, and that they represented multiple loyalty groups. They felt the chaotic and fun nature of the story coming through, and even acknowledged the youthful spin I developed, which prompted them to root for characters they were able to identify as “the bad guys.” Comments about the beauty of the costumes were balanced by remarks about the play’s seemingly more violent themes, which created an equal balance between the more obvious “dangerous-looking” costumes and the suspiciously pretty-looking ones.

\textbf{Figure 12. Costumes on Exhibition.} Created and curated by the author, April 18 - May 1, 2021. Charles Shain Library, Connecticut College, New London, CT.

\textsuperscript{73} See full survey in Appendix II.
So, does Shakespeare still have a place in our society and on our stages today? He does and likely will, justified or not. If we’re not ready to seriously rewrite the texts, I think costumes can help reimagine it.

I: CHARACTER

The Characters of 1 Henry VI

A note about character boards: Each character description is accompanied by a supporting visual collage. In my design process, I create character boards before I start to think about clothing, and these respond to the emotional role, journey, and personality of each character. I compile imagery that I feel represents them and then use this to develop their aesthetic through costume.

A note about character alignments: Character alignments are shorthand for a character’s attitudes and morals and are used to categorize characters in D&D. They can also be applied very effectively to pop culture franchises and other fantastical storytelling. I’ll talk about each alignment and what it means as we encounter them, but the nine possible combinations are listed in the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lawful Good</th>
<th>Neutral Good</th>
<th>Chaotic Good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lawful Neutral</td>
<td>True Neutral</td>
<td>Chaotic Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawful Evil</td>
<td>Neutral Evil</td>
<td>Chaotic Evil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Henry VI:

The namesake of the play, Henry is the king of England. He ascended the throne at just nine months old after his father, the great Henry V, met an untimely end. Henry is presided over by his uncle Gloucester, the Lord Protector of the realm until he is old enough to rule on his own. He spends most of the play as a child and early teenager, who despite his youth, is consistently called upon to solve disputes in the court amongst his bickering elders. He’s burdened with the destiny of losing all the lands in France which his victorious father won in the Hundred Years’ War. While he’ll put more voice to it in later plays, Henry does not appear to enjoy being king and wishes only for peace and harmony amongst his advisors, and an end to their fighting. As a result, he tries to please everyone and feels anxious knowing that that is an impossible task and that he will inevitably have to let some people down. Fans are a bit conflicted about Henry, although most appear to dislike him. He uses his deeply held religious beliefs and over-reliance on divine providence to shrink away from the great responsibilities that have been bestowed on him as ruler of France. His people, and the nation, get hurt as a result of his actions (or, more accurately, inactions). However, he is young and has no father to mentor him through the violent factions that emerge within the court who use his naivety to their advantage.
**Alignment:** *Neutral Good.* This means that Henry acts in ways that at least attempt to help and benefit those around him, even if those attempts fail (which they often do). He does genuinely want to stop the fighting and establish peace and feels that the factions are silly and doesn’t understand the seriousness behind them. The intentionality may be there with Henry, but the action often isn’t. Even the best intentions, the play proves, are never enough.

**My Take:** I chose to feel bad for Henry, although he ultimately fails to use his position of power and privilege to end the violence that plagues his country. In my reading of him, I see someone with a lot of childhood trauma who just wants to escape. For the purposes of my production, I chose to view Henry as a kind of younger sibling to one of the other D&D players, who was just barely allowed to tag along. He’s really excited about playing, but doesn’t really know how or have any strong opinions, which would make him fun for the group dynamic. It’s frustrating having him around, but you kind of can’t get out of it.

**Gloucester:**

As the Lord Protector, Gloucester manages the kingdom until Henry is old enough to rule. This means that he is sometimes accused of attempting to control the crown, particularly by his arch nemesis the suspicious cardinal Winchester. Regardless of any selfish intent, it’s impossible to deny that Gloucester is in an extremely high position of power, and that makes him a bigger target for the hatred of those vying for power in the court. Although he often lets his hatred towards that wicked priest get in the way, Gloucester genuinely does seem to care for Henry and is deeply disturbed to see him troubled. He also takes his position very seriously and is quite proud of it, advising and doling out wise counsel even as the young prince is swayed in the wrong direction by others. Although hinging on patronizing, I found Gloucester to be well-
prepared and measured in each scene, in contrast to the unchecked emotions of the other
characters within the play. He is one of the few characters able to put aside his own personal
feelings for the good of the king and realm, and does seem to ultimately desire peace, which feels
somewhat unique amongst the rest of the lot who seem to thrive on conflict.

**Alignment:** *Lawful Good* - Gloucester is a devoted follower of the rules and traditions of the monarchy. He respects the authority of the crown even if Henry is only a child with poor decision-making skills. However, his adherence to this hierarchy makes him hard on those who don’t adhere to his beliefs and proclaim their undying loyalty to the throne. Further, because he values the system so much, he prioritizes his allegiance to the monarchy over those who are close to him. To protect the innocent and fragile Henry, he must incur the wrath of the schoolyard bullies who don’t take kindly to a teacher’s pet.

**My Take:** Since Winchester is scholarly, older, and wise, he seemed the most apt in my production to be represented as a wizard. His intelligence, wisdom, knowledge, and insights are all valued and welcomed by the young king. While his position lends itself to a level of arrogance that the other characters dislike, I think his ability to take a step back from his anger
and find the logic of any given situation is something everyone else could all get a bit more practice on.

Winchester:

A man of extreme power and wealth, Winchester commands the English church, as well as anyone he can sway with his broad influence. He’s constantly on the up and up, and even obtains the title of Cardinal as the play progresses. Winchester seems to be dressed in a new and expensive ensemble of clerical vestments every time he enters the scene. This naturally puts him at odds with the Lord Protector, Gloucester, as they vie for power and influence over the kingdom and its young leader. Gloucester feels the priest is living a far too lavish lifestyle, with an overly saucy and ambitious attitude for a man of the church, and he’s probably right. Winchester is, to say the least, suspicious with regards to his trajectory of power. He is not as forgiving in the way of peace for the greater good like Gloucester is, which is hypocritical to his position.

**Alignment:** Neutral Evil. I chose this alignment for Winchester because he not only seeks to eliminate others in his way, but also attacks them personally—Gloucester in particular. He even uses Gloucester’s strict adherence to morals against him in feigning a truce, which is something neutral evils are known to do. He chooses his actions based on himself and his needs, without
considering the impact they may have on others and the country at large. He’ll follow the hierarchy as long as it serves him, but doesn’t mind stepping out of bounds to further his position or achieve his aims.

**My Take:** Honestly, he may be downright evil, but I’m so entertained by the guy. I can also respect his hustle, because even if he’s ostracized by the rest of the cool kids club at court for his shady dealings, they have to acknowledge the status he’s grown into. From a designer’s perspective, I love to see a character who values power dressing, and Winchester certainly dresses for the job he wants (even if that job is basically king). Furthermore, his petty demeanor makes him borderline cartoonish, which is entertaining and well-suited to a somewhat stereotypical fantasy world. There is actually a religious/cleric character type in the realm of D&D whose strengths include persuasion, charisma, and even trickery. Sound familiar?

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**York:**

Becoming one of the major players in the War of the Roses, we first see York as a courtly outcast, having been deprived of his wealth and titles by the late Henry V. At a young age, York witnessed his father being executed for crimes against the crown and his uncle, Mortimer, locked away in the tower for life. It is in a visit to this very uncle that solidifies for York his descendancy and claim to the throne. Convinced of his royal heritage, angry at the current monarchy for its
careless treatment of lands in France, and desirous for revenge on the slanderers to his family name, York sports a white rose plucked from the garden and encourages his supporters to do the same, encouraging the factionalism that will only grow in the subsequent plays. York is a very angry character as a result of the way he’s been despised and snubbed by those around him and it’s made him cold and unsympathetic. A significant scene of his is the capture of Joan of Arc where he brutally mocks her without pity and ensures she is burnt at the stake. Not to be mistaken though, York’s mastery of scheming is not on the battlefield (although he’s not as afraid of getting dirty like some of the others). His true genius is manipulation within the realm of politics, where his Machiavellian cunning earns him mounting ambition. He’s very calculated as he works towards his goal, which makes him similar in some respects to his son, the infamous Richard III.

**Alignment:** *Lawful Evil*: Rules and hierarchy are not as important to York as his family and cause. I don’t think he would consider himself evil, because Henry VI is not ruling the country effectively and York appears to have a legitimate claim. This type of alignment is one of the most dangerous, and I think that’s suited to York as his calculated plotting is able to create loyalty to a faction that eventually does take the crown.

**My Take:** My design for York appeals to the D&D ‘Rogue’ character – a scoundrel who doesn't use brute strength, but rather intelligence and deception to exploit his foes. York is sly. Combined with the adversity he faced as the result of being less privileged than the rest of the court, he develops an edge and bitterness. I feel for York; I think that’s the point. I keep reminding myself that every character in this play comes from a place of hurt and pain that ultimately closes them off from the emotional pleas of others. Not that it justifies York’s
treatment of Joan, who he seems to hate just because she’s both French and a woman. Yet, despite York’s uncaring for the world, he does have a deep love for his family that he is adamant to protect and honor at great personal cost. He does raise a couple of really obnoxious sons, but he at least tries to provide them a more privileged life than he experienced.

Somerset:

A young and somewhat haughty lord of the court who picks a fight with York while in a rose garden, Somerset emerges as the main proponent of the red rose or Lancastrian party. Looking down on York for being the son of a traitor, Somerset continues to poke the bee’s nest, until the antagonism between them and their followers escalates to an all out civil war in the plays that follow. Somerset is stubborn in the way only young, privileged people can be and he causes further division by refusing to concede a loss in the disagreement with York, even when it is proven that fewer people are on his side of the argument. The most profound moment of his stubbornness is when Somerset refuses to send aid to Talbot on the battlefield without York doing the same, and this pride leads to the English hero’s death. On the whole, Somerset is somewhat of an immature bully, who despite his eloquence in the rose garden scene, is irritating even when surrounded by other greedy power grabbers.
**Alignment:** *Neutral Evil:* This describes Somerset because his actions are driven by his primary loyalty to himself, those that follow him, and those that he supports. He takes actions that are in his best interest and refuses to consider the other options that may be available. Even as he sides with the crown, for Henry is also a Lancastrian, Somerset’s personal pride blinds him from the dangers of provoking York to factionalization.

**My Take:** Somerset is happy to let his followers and servants do his dirty work while he develops opinions on things he really has no experience with. I get where York is coming from with wanting to have Somerset’s head. This is another example of how everyone’s arrogance and willfulness make bargaining and cooperation extremely difficult.

**Duke of Exeter:**

An English lord who never truly reveals where his loyalties and personal opinions lie, the Duke of Exeter serves as a commentator on the play’s events for the audience. He’s very aware that the fighting amongst those around him does not bode well for the future and he doesn’t dwell in the emotional drama that seems to consume the rest of the characters. Continuously reminding audiences to imagine what the play’s events may foreshadow, Exeter does virtually nothing to stop them as they progress and seems content in their

*Figure 17. Character Board for Exeter. Created by author.*
inevitability. Always a presence but hardly ever a participant, Exeter’s soliloquies are for the audience’s ears only.

**My Take:** Exeter was the obvious choice for the Dungeon Master (DM) in this D&D Universe because he is in many aspects separated from and operating on a different plane than the other characters in the play. He exists for the audience, not as a driver for the plot or the other characters.

**Talbot:**

The ‘Golden Boy’ English general, and a star model of chivalric masculinity, Talbot is representative of the strand of heroic old English nobility which is dying out in favor of the bickering lords back at Court. After a period spent as a prisoner to the French where Talbot endured some rough treatment, he is once again free to reign terror on his enemies as the most fearsome force on the battlefield to reclaim France. Not often in the court with the others, Talbot employs a lot of delicious and gory imagery to show us his proximity to the death and violence those in the palace command. His almost mythical reputation gives him great influence over his armies, and he’s a worthy leader who’s both charismatic and strategic, if not a bit bloodthirsty.

Figure 18. Character Board for Talbot. Created by author.
Alignment: Lawful Good – Talbot’s biggest flaw is his unwavering belief in following traditions and upholding honor. He is committed to doing the right and honorable thing as society expects it, obtaining revenge for the dead, and refusing to flee a fight even when faced with impossible odds. He tries and believes in the people who have been invested with social authority, and never doubts Henry even as the young king leads his country towards disaster. Unmovable in his beliefs, Talbot’s death is both commendable and frustrating.

My Take: In the D&D world, Talbot is a shining example of the fighter class. He’s strong, intimidating, and perceptive to the task at hand. Something I admire about Talbot is his devotion to the men on the field and his willingness to do so much of the dirty work himself. In a lot of ways, he’s unlike the lords at court who remove themselves from the physical fighting, and look down upon their inferiors. The scenes where he faces Joan on the battlefield are really the most exciting, making him one of the other characters (besides her) that readers can really get behind. Of course, he’s a beacon of toxic masculinity, but his moments of confusion over Joan - moments where he questions gender and what defines it, are quite delightful.

John Talbot:

John is Talbot’s son. As a young man whose father’s reputation results in strong expectations for his behavior and success on the battlefield, John’s main motivation is to prove himself to others and in particular, make his father proud. In his one big scene, he fatefully joins his father in battle at Bordeaux after not seeing him for seven years – the older Talbot being too consumed with conflicts of war to spend time within the domestic sphere. Even as Talbot urges his son to flee the fight that will inevitably end in both of their deaths, John declines because he has been
brought up to believe that honor must be defended at all costs. The best way to describe John’s character is that of an Icarus: his youthful inexperience is paired with a dangerous drive for self-ambition, and logic cannot appeal to his notions of heroism and prideful stubbornness. His decision to perish unnecessarily in the battle can also be seen as a selfish endeavor since his death ends any chance he might have had to use the powerful reputation and privilege of his family to enact good.

**Alignment:** Lawful Neutral: I gave this alignment to John because he does believe in following expectations of honor and tradition like his father, but what he seems to value more is the code itself and not the resulting consequences. I think John is still too young to understand why he must uphold his father’s belief system, just that doing so is morally correct. As a result, he blindly follows an unquestioned code of ethics having not yet developed his own thought process as to whether or not they make any sense.

**My Take:** There is a D&D framework for the prodigy who comes from a remarkable family and wants to be known for their deeds as an individual, that fits John’s story arc well. While it's perhaps somewhat selfish and ridiculous to commit to a fight he will clearly lose, staying to fight alongside his father is generally still perceived as admirable and is one of the more touching moments in the play. Even the biggest naysayers of this play could at least admit they were moved by this scene. I’d also like to use this example to note the death of D&D characters while
on the campaign trail. Given the levels of violence in the game, it is frequent and highly possible for a player’s invented character to die, leaving them to create a new one in order to reenter the narrative. This can be very convenient for theatrical purposes, because an actor playing John, or even Talbot, could change costumes and re-enter the play as a different character such as Margaret, who only appears in scenes following their deaths.

Charles:

The French characters in *1 Henry VI* are underdeveloped because they are largely written off as stereotypes by Shakespeare, a famously English playwright. While Charles is known in French history as a great leader, I have to focus on his characterization within the fictional world of this play. In the play, Charles is crowned king while England grapples with the loss of Henry V. Shakespeare characterizes him as impatient, whiny, selfish, and such a cowardly and poor leader that he must resort to the help of witches (Joan of Arc) to succeed. Charles is a man who is quick to point a finger at others and to shirk responsibility for his own actions. He relies on Joan’s divine abilities for all his military strategy, which is driven by his creepy, sexual desire for her. He spends most of the play surrounded by those who do his bidding and celebrating the victories they achieve. Together with his forces, he is able to win back more than half of his
kingdom through a series of battles that eventually force Henry into a peace treaty, although the English are the obvious losers here.

**Alignment:** *Chaotic Neutral:* Charles is chaotic only because he breaks from England and their system of rules. He is loyal to his country, not the hierarchy that England has subjected it to. As he looks to achieve and maintain the freedom of his nation, he will participate or order whatever action necessary, be it good or evil from a moral standpoint.

**My Take:** A lot of Charles’s lines and actions read like comedy gags, and he is generally unlikable because of his unwarranted advances towards Joan when she’s just trying to do her job, and single-handedly win the whole war for him. I think the English had to make Charles out to be this way so they could feel better about themselves, but as a character he seems to care more about his own image than the wellbeing of his people, something that is common on both sides of the conflict.

**Joan:**

It’s hard not to draw upon my historical knowledge of the real Joan of Arc here, but I’ll try my best to stay within the confines of the play (although my design approach on her is less intertextual than the others). Joan is a young French girl, from a rural peasant family who is brought before Charles because of her ability to hear heavenly voices and her
possession of the power of prophecy. Joan is despised by almost all of the other characters in the play, including those whom her actions serve. Despite this, she is committed to the French cause and country beyond its mere petty politics and is devoted to sacrificing everything to secure victory for her people and honor the voices that call her to action. Although consistently sexualized and dismissed as a witch, Joan presents a major military threat and absolutely kicks ass to drive the English out of France with her endearing gusto and bold confidence. Her rapid rise to fame in the ranks is ultimately met with an even faster downfall as she is captured and done away with in a wash of flames.

Alignment: Chaotic Good: Joan does not live by the rules of society. She not only assumes the traits of a higher class than her peasant origins, but adopts a masculine profession and way of dress that confuses and frustrates the other male characters. She refuses to be bound by social codes because they are often obstacles to her task at hand. She makes a complete lifestyle change to address the messages she receives and to help the French cause. Joan adheres to this consciousness inside her beyond a shadow of a doubt and with utter confidence, even in the face of death. Something about chaotic good characters that is especially applicable to Joan is how they appear to others, often as strange for not abiding to societal expectations of conformance.

My Take: Anyone familiar with D&D would of course be quick to label Joan as a Paladin; a holy warrior class bound by a sacred oath from above. Similarly, Joan’s raw strength and charisma is unmatched in the play and she’s driven by her commitment to the powerful divine good (or devils, as Bill would put it) that speaks in her mind. Channeling this divine energy makes her stronger and gives her the unwavering conviction and confidence that is quite honestly inspiring. Despite Shakespeare’s attempts to villainize and slander her, Joan is cited again and
again as the star character in the play and a force to be reckoned with. She’s so witty and direct that her lines are virtually unforgetable. Any production that doesn’t recognize her as a main point of audience connection to the play is not reading the room correctly.

Bastard of Orléans:

Another overly simplified and stereotypical character, but interesting nonetheless, is the French nobleman and military leader, the Bastard of Orléans (he calls himself this – we don’t get much backstory, unfortunately). He joins Charles in the French revolt and is committed to France’s success. The Bastard of Orleans is vindictive, violent, bloodthirsty, overly harsh and brutal to those ends; on the whole not a person you’d like to run into on the battlefield. He uses graphic gory language that, typical of stereotyped villains, is unsympathetic to human emotions, notably in the scene where he calls for Talbot and John’s bodies to be torn to pieces and desecrated in a mocking manner. He can be credited, however, with introducing Joan to Charles, and for being the first to recognize her powerful potential in turning the tide of the war.

Alignment: Chaotic Evil: As the wicked crony behind Charles, the Bastard of Orléans seems to relish causing harm to others and is only temporarily bound by the rules in this state of
governmental anarchy. His unpredictable and intensely angry outbursts mark the scenes he is in and create an intimidating portrait of a volatile fighter.

**My Take:** Although a two-dimensional representation, the Bastard is an absolute video game avatar of a character that fits perfectly within this concept. He fits nicely into the D&D class of the Barbarian; a fierce and raging warrior characterized by reckless attacks.

**Margaret:**

This brings us to Margaret, who unfortunately, briefly appears at the end of the play, as the soon-to-be bride of Henry VI, king of England. Not to worry, however, if you keep up with the Henry VI trilogy, as well as *Richard III*, you will hear from her again as she leads armies and casts curses that have a lasting impact on this fictionalized historical saga. In *Henry VI*, she is introduced as a French princess that has been captured by English forces. Her father, Reigner, the King of Naples, possesses an empty title with no money to back it up. His daughter, however, is characterized as not only a stunning beauty, but a clever and savvy negotiator. Understanding her position, she accepts an offer to become Henry’s wife despite bringing little value to the English court. Enroute to becoming Henry’s bride and England’s next queen, readers may begin to see...
Margaret as a replacement for Joan given that she too is a French woman with seemingly ulterior motives that the English court can’t help but hate.

**Alignment: True Neutral**- I’ve chosen this for Margaret given that, since we don’t know enough about her yet (although we’re curious). We want to see where this alignment progresses as her character develops and confirm that she’s likely building her own agenda that’s momentarily undisclosed to us – creating her options now so she can maneuver towards strength and status in the future. She’s just been introduced to the playing board, and is creating space for herself amongst the other personalities.

**My Take:** Margaret’s entrance is like the cameo that plays after the end credits – instantly hyping audiences up for the next installment of the franchise. Her endurance through a life of war, to royalty, to leadership and influence, and beyond, starts here, on the cusp of one of the most significant and powerful female roles in any of Shakespeare’s plays.
II DESIGN:

Henry:

I wanted to approach the design for Henry in a way that emphasized his childish nature and one who is ill-suited for the violent and competitive world developing around him. In the context of the D&D world I’ve developed, this is probably someone who is more invested in personal connection with friends than suturing into the politics of the game. This reflects the way Henry spends so much of the play unsure of himself; constantly feeling the need to ask permission even when invested with the absolute authority of kingship. Visually cueing Henry’s youth helps the audience empathize with his incompetence, while also feeling the frustration of other characters at his inability to be anything but an innocent and neutral player in the vast narrative of war they’re building. Just as Henry is too young to separate the job from himself, I
think as a D&D player, Henry would internalize character’s decisions against him on a personal level that would make him difficult to play with. The Star Wars shirt is a direct nod to the intersectionality of fandoms, as I have found that Shakespeare fans often seem to take enjoyment in Star Wars because the character construction and narrative structure parallel surprisingly well. I also played with the idea of a lightsaber to give Henry as an added sound presence onstage for comic relief, but that would ultimately be up to the discretion of a director and actor.
Figure 25. Henry VI Final Rendering. Created by author.
Gloucester’s aesthetic aligns well with what can best be described as “dark academia,” a popular modern aesthetic category. Gloucester sports the trademark muted tones and soft geometric prints of someone who is scholarly, with a little flair for the dramatic, and an almost magical strength. After all, historically he was a large benefactor of the University of Oxford, which is where I drew a large part of the modern aesthetic from. In choosing to D&D-ize him as the wizard figure, I wanted to illustrate Gloucester’s immense power being second only to the king (if that), as well as his devotion to wisdom as the point from which his strength is drawn (unlike other characters, whose strength is drawn from anger and rage). So why not make the sword of state a wizard staff? Surely it can’t be that far of a leap. Additionally, the muted colors worn by Gloucester deviate from the bold statements made by the other character’s costumes, for he is orderly in his straight lines and formal wear in a way that is not ostentatious or showy like the other characters are. Yet the yardage and rich texture of his velvet robes lets the audience
question whether or not he indulges in his power and that Winchester might actually have a
point? I won’t answer that, but it begs the question. Lastly, the green is a calming hue that speaks
to his role as young Henry’s counselor and the trusting relationship that the two seem to share. I
love the possibilities of his cape in motion and the dramatic power it would give Gloucester to
command attention in his role as a high-ranking council member.
Figure 27. Gloucester Final Rendering. Created by author.
Winchester:

Figure 28. Winchester Original Concept. Created by author.

This bishop (later cardinal) character would be a fun one to assume for any D&D campaign. My intentions with Winchester’s design were based on the shapes of animated characters, as I attempted to design someone who was cartoon-esque and sumptuously ornamented. I wanted him to scream “suspicious, with devious ulterior motives,” but also take up space in a way that competed with and outshine Gloucester for stage presence. I wanted his body to be indulged in glittery surface decor and embellishment that took his look several steps too far for someone claiming to lead a pious life. I imagine the creation of this costume to be the result of a compilation of found shiny bits and pieces assembled into a glitzy monstrosity that could serve as a campy rival to the famed celebrity appearances at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heavenly Bodies Gala. This is a character with immense wealth who does not attempt to hide it, and someone the audience must look at even if only to laugh at the preposterous display
of wealth he brings to every scene. The poor habits of an imagined medieval priest would not be adequate to speak to the way in which Winchester uses clothing to establish his dominance in court. He must appear as a rival to the crown and the design of this elaborate look, in comparison to Henry’s simple and uncreatively assembled ensemble, illustrates the control of Henry’s top advisors as they tower over him and contest each other.
Figure 29. Winchester Final Rendering. Created by author.
York:

Figure 30. *York Original Concept*. Created by author.

York is the villain you love to hate. I personally have a lot of love for villains dressed in white, and the symbolism of the white colored rose aligns delightfully with York’s cool, suave, and downright cold attitude. As a roguish character, York lives by his own policies rather than the chivalric rules of society. He is not a straight-laced goody two-shoes like Gloucester, so his clothes are loose and slung casually in a way that is stylishly informal. I want the audience to know that Somerset wasn’t the first person to pick a fight with him about his seditious father and I think he would be hardened by constantly having to defend his family and his place at court, despite being ancestrally so close to royalty. He is so closed off to human emotion that even Joan, the ultimate persuader, has no impact on him. He’s hardened from a lifetime of feeling inferior. Perhaps the eye patch is a remnant from some tavern brawl to defend his honor, while the thick leather coat is the hard shell with which he closes himself off from the world. I’ve
chosen this pirate-esque coat as his prominent garment because the wide lapel feels deliciously villainous, but also conveys a suave coolness that I think makes him more appealing for audiences to root for. The pirate aesthetic recalls someone who doesn’t play by the rules of another’s society, of which York’s desire to reorganize the monarchy fits well. After all, we can’t assume the entire audience will automatically side with poor Henry. A poll from my Instagram page revealed that out of 50 voters, 27 sided with team York, giving just a 4% lead over team Lancaster. Unlike the play’s original audience, audience members today are so distanced from the actual history that choosing their loyalty is more of a personal choice that they can investigate for themselves. I was overjoyed to find this divine, snake-like textile for the coat because it gives a hint at York’s sly, traitorous plottings and hidden slimy motives.

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74 Carly Sponzo, (@pinkparisdesigns), Instagram, December 7, 2020.
Figure 31. *York Final Rendering*. Created by author.
I think Somerset represents the D&D player who didn’t spend that much effort developing their character and is just ready to jump into the game and get into lots of fights. This person would wear something stereotypically medieval, with little attempt at customizing it to anything specific, which actually seems to work well for Somerset. The simple parti-color vest can be easily thrown over street clothes to enter the game world and participate in the action. Somerset competes with his counterparts in stubbornness and pride, but he lacks the worldly experiences and backstory development that many of the others seem to have. However, that doesn’t stop him from jumping straight into the action and having strong, provoking opinions that accelerate the plot. While Somerset is decidedly not the topic of much fan discussion, you want to see him
onstage just to see what he forces the other characters to do. This simplistic look emphasizes his role as a reaction-inducing character, while the red shows where his allegiances lie. Its casualness, compared to York’s very developed look, generates the feeling that Somerset is up against something that is larger than he intended and encourages the audience to cringe as he blindly keeps it up. We know he’s gonna get bitten back, and he’s so annoying we almost want it, but we’re waiting for York to unveil exactly how he will do this, and the anticipation and antagonism between the two is exciting.
Figure 33. Somerset Final Rendering. Created by author.
Duke of Exeter:

I’ve talked in length about how I will be using the Duke of Exeter as the Dungeon Master in accordance with the D&D concept I’ve developed. In each design, I’ve made a point to try, as clearly as possible, to establish what side of the conflict each character resides on in order to provide the best visual clues for the audience to follow. In the English group, red and white are used to differentiate between the houses of Lancaster and York. Exeter is the only exception because of his ambiguous loyalties. In order to establish Exeter as an omniscient narrator, I felt the need to distance him from not only the English, but the rest of the player/character cast entirely. He needed something that was in a color and style unlike any of the other characters in the play. I settled on a gray sweat suit because it was distinctly modern and wholly unassuming amongst the rest of the characters, whose outfits compete for attention. No matter how dramatic, or how real the action is onstage, Exeter’s presence should always serve as a visual reminder that
this world is a game and not a real story. The audience relies on Exeter to serve as a bridge between them and the narrative and dressing her in a costume that resembles something an audience member might wear makes her more relatable. I have, however, given Exeter a few fun details that give depth to my concept. In my imaginative backstory for Exeter, I picture her appropriating Shakespeare for a D&D campaign, and using him in the service of her own entertainment with friends. To illustrate this, I’ve given Exeter a fun pop art graphic tee with Shakespeare’s image. I think it’s a playful way to give tribute to the inspiration behind the piece, but also show that it is a single source and not the whole endeavor. It shows the struggle of balancing the fan and the need to disempower the work. I’ve also provided Exeter with a bookbag for all the game materials they may need to lug onto the set, decorated with various pop culture pins not related to Shakespeare, as a way to reflect the varied interests of most young adults. If you squint, I’ve even incorporated a Dungeon Master pin just to make the link to the concept more obvious.
Figure 35. Duke of Exeter Final Rendering. Created by author.
Talbot:

Figure 36. Talbot Original Concept. Created by author.

Talbot is a character who needs to look as cool as possible. As I combed through online and live in-person reactions to Talbot (whether Goodreads, live feed audience reactions from the Show Must Go Online, or Flock Theatre’s zoom reading) I saw the love for Talbot coupled with the sympathy for the loss of his son and his unnecessary death. People seemed to love Talbot because he represents the ultimate bad boy archetype, but at the same time has that underlying softness and humanity that is always a winning combination. (“Wounded Alpha Bad Boy Soldier”, details this further in Shakesqueer). Obviously, bad boys get leather jackets. I don’t make the rules. Due to his primary identity as a fighter-type character, I felt it characteristic to load Talbot up with as many weapons as possible to amplify his intimidation and cool factor. I’ve also chosen to encrust his jacket with spikes inspired by the armor of a medieval knight,

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which references how armor was used to weaponize every part of the body. I walked the line
between dangerous, as in other characters would not want to mess with him, and sympathetic –
someone the audience could rally behind and get excited about, and later feel sad for. He needs
to be someone who the French would exclaim is “the devil in arms” for that beautiful
juxtaposition in those final prose scenes to really hit hard. He needed to look powerful in a
different way than my design for Joan, so they could pair up nicely for conflict scenes, and also
have more ease of mobility than the courtly characters. Talbot’s look is also separate from the
English court, who do not operate within the battlefield landscape as he does. Though he is
fiercely loyal to his country, Talbot does not join the Lancastrian/Yorkist debacle, because his
loyalty goes beyond family but to the monarchy, if not the monarch himself. So, I chose black as
opposed to red. I think any person would want to assume a character like this in a D&D setting
because it would allow them to access the courage and confidence they might feel unable to
express outwardly.
Figure 37. Talbot Final Rendering. Created by author.
Visually conveying the relationship between John and his father was my first priority for John Talbot’s look. In choosing a similar color scheme and coordinated tie dye patterning, I hoped to establish that the two were related, so that an audience could visually see their connection. The leather pants are another coordinating element. Next, I wanted to differentiate the ways in which Talbot’s son was unlike him. The cut of Talbot’s jacket features more flare and all the eclectic spike, rivet, and hardware details give it the appearance of being worn in a legacy of battle. It also takes someone who is very sure and confident in themselves to be able to wear it with the swagger it requires. John, on the other hand, has not had the experience to develop the assurance of himself as an individual yet. As a result, his jacket is less of a statement piece. It is based off of the inner padded fabric layer of the knight's armor, and unlike his father’s which uses metal to remind the audience of the hard, outer shell of armor, I’d hoped this would give John the
appearance of being softer and thus more impressionable, and also more vulnerable. The bow
and arrow are the result of a question I asked on social media about people’s favorite magical
weapons. It suited John well, as opposed to the more brutal sword and axe used by his father.
Giving John this weapon shows that although he may be skilled as the result of a life spent in
training, it is ill-equipped to protect him on a crowded battlefield that is wholly unchivalrous by
his standards. Although John’s refusal to flee the battlefield can be seen as a selfish act, I think
he was doomed from the start by the baggage of his father’s reputation and the expectations he
felt were unnegotiable. In some ways, I think Talbot is horrified by the blind honor monster he
created, and the destruction to his legacy that John’s death causes. Yet, I also see John as a tragic
figure who endeavors to become an individual but whose only path is what his father has laid out
for him.
Figure 39. John Final Rendering. Created by author.
Charles is, like Winchester, somewhat of a ridiculous cartoonish figure. He’s also self-indulgent like the Cardinal, but unlike Winchester is new to power having just been crowned. This translates into a bit of unnecessary glitz and glam, that feels a tad tone deaf to the war raging on around him. Charles, like much of the English court, is also distanced from the fighting despite his strong opinions on it. I used a bright, synthetically colored palette for the French in order to separate them visually from the English. Charles’s look has actual medieval references, but also has stereotypical features such as the deep V-neckline, which reads a bit sleazy and is suited to someone who repeatedly makes unwanted advances towards Joan. It’s important also to note that a lot of these designs feature robes, coats, and other easily removable outerwear. For all of the play’s characters, I wanted their looks to be easy to put on, and also easy to remove as the production concept transitions in and out of the D&D campaign. Street clothes are clearly seen,
but can also be hidden when needed. The line between fantasy and reality should always be intermingled, as seen in the way that Charles’s Houppelande has a pair of acid wash jeans sticking out underneath it. Charles is a character who cares about his image a lot, and that’s probably because he needs to establish himself as a legitimate king both to his followers in France and to the English crown which seeks to disempower him. So, even if he goes too far with the accessories, it is not without reason.
Figure 41. Charles Final Rendering. Created by author.
Joan:

Joan’s look is based around an imagined medieval jupon, which is the padded vest worn as the base layer to armor. I wanted it to look functional, but it also had to be decorative to convey Joan’s role as a powerful symbol in France’s army. This is a role that Joan in real life understood quite well and it has been historically recorded that her armor was quite elaborate. I’ve even used a white armor piece as a nod to the white armor she was allegedly wearing when captured. I liked the idea of a protective jupon with a decorative cross that encompasses and protects her heart – something I think drives her to the intense passion of conviction and courage that her strength is drawn from. The diagonal placement of the armor is a tribute to her confident and distinctly individual swagger (unlike John, whose jupon-like jacket is laced all the way up). One prop Joan mentions having in the script is this amazing sword that was obtained from God; although she does admit to the audience that it’s just a piece of rubbish she found en route to meet Charles. Regardless of Shakespeare trying to cut her out to be untruthful, I sought to design
something for her that felt magical and was the height of D&D fantastical weaponry. And of course, being a gilded piece of garbage would work well for cosplay. I wanted the cross symbol to be comprised of an eclectic collection of found metal bits. I felt that all the parts of Joan’s look should appear to be drawn from various sources, compelled by the strength of her charisma and power of persuasion. Most importantly, I wanted her to look practical and ready to fight, so I held off on overly-ornamenting her beyond the key symbols that establish her divine powers. Her extraordinary ability to wield a divine magical sword juxtaposes with her ordinary sweatshirt appearance, likewise those around her must reconcile her humble peasant origins with her divine ordinance.
Figure 43. Joan Final Rendering. Created by author.
Bastard of Orléans:

I had a lot of fun designing a costume for the bastard. As the script provides so little about him, it gives the costume designer a lot of creative liberty for how he is viewed in the play. He’s such a chaotic character, that I choose to juxtapose a soft organza/tulle with a hard, fitted metal corset. This look contrasts different gender expectations and refuses to conform to a single societal norm, but at the same time feels balanced and suited to the character. There’s something so anarchical about wearing fluffy tulle with armor that I just love. The use of fur also feels barbaric, but the colors are so synthetic and unnatural. This references one line that describes him as “contaminated” in the play. The Bastard is the creation of a player who is fully committed to deviating from the restraints of daily life, if in an indulgently violent direction.
Figure 45. Bastard of Orléans Final Rendering. Created by author.
Margaret:

Figure 46. Margaret Original Concept. Created by author.

Margaret functions in a very small role in this play, so I know it may be confusing as to why I’ve opted to spend so much time and effort into representing her here. After all of my studies, I think it would be ignorant to ignore the impact she’s had on the modern memory of the history play and also her beloved place in the words of transformative fan works. Margaret is viewed in many ways, as a replacement of Joan for the next unruly female character. However, I think that statement is something that ignores the ways in which the two are very different characters. Logically, it makes sense for a production to double cast the same actress as both Joan and Margaret, because as soon as Joan is no longer needed onstage, Margaret can appear. This has never really sat well with me. One, because she is often the only female-identifying actress in the whole cast, and two because Margaret and Joan are not the same person. Joan crosses gender lines and constructs, whereas Margaret plays a series of archetypal female roles, namely wife,
mother, widow, and in this play, that of the bride. Margaret is distinct in that she finds the power within these roles, whereas Joan chooses to operate outside of them. Both are powerful and both are distinctive roles to portray onstage. I chose this fiery orange color for Margaret because I loved the analysis of Margaret being the phoenix that arises out of the flames from Joan’s immolation, but she is not Joan reincarnated. She is distinctly French in this color scheme, and of course her dagged sleeve detail serves to remind audiences of Charles’s coat. However, the sharper dagging used feels purposefully pointed to reveal her clever nature and foreshadows her boldness to come in subsequent plays. I wanted her to look feminine in a large, gorgeous gown, but also feel distinctly powerful and in control. The orange color and silhouette have a stage presence that distracts from the muted English colors that are left on stage. I also played around with Margaret’s agency in this silhouette and the ability to completely be consumed by it and to easily navigate without it. After living with the same group of characters throughout the entirety of the play, Margaret should feel like a shock. She ushers in the next wave of dramatic events. She’s vivacious and unfit to be anything else but England’s next queen, able from the start to hold dominance over the other characters by drawing on the stereotypical beauty standard of the
imagined medieval.

Figure 47. Margaret Final Rendering. Created by author.
Appendix Figure 1. A Medieval Fantasy World and Character Design Conceptual Image Collage. Created by the author with works adapted from various artists.

Appendix Figure 2. A Medieval Fantasy Character Design Conceptual Image Collage. Created by the author with works adapted from various artists.
Appendix Figure 3. *Inspirational Collage for the Design of Winchester*. Created by the author with works adapted from various artists.
Appendix

Figure 4. Medieval Fantasy Character Inspiration. Created by the author with works adapted from various artists.

Appendix

Figure 5. Inspirational Collage for the Design of Talbot. Created by the author with works adapted from various artists.
Appendix Figure 6. *Inspirational Collage for the Design of Joan.* Created by the author with works adapted from various artists.
Appendix Figure 7. *Inspirational Collage for the Design of York*. Created by the author with works adapted from various artists.
Appendix Figure 8. *Design of The Bastard Collage.* Created by the author with works adapted from various artists.
Appendix Figure 9. *Inspirational Collage for Margaret of Anjou*. Created by the author with works adapted from various artists.
Appendix II: Costume Construction

Appendix Figure 10. Inspirational Images for Talbot's Jacket. Created by the author with works adapted from various artists.

Appendix Figure 11. Technical Design Renderings for Talbot's Jacket. Created by the author.
Appendix
Figure 12. Technical Design Renderings for Margaret’s Gown. Created by the author.

Appendix
Figure 12. Fabric Study for Margaret’s Sleeve Detail. Created by the author.
Appendix Figure 13. Margaret of Anjou Costume. Created by the author. Photograph by Sarah Seeley, April 2021.
Appendix Figure 13. *Margaret of Anjou Costume.* Created by the author. Photograph by Sarah Seeley, April 2021.
Appendix Figure 14. *Talbot Costume*. Created by the author. Photograph by Sarah Seeley, April 2021.
Appendix Figure 15. York Costume. Created by the author. Photograph by Sarah Seeley, April 2020.
What's your impression about what type of character would wear these costumes? Feel free to throw out some adjectives, what they remind you of, etc.

Your answer

Appendix Figure 16. Exhibition Feedback Form 1. Created by the author, April 2021.
For those of you unfamiliar with Henry VI Part I, what story are the costumes conveying to you?

Your answer

Please use this space for any additional comments

Your answer

Appendix Figure 17. *Exhibition Feedback Form 2*. Created by the author, April 2021.
Final Note

Although I’ve been receiving feedback on social media throughout the process, I miss not having the collaboration of an actual production, which I think would have added a lot to the design. I will also never get to see how the pieces truly connect the costumes to the characters in a performance, but I have faith that the renderings and costumes I did make are performative on their own, and invoke a comprehensive image of the production. Imagination is after all, something I’ve mentioned quite a bit, and a big theme here. The visuals I’ve provided are meant to provoke a response and a feeling that could get a creative team excited and inspired, even if they change throughout the collaboration process.

This also brings me to another note with regards to the renderings. Since this play is not actually cast, I selected images of people that would reflect the kind of casting I would like to see in a realized production. Ideally, I would like the casting to be a collaborative effort between the audience community and those who are producing the show. Since I was operating on my own, I opted to render the cast as diversely as possible so that it better reflected the followers I was sharing my renderings with, the online fans I was learning from, the D & D players I watched on YouTube, my friends, my school community, and the inclusivity I’d like to see more of in Shakespeare. That’s not to say that they’re perfect, and I have a lot of anxiety that I’ll be letting someone down who doesn’t see themselves represented, but at the end of the day, the renderings are just that – inspirational ideas to hype a concept. I would welcome later modifications to make a cast member feel and look more like their version of that specific character. The creativity is never over, at least for the costumes, until opening night arrives.
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