

# Destabilising Decapitation in *King Henry VI*

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**Abstract** *In early modern England, state beheadings were carefully codified, reserved for the nobility and those convicted of treason. The highest and lowest in society were sentenced to beheading: those who headed the nation and those who threatened the head of the nation. Beheading was both a confirmation and an inscription of power: the publicly-staged state-mandated beheading inscribed the state's power on the subject's body, reducing the individual to a legible, mastered sign. The decapitated head was intended to be a stable, monosemantic inscription of state power.*

*Shakespeare, however, often resisted the idea of the decapitated head as a permanent, definitive inscription of state authority. This article will examine decapitations in Shakespeare's King Henry VI Parts 1, 2 and 3 (1591), exploring how these plays undermine the state's attempt to inscribe a stable, single meaning on the decapitated head. The plays do this in two ways: firstly, by challenging the state's monopoly on according hierarchised punishment, by staging illicit beheadings; secondly, by according an agency and an influence to the decapitated head itself on the stage. The recognition of how these staged beheadings undermine the state's inscription of power might guide us towards seeing the genre's recurrently subversive response to the state's claim to authority.*

Keywords: Shakespeare, beheading, decapitation, Henry VI, subversion, authority, state power

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In early modern England, state beheadings were carefully codified, reserved for the nobility and those convicted of treason. The highest and lowest in society were sentenced to beheading: those who headed the nation and those who threatened the head of the nation. Beheading was both a confirmation and an inscription of power: the publicly-staged state-mandated beheading inscribed the state's power on the subject's body, reducing the individual to a legible, mastered sign. The decapitated head was intended to be a stable, monosemantic inscription of state power.

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beheadings belie the careful codification of the state-decreed hierarchy of punishment. Beheadings are decreed and performed by those of too lowly a stature to do so, and are carried out on those not properly fitted for decapitation. Furthermore, the severed head retains an agency onstage that the state's inscription of power would attempt to deny. The head exercises a posthumous influence over characters and audience, infecting those it touches and those on whom it gazes with its abject condition.

This article will examine decapitations and the decapitated head in Shakespeare's *King Henry VI Parts 1, 2 and 3* (1591). More precisely, it will examine how these plays undermine the state's attempt to inscribe a stable, single meaning on the decapitated head. The plays do this in two ways: first, by challenging the state's monopoly on according hierarchised punishment, by staging illicit beheadings; second, by according an agency and an influence to the decapitated head itself on the stage. Other plays by Shakespeare also, of course, use beheadings as crucial focal points, perhaps most notably *Measure for Measure* (1604), with *Macbeth* (1611) and *Titus Andronicus* (1594) also offering less frequently discussed decapitations. However, I focus here on the *Henry VI* trilogy, partly because of the unsurpassed number of decapitations within the plays, but mainly because of their status as history plays. Margaret Owens has noted the prevalence of staged decapitations in the early modern history play, going so far as to call the severed head 'the pre-eminent marker for the history play' (2005: 145). If Shakespeare undermines the idea of the beheading as a stable inscription of state power, then the recurrent appearance of decapitation in the history plays might indicate the often subversive nature of a genre more frequently read as essentially conservative. Where Ton Hoenselaars, for example, criticises Shakespeare for 'the (often implicit) conservative political ideology of his play, and of his history plays in particular' (2010: 147), the recognition of how these staged beheadings undermine the state might guide us towards seeing the genre's recurrently subversive response to the state's claim to authority.

### **Beheading in Early Modern England**

State-ordered beheadings in early modern England were 'great public scaffold dramas' in Regina James's words (2005: 41), publicised in advance and performed in front of crowds, with the decapitated head erected in central public places such as London Bridge, Lambeth Palace and Parliament House to ensure the continuance of a public message of state power. Underlying these spectacular decapitations, however, was the careful codification of who could be beheaded within the hierarchy of contemporary state-decreed punishments. When the Shepherd in *1 Henry VI* cries of Joan La Pucelle, 'O burn her, burn her: hanging is too good' (5.4.33), he is invoking what Owens calls 'the semiotic economy

that governed the judicial imposition of punishment in early modern England' (2005: 146). Within this system, decapitation was 'a form of death virtually restricted to caste' and connoted 'aristocratic privilege' (Arasse, 1989: 32). Beheading was a quick, relatively elegant and hopefully less painful manner of dying, in comparison to hanging, burning, or drawing and quartering. The public spectacle constructed around the decapitation spectacle meant that it tended to emphasise the individuality of the victim, since each was paraded to the block and beheaded separately, whereas in hanging and other mass executions 'the victim was subsumed into the anonymous and timeless persona of the common criminal' (Owens, 2005: 127).

The exception to beheading being reserved for the aristocracy and the monarchy was the decapitation of the traitor or would-be traitor, whether noble or not. Here, decapitation was intended to honour the target rather than the committer of the crime: the head of state. To challenge the head of the state – to commit 'capital treason,' as Somerset puns (2H6, 5.1.107) – was to sacrifice one's own head. In what Jonathan Crewe calls 'a Dantesque contrapasso [...] that re-enacts the sin it punishes' (2009: 393), the decapitated traitor loses his or her physical head instead of his or her symbolic head of state.

Michel Foucault reminds us that the public execution is not merely a 'negative' (1977: 24) mechanism that represses and prevents, but a ceremony by which power – political as well as juridical – is manifested. The public execution 'is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted' (Foucault, 1977: 48). In the case of treason, the symbolic head is reconstituted by a literal head, the head of state's power reasserted by his or her reclamation of another's head. Making thus concretely material both the concept of the monarch as the head of the nation and this head's retaliation against menace, decapitation was intended to render legible the state's power over the subject, reducing the victim to a masterable sign – and crucially a sign with one stable, incontestable meaning. The spectacular but controlled quality of the execution and the subsequently displayed decapitated head was thus crucial to the functioning of this inscription of state power by early modern authorities.

Contemporary sources, however, record instances in public discourse when this attempt to impose a monological meaning on the subject's body was destabilised. Thomas Platter, visiting England in 1599, recorded how descendants of those whose now-decapitated heads were displayed upon London Bridge would boast of their relation to individuals who had once reached so high as to threaten the crown. Platter observes, 'Thus they make an honour for themselves of what was set up to be a disgrace and example' (1937: 155). The state's attempt to inscribe a single, stable meaning upon the decapitated head fails; the contemporary spectator confers their own interpretation upon the head. Although such

undermining of intended meaning is a risk in any public execution, as the hagiographic reclamation of the more frequently burned martyr attests, the dual inscription of the decapitation as both punishment and recognition of nobility renders it particularly vulnerable to such destabilisation.

### **Beheading on the Early Modern Stage**

There was a marked link between the early modern stage and the early modern execution block. Baron Waldstein recorded how a visitor to the London theatres in 1600 would have to cross London Bridge and witness the displayed decapitated heads there in order to reach the liberties (**Brtnicky z Valdstejna, 1981: 37**). ‘Backdrop, actors and a public’ were present for both theatre and execution (**Arasse, 1989: 88**), and audiences for either ‘paid high prices for the best seats’ (**Larson, 2014: 99**). Moreover, on both stage and executioner’s block, the body is manipulated as a signifier: the individual body is made into a spectacle in order to allow it to be inscribed with a wider meaning that is presented to a crowd of spectators. Each spectacle is carefully scripted and choreographed in the attempt to close down interpretative possibility to varying degrees.

The proliferation of decapitated heads across the early modern history play undermines any attempt to fix a stable or single meaning to the beheading. The history play that is marked by a proliferation of illicit beheadings and lingering heads refuses to, indeed cannot, offer a single, permanent inscription upon the body. Instead, interpretations multiply along with the decapitated heads, pitting ‘equivocal dramas against the univocal spectacles of power they seem to reflect, spinning subversion from what begins as imitation’ (**Cunningham, 1990: 214**). The stage representation of decapitation becomes a mockery or outright parody of political or judicial attempts to inscribe and so stabilise their power over the individual. History plays staging such beheadings can thus be read as subversive rather than conservative responses to early modern state authority. If the state seeks to inscribe power through beheading, these plays are literally a new scripting of those beheadings.

### **Unqualified to Decree Decapitation; Unqualified for Decapitation**

One manner in which these plays undermine the stable inscription of state power on the subject’s body is by challenging the state’s monopoly on power-inscribing punishment, with decapitation being successfully decreed or performed by an individual who should not have the authority to do so. The power to inscribe a message on another’s body is not the sole preserve of the state and monarchy; as Carol Chillington Rutter observes, ‘this power to represent power is not a royal monopoly,

is not in the control of the state; instead, it can be improvised and anarchic, arbitrary and subversive' (2012: 110).

*2 Henry VI* stages such challenges to the state's monopoly on decapitation. Suffolk declares his incredulity at the lowly sailors taking upon themselves the authority to behead him: 'It is impossible that I should die / By such a lowly vassal as thyself' (4.1.110-11). He attempts to comfort himself by aligning the stated-decreed nobility of execution with his own nobility:

No, rather let my head  
Stoop to the block than these knees bow to any  
Save to the God of heaven and to my King;  
And sooner dance upon a bloody pole  
Than stand uncovered to the vulgar groom. (2H6, 4.1.124-128)

However, Suffolk's language belies his own logic; he will 'kneel' to these lesser men in the process of being decapitated, and he will be very literally 'uncovered' by them, his head removed from his body rather than his hat removed from his head. Both the state's monopoly on decreeing decapitation and its hierarchising of decapitation as an ennobling punishment are challenged by Shakespeare's staging of Suffolk's ignominious beheading.

Jack Cade's rebellion continues this reclamation of the inscribing power of decapitation in *2 Henry VI*. Cade, a lower-ranking member of society 'born under a hedge' (4.2.42) and living by 'beggary' (4.2.45), decrees the beheading of those far beyond him in class status, such as Lord Say and Sir James Cromer. Instead of decapitation being a carefully codified punishment for treason, it is inverted so that the traitor decrees the beheading of those who rank above him within the class system. Lord Say's threatened beheading is evoked earlier in the play, and the king's right to decree decapitation is invoked as a safeguard against it:

HENRY: Lord Say, Jack Cade hath sworn to have thy head.  
SAY: Ay, but I hope your highness shall have his. (4.4.19-20)

Now, the power relation is inverted: Cade claims the right of decreeing decapitation above all other state power. Carrying the decapitated heads of nobles with him in what becomes a morbidly 'visible sign of their loss of status and concomitantly of the rebels' claim to power' (Owens, 1996: 374), Cade puns on the word 'head' itself in declaring his new authority: 'The proudest peer in the realm shall not wear his head on his shoulders, unless he pay me tribute; there shall not a maid be married, but she shall pay to me her maiden-head ere they have it; men shall hold of me in capite' (4.7.103-6). Cade, a low-ranking member of early modern English society, successfully claims the state's ability to inscribe power through beheading.<sup>i</sup>

3 *Henry VI* opens with the concrete representation of another illicit beheading: Richard carrying Somerset's head. Richard's beheading of one of King Henry's court is an explicit challenge to the king's authority, and his carrying Somerset's decapitated head onstage acts as a material representation of this subversive will. Furthermore, Somerset's head is used to anticipate another still more illicit decapitation when Richard declares, 'Thus do I hope to shake King Henry's head' (1.1.20). The evoked decapitation is illicit not just because decreed against the will of the state, but also because it aims at the head of the state: decapitation as an instrument of treason rather than a punishment for treason.

However, even decapitation as punishment for treason and decreed by a figure of state authority can undermine a monosemantic state power in 3 *Henry VI*. Queen Margaret ordering the decapitation of York in Act 1 Scene 4 enacts an internal challenge to a monologic state authority. Rutter draws a parallel between Cade's illicit decapitations and Margaret's: just as Cade 'summarily executed' England's noblemen, so too the 'usurping' Margaret 'summarily executes York' (2012: 113). 'Will we see Margaret,' Rutter queries, 'as another Cade?' (2012: 113) Both Margaret and Cade, by decreeing decapitation, have inscribed their own power on another individual's body, rather than the state's power. That York is eventually not decapitated only further destabilises the system, by denying him the quicker, painless and more dignified means of death due to him as a noble and potentially royal man. The state's power to hierarchise and stage appropriate deaths according to its own system of interpretation is undercut. If we acknowledge beheading as one of Foucault's 'ceremonies by which power is manifested' (1977: 47), then for someone else to decree decapitation is for that individual to inscribe their power in place of state power. These illicit beheadings on Shakespeare's stage reveal 'how easy it is to requisition the property of the elite and to appropriate its signifying systems' (Rutter, 2012: 111).

Henry VI also undermines the state by beheading those who, according to the hierarchy of judicial punishment, are unqualified for decapitation. Since beheading was reserved for the higher classes, 'perceived to be an honorable, and less agonizing and humiliating, way to go' (Larson, 2014: 94), Jack Cade's decapitation in 2 *Henry VI*, as a degraded beheading, undermines the state's attempted inscription of their power upon him. Iden frames his slaughter and subsequent decapitation of Cade in hyperbolic courtly terms, portraying himself as the glorified slayer of the king's traitor:

Is't Cade that I have slain, that monstrous traitor?  
Sword, I will hallow thee for this thy deed  
And hang thee o'er my tomb when I am dead:  
Ne'er shall this blood be wiped from thy point,  
But thou shalt wear it as a herald's coat  
To emblaze the honour that thy master got. (2H6, 4.10.59-64)



Iden links his deed to the traditional glorification of state authority that surrounded beheading, invoking the 'herald' and the blazon (via the phonetic similarity of 'emblaze') that he anticipates as reward. However, the scene of slaughter and beheading itself is far removed from any such regulated courtly scene. Instead, Cade's projected decapitation seems a blackly comic, pitiable farce. Michael Hattaway observes that, in the fight that precedes it, 'we see a strong man slaughtering a starving one' (1991: 33), a move that both heightens the audience's contempt for Iden's alleged heroism and underlines the abject brutality of the state's inscription of power upon their subject's bodies. The decapitation itself is performed after death, thus not providing the fast, relatively painless end with which the state-staged beheading was supposed to honour the victim – and it takes place on 'a dunghill' (4.10.74), a final, accusatory blow to the state's attempted inscription of its own glory on the body of another. Both state and individual are degraded by this illicit beheading.

### **The Agency of the Severed Head**

Having examined the undermining of state authority by the performance of beheading, it remains to explore Shakespeare's representation of the decapitated head itself on the stage. In early modern England, decapitated heads were erected in central public places to ensure that the state's inscription of power upon the subject's body was displayed to and witnessed by as many individuals as possible. Many modern theorists of decapitation continue to proffer the idea of the decapitated head as a manipulable tool that state powers can control as a stable sign of their own authority. These theorists read the severed head as inevitably symbolic of a loss of agency. Owens calls the displayed decapitated head 'a striking, unmistakable icon signifying not only the defeat and demise of the victim but, more crucially, the transfer of political power that is consolidated through this act of violence' (2005: 145). Guenther argues that 'who retains his head, who loses hers, becomes a significant marker of agency' on the early modern stage (2005: 16), and James agrees that 'whose head is up [on a pole] and whose head is still on separates the losers from the winners' (2005: 53). For Larson, the displayed severed head 'attests the power of a man who kills another, and who deigns to make a human being into an artefact' (2014: 74).

However, the attempts to inscribe a monosemantic meaning upon the severed head are frequently undermined by the staged presentation of the head in the *Henry VI* trilogy. These plays 'expose the fraud at the core of public punishments' (Cunningham, 1990: 210). The display of the severed head onstage renders more obvious the polysemantic possibilities of the ostensibly monosemantically-inscribed head, and returns the agency of meaning-inscription to the head itself, rather than those who remove and display the head. In place of a passive, abject

object that articulates only the state's victory over it, the captivating presence of early modern stage head offers an alternative interpretation, or simply a 'profound ambiguity' (Cunningham, 1990: 210) of meaning in place of a stable, definite expression of state power.

Rather than being a passive, manipulable 'artefact,' the decapitated head in fact retains a great measure of agency on the early modern stage. Palmer notes that 'open-mouthed, the head seems poised to speak. No other mutilated body part invites such projection [...] the silence of the severed head invites speech' (2014: 5-6). Such agency is usually attributed to its liminal state. Larson argues that 'a severed head upsets our easy categories, because it is simultaneously a person and a thing. It is always both and neither. Each state reaffirms the other and negates it. [...] It presents an apparently impossible duality' (2014: 9). Rutter adds that having 'left the stage only minutes before as someone, a subject,' the re-entering decapitated head is consequently 'an object of almost too much countenance, appallingly recognizable, immediate in flesh, still warm, the "not-quite-dead" [... T]hese heads suture subject to object' (2012: 107). Katherine Park has recorded how death was envisaged 'as an extended and gradual process' during which the corpse was regarded as 'active, sensate, or semianimate, possessed of a gradually fading life' (1994: 116). Thus, the early modern English audience was accustomed to perceiving a recently-decapitated head as only half-dead – and, more significantly, as still half-alive.

We must remember, however, that these were of course not real heads being really severed on stage. Unfortunately, little is still known about the specifics of early modern onstage beheadings or representations of the severed head. Reginald Scot records in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) a juggler's trick called 'The decollation of John the Baptist,' which may have been appropriated for use on the contemporary commercial stage. While the displayed boy hid his head in a disguised hole in the board and carpet on which he lay, the decapitated head itself was represented by

an other boie of the bignesse of the knowne boie must be place, hauing vpon him his vsuall apparel: he must leane or lie vpon the boord, and his head vnder the boord through the said hole, so as his bodie shall seeme to lie on the one end of the boord, and his head shall lie in a platter on the other end (1584: 349-50).

For additional effect, 'a little dough kneded with bullocks blood, which being cold will appeare like dead flesh; & being pricked with a sharp round hollow quill, will bleed, and seeme verie strange' (350). Modern productions have also used a live actor's head to represent a decapitated head, such as in Michael Boyd's 2000 RSC production of the trilogy. Here, when Margaret, played by Fiona Bell, cradled Suffolk's decapitated head in her lap, she in fact cradled the actual head of the actor Richard Dillane who played Suffolk; both actors were dressed in black and blocked



against a black background, so that when Suffolk knelt his body disappeared into the shadows of Margaret's body and the stage itself, leaving only his 'decapitated' head visible. Having the decapitated head represented by a 'real' head would, of course, provide a particularly liminal severed head, alive-in-death and with a potent agency of its own.

Other sources suggest ways in which the decapitated stage head could be represented by prop rather than actor. The inventory of the properties owned by the Admiral's Men at the Rose in 1598 famously records 'iij Turckes hedes,' 'owld Mahemetes hede,' 'Argosse hede,' 'Lerosses hede' and 'j frame for the heading of I Black Jones,' but provides no clue as to the material of the fake heads or the style or functioning of the decapitating 'frame' (Rutter, 2012: 104-5). Guenther has noted the papier mâché heads used in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* (1592), and the much earlier property list of the St George Play, Turin (1429) records payment for white paint required to paint 'the faces of the heads' used on stage (see Butterworth, 2005: 149). The stage directions of Majorca SS Crispin and Crispinian (c. sixteenth century) call for 'dummies filled with straw' with heads 'made with masks with calm expression' for the decapitation scene, but beyond the fact that such masks were obviously realistic enough for the individual's expression to be legibly rendered, these details provide little information as to the actual appearance of the early modern stage head (Butterworth 2005: 149).

Shakespeare scholars have posited that the early modern stage head, even if not a 'live' head, must at least have been rendered convincingly. Hirrel argues that spectators 'surely expected to see something akin to what spectators saw' at the commercially competing actual executions, and adds that 'the multiplicity of severed heads in *2 Henry VI* suggests that the heads shown on stage actually resembled those of the actors in the company,' since the plot frequently necessitates that both actors and spectators recognise whose head is being displayed. Hirrel uses the aforementioned scene between Margaret and Suffolk's head as evidence, saying that 'Margaret grieves over the head of her deceased lover, Suffolk, but the head isn't orally identified. The audience must have been puzzled if she were grieving over some unrecognisable object' (2015: online, para. 5).<sup>ii</sup>

It seems reasonable therefore to assume with only some reservation that the early modern stage head, either secretly attached to the living actor or represented by a material prop, was sufficiently realistic as to recall the recently-dead individual and consequently to retain the agency of meaning-inscription. This is very explicitly the case where the live actor's head represents the decapitated head, such as Dillane's head in the above-mentioned Boyd production with Bell. That we see on stage what Paul Levy called 'the still-sexy and still-living head of her boy toy' in his review of the performance (*Wall Street Journal*, 5 January 2001)

emphasises the continued influence of Suffolk over Margaret, and thus over the nation's affairs. Margaret emphasises both Suffolk's new existence as a severed head (rather than a full corpse) and his continued exertion of influence over her. This 'lovely face' (4.4.15), of which she exclaims, 'But where's the body that I should embrace?' (4.4.3-4) and which she acknowledges once 'ruled' her (4.4.16) now continues to act upon her: 'Think therefore on revenge and cease to weep. / But who can cease to weep and look on this?' (4.4.3-4) Suffolk's severed head distracts the queen from action and from the king himself. Through its continued resemblance to the decapitated individual, the displayed severed head demonstrates that decapitation cannot totally inscribe one power and totally erase another. The staged severed head can still challenge its own inscription, divesting itself of a state-decreed meaning and reinvesting itself with another.

Moreover, the severed head on stage, whether represented by a live actor or a material prop, retains the power to seemingly see while being seen. When displayed to the gaze, the severed head 'has the potential to turn its gaze' (Rutter, 2012: 110), can look back subversively at the character onstage or at the audience itself. The gaze of the severed head on the characters onstage can influence interpretation as powerfully as a meaningful look from another actor. In *3 Henry VI*, Margaret points out York's decapitated head displayed on the city walls to Henry, and he quickly moves from expressing his displeasure to Margaret and God – 'To see this sight it irks my very soul. / Withhold revenge, dear God! 'Tis not my fault' (2.2.6-7) – to speaking directly to York's head: 'Ah, cousin York, would thy best friends did know / How it doth grieve me that thy head is here!' (2.2.54-5) York's still-recognisable head provokes Henry into speaking to York as a still-living entity, distracting him from the affairs and duties of the court and his family to which Margaret must recall him.<sup>iii</sup>

Furthermore, York's living presence as a decapitated head stimulates a recognition in Henry, what Jill Bennett calls 'unwilled empathy' (2005: 82) and Rosalyn Diprose 'the nonvolitional generosity of intercorporeality' (2002: 68). York's head, although ostensibly a firmly inscribed object of Henry's victory, instead catalyses Henry's recognition of his own body's vulnerability, his potential 'wrack' (2.2.5) at the hands of an avenging God or York's friends: it easily could have been or could be his own head overlooking York.<sup>iv</sup> The still-recognisable head expedites 'the shock of recognition, so that one feels not simply a disinterested kind of pity-at-a-distance, but rather a jolting realization of one's own connection to a death' (Bennett, 2005: 82), and so undermines Henry's faith in his own authority rather than solidifying it.

## Contamination by the Severed Head

This ability of the uncannily recognisable severed head to alert its viewer to his or her own bodily vulnerability to inscription is mirrored in the way in which tactile contact with the head connects the handler to its abject state. We see a more literal staging of what Stephen Greenblatt observes as the contemporary concern of how to put down a lower-class antagonist without derogating oneself in the process, since when 'the enemy is an object of contempt and derision,' then the victor 'can be tarnished by the unworthy encounter' (1983: 11). Northumberland articulates this anxiety in *3 Henry VI*, when he warns:

Hold, Clifford, do not honour him so much  
To prick thy finger, though it wound his heart.  
What valour were it, when a cur doth grin,  
For one to thrust his hand between his teeth,  
When he might spurn him with his foot away. (1.4.54-8)

The abject must be kept at a distance, even during its very suppression, to avoid contamination. This was also true of the severed head in early modern England. The executioner, although he enacted a state-sanctioned and regulated power, was, as Larson puts it, 'one of the most reviled and feared members of society' (2014: 95) by dint of his contaminating contact with the severed head. The fact that 'his profession obliged him to soak his hands in the blood of his fellow man' (Arasse, 1989: 126) 'often turned the legal violence of the executioner into shame' (Foucault, 1977: 9). The severed head retained sufficient agency to contaminate its handler. Thus we understand the 'policy practised by more canny monarchs, that of maintaining a rigid segregation between the sacred body of the sovereign and the polluted body of the traitor' (Owens, 1996: 377): the evasion of the contaminated body's ability to inscribe itself upon its neighbour.

However, Shakespeare has his monarchs handle the severed head with a disturbing frequency. There are implicit stage directions in Act 5 Scene 1 of *2 Henry VI* for Henry to reach out to grasp Cade's head, when he exclaims, 'The head of Cade! Great God, how just art Thou! / O let me view his visage, being dead, / That living wrought me such exceeding trouble' (5.1.68-70). Cade's head can still 'trouble' Henry even after his death and ostensible inscription by state power. The usually peaceful and pious Henry now revels in the death of his subject, with opportunity for a staging to emphasise the blood or gore from the recently severed head contaminating the king's own hands and clothes: Cade inscribes the king's body as much or more so than the state can inscribe Cade. In a period when the role of 'despised executioner' (James, 2005: 17) sometimes had to be filled by a convicted criminal, given the job's moral contamination, Henry's confrontation with Cade's severed head undermines the intended unambiguous inscription of state power.

Decapitation does little to contain the capacity of the individual to challenge and contaminate state power.

### **Proliferating Heads on the Stage**

If Margaret continues to carry Suffolk's head with her in her next stage appearances in Act 4 Scene 9 and Act 5 Scene 1, Suffolk's severed head will share the stage with several significant challenges to state authority.<sup>v</sup> In Act 4 Scene 9, Henry laments his enforced status as king – 'Was ever subject longed to be a king / As I do long and wish to be a subject?' (4.9.5-6) – and the news of York's rebellion. In Act 5 Scene 1, Suffolk's head will join Cade's on the stage, along with York's challenge to the court, 'I am thy king' (5.1.143) and his rebels' refusal to kneel to Henry. If Margaret still carries Suffolk's head in the play's final scene, then it bears witness to the king and queen's ignominious flight from the rebels. If all the other decapitated heads from the play are left onstage, then there is potential to have a great number of heads crowding the stage by the final scene, watching the court's inglorious flight from their seat of power. The severed head destabilises rather than demonstrates the inscription of stable, monosemantic state power.

Similarly, if the heads severed in *1 Henry VI* remain onstage until the final scene, they supervise Suffolk's closing pronouncement, 'Margaret shall now be queen, and rule the king: / But I will rule both her, the king, and realm' (5.5.107-8). If the countless heads severed in *3 Henry VI* remain onstage until the final scene, they challenge the new King Edward's confident profession that 'here, I hope, begins our lasting joy' (5.7.46) and a menacing materiality to Gloucester's muttered threat 'I'll blast his harvest, if your head were laid' (5.7.21). In all three cases, the lingering agency and proliferation of the severed head serve to underline the textual hints as to the unstable nature of the inscription of power allegedly achieved by the beheading. Every severed head remains a partial challenge to any confident assertion of authority, and a ghastly underlining of any hesitation over state power. The severed heads of rebels retain their challenge to, influence over and contamination of the monarch; the severed heads of previous ruling figures provide a material reminder of how swiftly power can be reinscribed from one body to another. Guenther observes that 'as many heads as possible were put on view' on London's public buildings 'to guarantee the effectiveness' of the state's legible inscription of their authority upon the individual's body (2005: 182). By contrast, on Shakespeare's stage the multiplying decapitated heads emphasise the unstable nature of the transfer of power or the inscription of authority. The decapitated head remains a subversive challenge to the state's attempt to inscribe a stable, monologic meaning on the subject's body.

**'Why, what is pomp, rule, reign, but earth and dust?' (3H6, 5.2.26)**

In conclusion, Shakespeare's representation of decapitation and decapitated heads in the *Henry VI* trilogy challenges beheading as a means for the state to inscribe its absolute power onto the subject's body. These plays disrupt the carefully codified range of meanings that the early modern state attributed to the beheading. On Shakespeare's stage, traitors behead authority figures, nobility and monarchy are denied decapitation, and the very process of beheading becomes a sickening farce rather than a noble staging of the state's power. The state's authority to inscribe the subject's body is recurrently reclaimed by the subject and used against the state.

The decapitated head itself on Shakespeare's stage also retains an agency that state power attempts to deny. Refusing to passively embody the single, stable meaning that authority would inscribe upon it, the decapitated head takes on a multiplicity of shifting meanings. It distracts those around it from state affairs, contaminates those that touch it with its own abjectness, and reminds its viewers of their own vulnerability to such mutilation. The proliferating decapitated head within the history play codes the instability of state power, whether granted or usurped, and its lingering agency demonstrates the impossibility of one individual or even one system inscribing their power totally upon another individual. In examining the challenge to state power enacted by decapitation and the severed head in Shakespeare's *Henry VI* trilogy, we can isolate one particularly potent subversive element in what Shakespeare rendered the subversive genre of the history play.

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<sup>i</sup> It may be objected that Jack Cade in 2 *Henry VI* is punished at the end of the play for his challenge to state power; his beheading may thus seem to offer a conservative restoration of state power in the precise context of decapitation. The final sections of this article will examine the lingering agency of Cade's head on stage, which undermines this seeming restoration of the state's power and inscribed authority on the disobedient subject's body.

<sup>ii</sup> It is worth noting that several scholars have argued that the representation of death on the early modern stage would not necessarily have been a convincing one. Sarah Outterson-Murphy, for example, notes that 'Whether through the rise and fall of a corpse's chest after a vigorous fight scene, the audible tramp of a ghost's approach, or the quiver of a statue's extended hand, a living actor's representation of the dead is always imperfect and provisional. Yet instead of seeking to hide such deficiencies, early modern playwrights daringly exploited the paradoxical bodies of theater to distinctive effect' (2015: 5). Susan Zimmerman argues that early modern theatrical conventions were often 'aggressively meta-theatrical and sensational' (2005: 13) and that the actor's presentation of a dead body would be no different, since 'the representation of the corpse on the early modern stage entailed the meta-theatrical recognition not only of an illusion, but also in effect of a double illusion – an illusion of an illusion. That is, a

material, sentient body was supposed to signify an insentient one, severed from “its real materiality” – a disembodied body’ (2005: 93). She queries, ‘did early modern performance conventions not only provide the theatrical industry with a defensive strategy against anti-theatricalists, but also insulate the audience from too powerful a confrontation with the unspeakable?’ (2005: 115) Both scholars, however, limit their exploration to the live actor’s performance of a whole corpse, rather than the material object of the decapitated head prop itself.

<sup>iii</sup> Guenther has recorded the preservation methods used by early modern executioners to ensure that the heads displayed in public remained recognisable after death. See **Guenther, 2005: 182-3.**

<sup>iv</sup> This play will later invoke just such an easy exchange of one individual’s head for another, when Warwick commands Richard, ‘From off the gates of York fetch down the head, / Your father’s head, which Clifford placèd there; / Instead whereof let this supply the room’ (2.6.51-3).

<sup>v</sup> There is contemporary precedent for Margaret to continue carrying Suffolk’s head with her. Margaret Roper kept her father Sir Thomas More’s head with her following his death, and Sir Walter Raleigh’s wife kept his head until her own death, when it was passed to their son, who in turn kept it for the remainder of his life. See **Guenther, 2005: 10.**



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