Chapter Two

The Dark Powers in *King Henry VI, Part 1 and Part 2*: More Mundane than Supernatural?

The first chapter deals with the meaning of the “dark forces”, based on the superstitious beliefs in supernatural powers and agencies influencing human lives. These beliefs were prevalent since the Middle Ages, particularly due to the lingering seeds of paganism in the minds of the Christians, so that there was a split in their attitude to the supernatural – the divine powers and the evil powers, the latter (originating from pagan gods and goddesses) being identified with the powers of the Devil/Satan. The main approach of my research is the investigation and characterization of the dark powers as represented by Shakespeare in some of his plays.

The first group of plays in which Shakespeare introduces the supernatural in its split forms is the history plays – *Henry VI, Part 1, Henry VI, Part 2* and *Richard III*. Under perspectival constraints I have to deal in this chapter with *Henry VI Part 1* and *Part 2*, since my investigation reveals that the dark powers operating through the historical conflicts have been, to say the least, as much socio-political as supernatural in character and manifestation.
King Henry VI, Part 1 is one of the least popular of Shakespearean plays and is ridden with much doubt and dissension with regard to its authenticity, date of composition, authorship etc. Critics like Dover Wilson feel that not only was 1 Henry VI written after the 2nd and 3rd parts but also that the latter two plays reflect a complete ignorance of the first. He points out:

Whereas 1 Henry VI was written by a person or persons who knew about 2 Henry VI, and I think 3 Henry VI also, those two plays display complete ignorance of the drama which ostensibly precedes them.(ix)

This was the trend of thought in Shakespeare criticism throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. It was generally supposed that the play was written by more than one author: while the English scenes might have been written by Shakespeare, the French scenes were worked out by some other inferior hands. Andrew S.Cairncross in his Introduction to the Arden Edition of King Henry VI, Part 1 has given a detailed account of critics such as Theobald, Warburton, Malone, Charles Knight, Hudson, Jane Lee, H.C.Hart and Dover Wilson, who all agreed that the work certainly did not belong to Shakespeare. But in the 20th century the scenario changed: Courthope, Peter Alexander and Hereward T.Price convincingly argued that the play could have been written by one dramatist alone – William Shakespeare. Cairncross precisely sums up the situation:
Irregularities, contradictions, and inconsistencies, however, do not necessarily imply composite authorship or revision.... I suggest rather that the state of the text is consistent with a single author - Shakespeare - and a succession of factors, extending from his use of different sources, and a stage adapter's annotation of the manuscript and adaptation of the cast, to the intervention of a scribe, and of compositors A and B of the First Folio. It will not always be possible to isolate the phenomena due to each of these factors; but the evidence seems sufficient and unequivocal in a way that the evidence for revision or composite authorship is not. (xiv)

The famous critic Tillyard asserts that he is “fully in accord with a growing trend of belief that Shakespeare wrote this play”(161), though he is conscious of its “hesitant” style, versification and some other shortcomings which he explains to be quite natural for “a young man” as Shakespeare was at the time of writing it (1590).

The play Henry VI, Part 1, deals with events happening after the death of Henry V and before the solemnization of marriage between Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou. This play also serves as the seedbed for the brewing contention between the house of York and the house of Lancaster. So this play is chronicler in nature, but my study opens with this very controversial, chronicle play because “there is more in the dark glass than the moral history
of the Lancastrian House of Jeroboam and the happy ending in the dawn of Tudarchy” (Rossiter:44-45).

The play which deals with English history has, strangely enough, a French maid as its central antagonist. Moreover, the maid is none other than Joan of Arc who had been burnt alive at the stake as a witch and had again been later canonized as a saint by that very Roman Catholic Church which had played a prominent role in her persecution and execution. The history covered in this play is a part of the Hundred Years War between England and France, in which Henry V achieved so great successes that he married Catherine, the French King’s daughter, and was declared heir to the throne of France. But his sudden death in 1422 encouraged the French to revive the war and try to regain lost territories. The French Duke of Burgundy, the greatest faction leader against the French King who had earlier joined Henry V, continued his collaboration with the English. The English feudal lords, with Henry VI as an infant King under the tutelage of some lords, renewed the war. By 1453 the English claim to the French throne was terminated with the English forces being driven out of every area in France except Calais, after successful operations by French nationalists like Dunois’ military tactics and the death of the English commander Talbot (along with his son) in the last battle of Gascony. This success was the culmination of a process
started in 1429 at the battle of Patay through the inspired leadership of a French maid, Joan of Arc, who, within two years, won a series of battles against the English and helped in the emergence of patriotic nationalism in France. As Woodward comments:

This flame of liberation [in France] will be associated forever with the history of Joan of Arc. For the shameful treatment of Joan, Frenchmen must take as much blame as the English. The English put her to death [at the stake, in 1431]; she was betrayed to them by her own countrymen and condemned by a court presided over by a French bishop. (49)

John Dunois, who was known as the Bastard of Orleans (the illegitimate son of Louis, Duke of Orleans), introduced Joan to the Dauphin Charles. The French army under Joan’s leadership confronted the English army led by Joan Talbot (Earl of Shrewsbury) and raised the sieges at Patay, Orleans, Rouen and Bourdeaux. Joan’s career as a soldier was cometic – flashing up in dazzling brightness from 1429 to 1431, when it suddenly ended with her death at the stake. Meanwhile, the English nobles surrounding the young King were divided into factions which ultimately (after 1453) flared up in the Wars of the Roses between the Houses of Lancaster and York.

But Shakespeare here takes so much liberty with historical sources that Bullough calls this play “a fantasia of historical themes” (25). However, it is hardly likely that Shakespeare had any ignorance about history. In
reality, he had read Hall’s and Holinshed’s Chronicles in detail as is apparent from his plays. And this brings us face to face with some extremely important and intriguing questions: Why did Shakespeare violate historical truth to make Joan a central character in his very first history play? Being an Englishman keenly aware of contemporary anti-French sentiments, why did he give a so-called “French strumpet” as much importance (if not more) as he did to the English national hero Talbot? Having done so, why did he present two entirely contradictory images of the same woman? Why was a woman, castigated as a witch by society and religion, all so important to the humanitarian dramatist? The purpose of this present chapter will be to search for viable answers to all these confusing questions and we must begin with the enigmatic concept of “Witch”.

II

Witch and Witchcraft are terms, which, even to this day, raise storms in the critical circle. Various theories have been proposed through the ages, and they are so contradictory in their focuses and interpretations that it is almost impossible to detect a clear reasoning in this labyrinthine maze. Yet, if we trace the word to its very root and then observe the process of
etymological change, which it underwent, we do find that there exists a method in this conceptual labyrinth. There are many viable origins of the word “witch”, but most critics agree upon the Proto Indo-European Theories. According to these theories the word can be traced back to weik, weik and weid. Tom Johnson in the Draconian Website presents a well-thought analysis of these three possible origins. He prefers the third root (weid) and states:

Choice # 3 [my preferred]: from the Proto Indo-European weid, to see or to know. This form produces everything from Latin “video, videre” “to see”, to the English “wit” “knowledge” and German “wissen”, “to know’. Seeing and knowing have been semantically tied throughout the Indo-European languages, and for the English “witch” would yield the translation “wise one” even as the Latin “saga” is at once the word for a “female witch” as well as the basis for our Modern English words“sage”or“sagacious”(<http://www.draconin.com/database/witchetymology.htm>).

Hence it is apparent that “witch” probably arose from “weid” and therefore, in its oldest form it obviously meant the “wise one”. This theory was initially supported by Gerald Gardner who further popularized this concept in his book Witchcraft Today. Earlier, a similar theory had been supported by Rev. Walter W. Skeat in A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the
English Language. This book shows that the word “wicca” was in fact derived from the Norwegian “vikja”, which meant “to turn aside” or “to conjure away”. Skeat, therefore, believed that the word “witch” originally meant “avert”. This etymological search for “Witch” brings us face to face with another controversial word “Wicca”.

Vincent McCann in “Wicca, Witchcraft, or What? Defining Pagan Terms” provides a powerful definition of “wicca” which he considers synonymous with “witchcraft”. He points out:

Wicca is one of the most influential traditions of modern Paganism, also known as witchcraft.... It is an initiatory path, a mystery tradition that guides its initiates to a deep communion with the powers of Nature and of the human psyche, leading to a spiritual transformation of the self (<www.spotlightminister.Org.uk>).

The Wicca UK website goes even further and clearly states:

Wicca is an Earth-based, nature centered religion drawing on the ideas of pantheism, gnosticism, ceremonial magick, witchcraft and the pagan religions of our forefathers....The term witchcraft literally means ‘craft of the wise’. In its original usage, witchcraft was practiced by those persons, generally female, who had knowledge of herbal lore, the law, psychology and physiology(<http://wiccauk.net/modules.php?op=modload&name=Sections&file=index&req=viewarticle&artid=61>)}
So it is obvious that wicca or witchcraft was originally a pagan form of religion which involved communion with the Earth as a Goddess and living in peace and helping others to lead a good life by utilizing the knowledge of the universe. It was obviously a positive art and a religion belonging to the cult of pagan "female worship". The witches, at their point of inception had no relation with Satan.

Now, this throws up before us another question. We wonder, if originally a witch was a wise woman, a worshipper of the Pagan feminine cult, then where from arose the present maligned concept of a witch as "an agent of Satan"? A search in the history of witchcraft, conducted from this angle, reveals certain startling factors.

A witch, initially, was a seer, a knower, and an averter of evil. The term was pagan in origin. It came to England with the Anglo-Saxons who were Germanic tribes. Hence, the Germanic root of the word was definitely positive. It may be presumed that the word developed a negative connotation only with the coming of Christianity. Keith Thomas points this out clearly in "Witchcraft: The Crime and its History". Thomas argues that Pagans were heretics in the view of the Church fathers and hence their religion was purposefully tarnished in the name of Christian faith:
Seen from this point of view, the essence of witchcraft was not the damage it did to other persons, but its heretical character – devil worship. Witchcraft had become a Christian heresy, the greatest of all sins, because it involved the renunciation of God and deliberate adherence to his greatest enemy. (438)

But initially, in the *Old Testament*, Satan had not been that great a presence. Rather, he appears to have gained popularity since the time of Emperor Constantine when the various Gospels were collected to form the *New Testament*. So, again as Keith Thomas points out:

> It is obvious that stories about diabolical compacts could never have gained circulation if contemporary religion had not lent its authority to buttress the notion of a personal and immanent Devil. Relatively unimportant in the Old Testament, Satan had been raised by later Judaism and Christianity to the status of God’s grand cosmic antagonist. (469)

The popularity of Satan, therefore, was directly related to castigation of pagan worshippers of the Earth Goddess through the cult of “witches”. Christina Larner in *Witchcraft and Religion* has clearly pointed out that the concept of *maleficum* or doing harm to others was not as great a charge against witches as was the issue of maintaining diabolical compact with the Devil:

> Most accounts of European witchcraft, however, put forward a distinction between ‘popular’ and ‘educated’ witch beliefs. The category of
‘educated’ witch beliefs include the demonic pact, in which the witch renounced her baptism and parted with her immortal soul in return for certain specific earthly benefits .... The most essential element in a conviction of this type of witchcraft was the witch’s confession and this was extracted through direct torture, threat of torture, or sleep deprivation.

(74)

Thus, it is apparent that proof of witches practicing maleficum or having pact with the Devil were entirely fictitious accounts extracted through torture. But this, again, leads to another important question – if the so-called witches were tortured, then who were the torturers and what was their purpose behind such ruthless actions?

A search for these answers, again, brings us back to the etymological significance of the word “wicca”. We find that it was for the first time used in a negative sense in the Homilies of Aelfric (c.980A.D.). With him the term “wiccan” takes on a more sinister connotation and is equated with evil doers such as murderers and thieves:

\begin{quote}
\textit{mor slagan and mandaedan and unmae fulle gitseras wigleras and wiccan and unlybwyrtan Beofas and reaferas and a reaan dramen} (murderers and evil-doers and heedless misers, seers and witches and poison makers, thieves and robbers and fierce musicians). (36)
\end{quote}

Here it must be remembered that Aelfric, a founding father of Anglo-Saxon prose, was in actual life a Roman Catholic priest. His deliberate association
of a "witch" with perpetrators of other unsavory, illegal and immoral acts depicts a conscious shift in the attitude of the Church towards this Pagan cult of "female worship". This point is further highlighted by the rapidity with which the Church passed edicts to condemn witches and their practice of witchcraft. We again return to Keith Thomas who points out:

The main agency responsible for the introduction of this new concept was the Roman Catholic Church, whose intellectuals rapidly built up a large literature of demonology.... The new doctrine was developed in a series of edicts culminating in the Papal Bull, Summis desiderantes affectibus, of Innocent VIII in 1484, and the compendious treatise by two Dominican Inquisitors, the Malleus Maleficarum (1486). Meanwhile the systematic presentation of witches as devil worshippers, rather than for their malevolence, had been steadily proceeding on the Continent since the fourteenth century. (438-439)

So, we see that it was the Church and its clergy, which provided religious sanctions for the death by torture of thousands of innocent persons, chiefly women on various charges of witchcraft. Of course, there were other factors, such as, selfish desires of powerful men, the misogynous nature of society, and above all, the political interests of the rulers, which provided further fuel to this mass mania. However, as religion was the seed-bed of this evil concept of an otherwise positive Pagan ritual, our primary concern here will
be directed to a study of the medieval Church and the definitive role it played in blackening the white art of witchcraft.

Though in "the burning times" the witch was considered to be the greatest enemy of God, the Church and its clergy led the mass mania resulting in the extermination of so-called witches, yet, a startling fact remains that there exists almost a dearth in Biblical references to witches. In fact, as the website of International Standard Bible Encyclopedia points out:

The word "witch" occurs twice in King James’s Version, namely, (1) in Exodus 22:18, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch.... to live; (2) in Deuteronomy 18:10, “or a witch”...The Hebrew word in both cases...[is]....the verb (Kishsheph), denoting the magical article. (<http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/W/witch-witchcraft.html>).

Even the term “witchcraft” does not frequently occur in the Bible, though “Devil” abounds in it: this does reflect the startling point that in their origin the two terms “Devil” and “witchcraft” (as also “witches”) were not related at all. T. Witton Davies argues:

The word “witchcraft” occurs thrice in King James Version in I Samuel 15:23, “the sin of witchcraft”....The phrase “used witchcraft” (of Manasseh, II Chronicles 33:16)....The word translated in the King James Version “witchcraft” in Gelatians 5:20 (pharmakeia) is the ordinary Greek one for “sorcery”...(http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/W/witch-witchcraft.html).
In fact, the Hebrew term in the original Bible was “Kishsheph” which was translated in King James’s Version as “witch”. Here it must be noted that King James I was closely related to the persecution of hundreds of innocent women as witches and so, he probably had inspired (directly or indirectly) the transrendering of the Hebrew word into English as “witch”. The Biblical interpretation thus obtained was “thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” (Exodus 22:18), and it provided religious sanction to a ruthless monarch who had earlier killed the so-called witches mercilessly in the name of religion. The Revised Version of the Bible (1884) appears to support this speculation conclusively for, here, the term “witch” has been replaced by (i) “a sorceress” in Exodus 22:18 and (ii) “or a sorcerer” in Deuteronomy 18:10. Obviously, the revisers too, felt that the translation of the Hebrew word into “witch” by the 1611 Version was a misguided and somewhat prejudiced interpretation. In an identical fashion, the term “witchcraft” in the Authorised Version was replaced by “divination” in the 1884 Revised Version. Thus, “the sin of witchcraft” in Samuel 15:23 was transformed into “the sin of divination”, and certainly, “divination” is widely different in implication from “witchcraft”. It is, therefore, apparent that the term “witch” or “witchcraft” did not exist in the original Bible at the point of its
conception. They were later incorporated into the English version of the Holy Text under the purposeful influence of the then ruling monarch King James I. Just as the original Bible never actually refers to the witch, similarly, the Church too, initially remained aloof from witchcraft inquisitions. But later on the Church played a positive role in condemning witchcraft. Early Church history upholds the fact that prior to the 9th century the Church did not take any interest in this ruthless phenomenon, and it even officially taught that such phenomenon did not exist. Jenny Gibbons in her well-researched article, “Recent Developments in the Study of the Great European Witch Hunt” points out:

For example, the 5th century Synod of St. Patrick ruled that ‘A Christian who believes that there is a vampire in the world, that is to say, a witch, is to be anathematized; whoever lays that reputation upon a living being shall not be received into the Church until he revokes with his own voice the crime that he has committed’. A capitulary of Saxony (775-790 C.E.) blamed these stereo types on pagan belief systems: ‘If anyone, deceived by the Devil, believes after the manner of the Pagans that any man or woman is a witch and eats men, and if on this account he burns [the alleged witch] .... He shall be punished by Capital sentence’ (<http://www.cog.org/witchhunt.Html>).

These comments serve to highlight two specific points – firstly, that a witch was not an enemy of the early Church, and secondly, that the Devil was in
no manner connected with the witches. This concept was further supported by Gale Thomson. She refers to the fact that in 906 A.D, Abbot Regino of Prum wrote *Canon Episcopi* wherein he clearly argued that any belief in witchcraft must be condemned as heretical. His point of view was further supported when in 1025 A.D came *Corrector*, a text by Deacon Burchard, later archbishop of Worms, wherein he argued that God alone had the kind of power that was being invested upon witches.

So, when was it that the Church reversed its viewpoint and began to provide zealous patronage to the mass mania against witchcraft? Jeffery Burton Russell feels that as Christianity recognized paganism as a threat, it began its ‘crusade’ against the fore-figures of the pagan cult, i.e. witches. He argues that as the medieval western Church grew in every aspect – wealth, influence and authority - the degree of witch persecution also multiplied. B. A. Robinson in the “The Burning Times” has recorded that Church Inquisitions originally began with the burning of the heretics. The first case of mass murder by the Church occurred in 1203 A.D. when a Gnostic Christian group called Cathars were declared heretics and were burnt at the stake under the order of Pope Innocent III. Indeed, this fact is morally repugnant because here Christians were burning fellow Christians, and not non-believing heretics, in the name of religion. Pope Innocent III also
introduced torture as a means of extracting confessions from witches, sorcerers and other heretics. So we see that the concept of heretics was slowly gathering momentum under the influence of the Church (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/wic-burn2.html>). The second case of such mass persecution under the false pretext of witchcraft occurred during the Papal rule of Pope Clement V (c.1260-1314). This was another case of Christians turning against their own religious brothers. The Knights Templars who had played an active role in protecting the Church were accused of heretical acts, such as, worshipping demons and invoking Satan. They were tortured en masse and burnt at the stake and their order was disbanded by Pope Clement V (file://E:\Inquisition.htm).

In this manner the Church Inquisitions grew under the false pretext of protecting the world against the so-called agents of Satan. Slowly the Jews and the Muslims also came under the list of Church suspects and they were also branded in the all-encompassing name of witchcraft.

So, it is apparent that the Church which had initially been almost unresponsive towards the sin of witchcraft, suddenly, in the Medieval Age, took up the mantle of persecution. In fact, the book which sealed the fate of thousands of witches throughout Europe, i.e. Malleus Maleficarum (1486), was written by two Dominican Inquisitors, Henry Kramer and Jakob
Sprenger. So the Church's role in galvanizing this greatest mass mania of all times is indubitable.

But what was the reason behind such Church persecutions? Why were fellow Christians persecuted as heretics and were unfairly condemned of having demonic pact with the Devil? These are some of the questions which crop up at this juncture, and the answer is important for it brings us face to face with one of the greatest controversial figures of Christianity – Mary Magdalene.

A noticeable fact pointed out earlier was that both the groups thus mass persecuted by the Church in the name of Inquisition, i.e. the Cathars and the Knights Templars, were sworn “Gnostics”. Moreover, the Church in the name of witch-burning, usually burnt women who in some manner posed a threat to the unquestionable patriarchal status of the Medieval Church. All these together seem to point towards an intention of the Church to suppress the “sacred feminine”, much upheld by the Pagans and the early Christians. In recent years, religious historians such as Jane Schaberg, Ann Graham Brock, Liz Higgs, Carla Ricci etc. have taken pains to prove that the Biblical prostitute Mary Magdalene was in reality a woman of substance and in some ways even superior to the male disciples. Her image had suffered, as Jane Schaberg points out, purposeful “harlotization”. The Christian Church and
the Papacy traces its origin to St. Peter and so, there was a decisive attempt on the part of the misogynistic Church to suppress the story of the woman who might have challenged the authority of St. Peter as the founder of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, an attempt to persecute ruthlessly “Gnostic” Christians appears to be an endeavour to silence for ever the followers of Christ who probably knew the truth about “the lady with the albastor jar”. David Van Biema in his article “Mary Magdalene: Saint or Sinner?” has adequately summed up the situation:

Historians of Christianity are increasingly fascinated with a group of early followers of Christ known broadly as the Gnostics, some of whose writings were unearthed only 55 years ago. And the Gnostics were fascinated by Magdalene. (Time.11Aug, 2003)

And again, as already pointed out, the Church Inquisitions were directed to a large extent against the Gnostics. I particularly find this connection fascinating and illuminating, since it happens to be highly relevant to the present chapter of my dissertation. In this chapter the focal interest is upon a woman who was murdered by the Church and the royal powers in the name of religion (she was said to be in league with the Devil); she was “harlotized” to a certain extent; she dared to stand up and lead troops like a male commander – qualities which are also found in the resurrected image of Mary Magdalene. Indeed, the resemblance appears to be too close for
mere co-incidence, and we wonder about Shakespeare’s role in creating such an image. What did the dramatist propose to suggest through his strikingly antithetical image of Joan of Arc? Was the “maid of Orleans” a saint or a sinner? Who were the actual “dark forces” active behind the facade of religion and nationalism which brought about her downfall? The questions are many and baffling, and the answers we hope to seek in the following pages.

III

One of the central characters (and probably the most disputed) in Shakespeare’s Henry VI, Part I is the French maiden Joan of Arc. Her character is strikingly antithetical, vascillating between divinity and whoredom and ultimately crumbling into dishonour and purposeful “harlotization”. She is introduced for the first time in glorious laudatory terms. The Bastard of Orleans comments:

A holy maid hither with me I bring,
Which, by a vision sent to her from heaven,
Ordained is to raise this tedious siege
And drive the English forth the bounds of France.
The spirit of deep prophesy she hath,
Exceeding the nine sibyls of old Rome:

What’s past and what’s to come she can descry.

(I. ii. 51-57)

There is, indeed, nothing ignoble in this presentation of Joan. In fact, here she appears to be a child of God, a virtuous maiden sent by the patron Goddess of France to act on her behalf against the foreign invasion. She reminds one of the priestesses at the Delphian Oracle, because like them “what’s past and what’s to come she can descry”. She reminds one of the “nine sibyls” of Rome. But as A. S. Cairncross points out “but they were ten” (16). So Joan herself may be looked upon as the proverbial tenth sibyl.

When Joan enters, her words too are precise and clear. She has no desire to hide her base origin and declares:

Dauphin, I am by birth a shepherd’s daughter,
My wit untrain’d in any kind of art.
Heaven and our lady gracious hath it pleas’d
To shine on my contemptible estate.

(I.ii.72-75)

Joan shows her allegiance to God and Christianity by referring to Christ’s mother in eulogical terms (“our Lady gracious”). Had she been a Devil’s worshipper she certainly would not have used such profoundly felt rhetoric. Dramatists of Shakespeare’s day were well acquainted with witchcraft lores
to know that a Devil's worshipper was never supposed to speak about God or heaven in praise. Christopher Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus* refers to this concept about demonology when he makes his protagonist comment:

> Pardon me this,
> And Faustus vows never to look to heaven,
> Never to name God or pray to him,
> To burn his scriptures, slay his ministers,
> And make my spirits pull his churches down.

(II.ii.97-101)

Shakespeare, being a contemporary of Marlowe, could not possibly have been ignorant about this highly popular notion of his age. And therefore, in spite of his knowledge, when he makes Joan speak of Virgin Mary in glorifying terms, his obvious intention appears to be the creation of an entirely positive image. Joan's image is not merely religious. Her own words prove her to be a self-professed nationalist. The task Mother Mary has assigned to her is that of gaining freedom for her country:

> God's Mother deigned to appear to me,
> And in a vision full of majesty
> Will'd me to leave my base vocation
> And free my country from calamity:
> Her aid she promis'd, and assur'd success.

(I.ii.78-82)
Here Joan appears to be resplendent in the bright colours of a patriot. She does not seek "divinity" for herself. She is only a humble maid, "black and swarth before", chosen by God to fight for her country. Indeed, her simplicity, courage and devotion remind one of the great prophets and saints, and as Charles the Dauphin glorifies her in a worshipful voice:

> Was Mahomet inspired with a dove?
> Thou with an eagle art inspired then.
> Helen, the mother of great Constantine,
> Nor yet Saint Philip's daughters, were like thee.
> Bright star of Venus, fall'n down on the earth,
> How may I reverent worship thee enough?

(I.ii.140-145)

Here in the presentation of the saint like image of Joan, she is like the proverbial phoenix, a mythical mingling of genders who effects a resurrection within the battle-wary army of French king Charles. Both the male and female saints are present in her persona. The reference to the "eagle" inspiring her is a throw back upon the apostle St. John. A. S. Cairncross refers to this and writes, "The holy Joan is compared ....... to the apostle John, the eagle, his attribute, being the symbol of highest inspiration" (20). But Shakespeare's Joan is not merely a zealous patron of religion, though she firmly believes and convinces others that she das been
empowered by Christ's Mother to help France regain freedom from the English. With this inspired mission, she rejects Dauphin's offer of love and marriage, convinces him of her military valour by easily defeating him in a single combat. She does not look forward to any personal glory as she asserts:

Assign'd am I to be the English scourge.
This night the siege assuredly I'll raise:
Expect Saint Martin's summer, halcyon's days,
Since I have entered into these wars.
Glory is like a circle in the water,
Which never ceaseth to enlarge itself
Till by broad spreading it disperse to nought.
With Henry's death the English circle ends;
Dispersed are the glories it included.

(I.ii.129-137)

She proves herself to be a valiant and sagacious military commander. After the capture of Rouen when Talbot challenges Joan in an open combat, she scoffs at him:

Belike your lordship takes us then for fools,
To try if that our own be ours or no.

(III.ii.62-63)
Thus, in this part of the play Joan is presented in bright, superhuman colours. It is her war-like image which relates her to the “Amazons” of the Elizabethan Age. Of course, there are times in the opening scenes of the play too, when Joan is called “a witch”. Defeated by her military prowess Talbot cries:

Here, she comes. I’ll have a bout with thee;
Devil or devil’s dam, I’ll conjure thee:
Blood will I draw on thee, thou art a witch,
And straightway give thy soul to him thou serv’st.

(I. v. 4-7)

Again, Burgundy, upon facing defeat at Rouen uses abusive terms against Joan:

Scoff on, vile fiend and shameless courtezan.

(III. ii. 45)

But such words appear to be mere false accusations by men upon being defeated by their enemy. It hurt their self-esteem further that the enemy was being led by a woman – the proverbial underling to menfolk. Society, thriving upon its misogynic nature could never stand war-like women or cross-dressed women. Whenever this occurred, male-dominated society struck back by condemning this and challenging the woman as a witch. Shakespeare clearly brings forth this idea by presenting Joan of Arc as a
holy virgin on one hand, and again making her enemies castigate her as “a witch”, “a strumpet”, “a devil’s dam”, “a fiend” etc. Indeed, all these terms were synonymous in Shakespeare’s age and used for condemning women who dared to challenge the established norms of female behaviour. Christina Larner argues:

All women threaten male hegemony with their exclusive power to give life; and social order depends on women conforming to male ideals of female behaviour. (84)

Whenever this established concept was violated, the woman concerned was castigated and often the castigators turned out to be the woman’s own folks. As if to bring forth this point, Shakespeare initially makes Charles speak of Joan in praise, but the moment she fails (though on account of no actual fault of her own), the Dauphin accuses her openly:

Is this thy cunning, thou deceitful dame?
Didst thou at first to flatter us withal,
Make us partakers of a little gain,
That now our loss might be ten times so much?

(II. i. 50-53)

So, for a woman it took almost no time to be condemned as “a deceitful dame” even by her allies. She had to prove herself at every point of life, and her failure was never pardoned by the male-dominated society. Indeed, the
portrait of Joan, up to this point, exposes Shakespeare’s intellectual ambivalence in deciding on a clear view towards this mass mania of witch accusations and burning.

This concept is further strengthened by Shakespeare’s violation of historical truth and accuracy in presenting the character of Joan in his first history play. Dr. S.C. Sengupta aptly comments:

Not only is time telescoped and chronology turned topsy-turvy but the account of historical events is mixed with a good deal of invention. (58)

As per history, Joan’s career as a warrior was very short. She appeared on the scene in 1429 and was captured by the English forces a year later. On the other hand, Talbot, who in Henry VI, Part 1 is shown as falling before Joan, in actuality died in 1453, almost twenty-two years after the death of Joan. As S.C. Sengupta points out:

there is no evidence that these two mighty figures ever met, and the only connection historically between them was that Talbot was present at the siege of Orleans that Joan helped to raise. (59)

So, considering the entire historical gamut of Henry VI, Part 1 which begins with the death of the illustrious King Henry V (1422) and ends with Suffolk’s negotiation of Henry VI’s French marriage (1444-1445), we find that Joan of Arc occupies an extremely unimportant position. Yet, Shakespeare makes Joan Talbot’s chief antagonist in this play, expands her
role beyond historical truth and even pits her against the legendary Talbot, whom she is shown to have defeated and to have indirectly caused his death. All this could not have been random creation by a dramatist as great as Shakespeare. Rather, there appears to be a definite plan, as Moody E. Prior points out:

Shakespeare is so much a dramatist that he will readily sacrifice historical accuracy in matters of detail to dramatic effectiveness and dramatic logic. (34)

Again, S. C. Sengupta feels that Shakespeare produces the spirit of history and interprets it from the point of view of human characters:

History itself has to give a truncated, mutilated account of events which, when they occurred, were due to causes that contemporaries could not assess correctly and did not record faithfully and completely. Shakespeare, even in his earliest drama, cuts through the enormous mass of historical records, and re-creates the past as a story of human passion in which all that is intricate or baffling is to be traced to the enigma of human character. (58)

So, Shakespeare’s fictionalized presentation of the character of Joan appears to be an attempt to recreate history for two reasons: first, for an immediate dramatic impact and exigency, and secondly, for indulging in sentiments of English nationalism. His Joan is a simple shepherd girl, pure at heart whose unwavering faith and unabating nationalism make her undertake Herculean
tasks. And yet the English led by the self-interested Church condemns her as a witch. Here the entire castigation is politically and religiously motivated as such condemnations usually were. Sir Walter Scott in his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* has clearly indicated this. The death of Joan, he says:

> was not, we are sorry to say, a sacrifice to superstitious fear of witchcraft, but a cruel instance of wicked policy mingled with national jealousy and hatred. The Duke of Bedford, when the ill-starred Jeanne fell into his hands, took away her life in order to stigmatize her memory with sorcery, and to destroy the reputation she had acquired among the French. (25-26)

In fact, as if to establish this idea of a wrong done to her, Shakespeare makes his Joan pronounce a curse upon the English. Prophet-like she declares:

> May never glorious sun reflex his beams
> Upon the country where you make abode;
> But darkness and the gloomy shade of death
> Environ you, till mischief and despair
> Drive you to break your necks or hang yourselves!

*(V. iv. 87-91)*

And her curse is fulfilled in the coming years when the Wars of the Roses tear apart the English nation, bringing "darkness" and "gloomy shade of death". In fact, these words spoken by Joan appear to challenge the basic concept of the "Tudor Myth" – the concept that the long period of England's
suffering “had begun with the upsetting of the divine order by the deposition of King Richard II” (Ribner: 104). This end justifies aptly Shakespeare’s reshaping and enlarging the role of Joan in his play.

Shakespeare shows from the very beginning how the military commanders of the English side (including the French faction leader Burgundy) have been depicting Joan as a “vile fiend and shameless courtesan”, “that witch, that damned sorceress”, “that railing Hecate”. However, for the French, she has all along been “a blessed saint”, rallying their demoralised troops into united powers that recover most of their lost grounds. But she is not shown as working miracles, but only bringing about successes through her inspiring leadership, her clever understanding of situations and intelligent manipulations of the disunity of the English side. As Talbot and his forces march towards Paris for the coronation of Henry, with Burgundy and his forces left behind (“Fortune in favour makes him lag behind.”), Joan summons a parley with him in presence of Charles Dauphin and others and appeals to him with powerful words:

Look on thy country, look on fertile France,
And see the cities and the towns defac’d
By wasting ruin of the cruel foe;
As looks the mother on her lowly babe
When death doth close his tender dying eyes,
See, see the pining malady of France;
Behold the wounds, the most unnatural wounds
Which thou thyself hast given her woeful breast.
O, turn thy edged sword another way;
Strike those that hurt, and hurt not those that help!
One drop of blood drawn from thy country’s bosom
Should grieve thee more than streams of foreign gore.
Return thee therefore with a flood of tears,
And wash away thy country’s stained spots.

(III.iii.44-57)

The combined forces achieve greater successes, including the fall and death of Talbot in the plains of Gascony (which is again a violation of historical fact). Even in the plains of Anjou (V. ii) when a scout brings the news of the reunion of the hitherto divided English army, Joan cheers up Charles Dauphin, Burgundy, Alencon, Bastard and Reignier and proceeds towards further conquest. But suddenly in the very next scene of battle before Angiers, Joan is presented almost as a witch invoking the evil spirits to whom she wants to offer her limbs, then her body and finally her soul, though without success:

The Regent conquers and the Frenchmen fly.

Now help, ye charming spells and periapts;
And ye choice spirits that admonish me,
And give me signs of future accidents: 

You speedy helpers that are substitutes
Under the lordly monarch of the north,
Appear and aid me in this enterprise!

Enter Fiends.

This speed and quick appearance argues proof
Of your accustom'd diligence to me.
Now, ye familiar spirits that are cull'd
Out of the powerful regions under earth,
Help me this once, that France may get the field.

Thunder.

They walk, and speak not

O, hold me not with silence over-long!
Where I was wont to feed you with my blood,
I'll lop a member off and give it you
In earnest of a further benefit,
So you do condescend to help me now.

They hang their heads.

No hope to have redress? My body shall
Pay recompense if you will grant my suit.

They shake their hands.

Cannot my body nor blood-sacrifice
Entreat you to your wonted furtherance?
Then take my soul; my body, soul, and all,
Before that England give the French the foil. They depart.

See! they forsake me. Now the time is come

That France must vail her lofty-plumed crest

And let her head fall into England’s lap.

My ancient incantations are too weak,

And hell too strong for me to buckle with:

Now, France, thy glory droopeth to the dust. Exit.

(V.iii.1-29)

In the battle that follows the French forces is defeated and fly, while Joan la Pucelle is captured by the Duke of York. In the next scene at York’s camp in Anjou, Joan’s degradation is further dramatized. First, a shepherd appears before the English nobles and addresses Joan as his “sweet daughter”. But Joan dismisses him as “base ignoble wretch” who is neither her father nor her friend, and claims that she is “descended of a gentler blood”. As the shepherd angrily denounces her to be burnt to death, and York orders her to be taken off for burning, Joan appeals:

First let me tell you whom you have condemn’d:

Not one begotten of a shepherd swain,

But issued from the progeny of kings;

Virtuous and holy, chosen from above,

By inspiration of celestial grace,

To work exceeding miracles on earth.
I never had to do with wicked spirits;
But you, that are polluted with your lusts,
Stain'd with the guiltless blood of innocents,
Corrupt and tainted with a thousand vices,
Because you want the grace that others have,
You judge it straight a thing impossible
To compass wonders but by help of devils.
No, misconceived Joan of Aire hath been
A virgin from her tender infancy,
Chaste and immaculate in very thought;
Whose maiden blood, thus rigorously effus'd,
Will cry for vengeance at the Gates of heaven.

(V.iv.36-53)

Here she claims to be of royal birth, a pure and immaculate virgin and having no connection with "wicked spirits", so that her execution will certainly provoke divine wrath. But as Warwick suggests that in order to shorten her torture large amounts of faggots and pitch should be provided for her quick burning, Joan further betrays her weakness by recourse to lies after lies – that she is pregnant, that her child's father is Alencon, again, that her child's father is Reignier:

_Puc._ Will nothing turn your unrelenting hearts?

Then, Joan, discover thine infirmity
That warranteth by law to be thy privilege:

I am with child, ye bloody homicides;

 Murder not then the fruit within my womb,

 Although ye hale me to a violent death.

*York.* Now heaven forfend! The holy maid with child!

*War.* The greatest miracle that e’er ye wrought!

 Is all your strict preciseness come to this?

*York.* She and the Dauphin have been juggling:

 I did imagine what would be her refuge.

*War.* Well, go to; we will have no bastards live,

 Especially since Charles must father it.

*Puc.* You are deceiv’d; my child is none of his:

 It was Alencon that enjoy’d my love.

*York.* Alencon, that notorious Machiavel!

 It dies and if it had a thousand lives.

*Puc.* O, give me leave, I have deluded you:

 ’Twas neither Charles, nor yet the Duke I nam’d,

 But Reignier, King of Naples, that prevail’d.

*War.* A married man! that’s most intolerable.

*York.* Why, here’s a girl! I think she knows not well –

 There were so many – whom she may accuse.

*War.* It’s sign she hath been liberal and free.

*York.* And yet, forsooth, she is a virgin pure!
Strumpet, thy words condemn thy brat and thee:

Use no entreaty, for it is in vain.

Puc. Then lead me hence, with whom I leave my curse:

(V.iv.59-86)

But this leads us to certain questions: Why does Shakespeare purposefully blacken the image of Joan here in Act V of his play? Why does Shakespeare embark upon a scurrilous mission of defiling in a single Act a portrait herebefore so lovingly nurtured by him, even at the expense of historical truth? The shift in the portrayal of the Maid is incredible and will be examined in the following pages.

IV

Now, when Shakespeare presented *Henry VI, Part I* (around 1592), the Elizabethan England was going through a turbulent phase which was almost a historical re-enactment of the scenario during the reign of Henry VI. Once again the country was up in arms against the French; once again they were supporting the claim of another Henry, Henry of Navarre of France, and hence a play which dealt with English nationalism pitted against French pragmatism was highly in keeping with the public appetite of the time. For a long time the play was studied as a “newsreel” article, a
purposeful nurturing of “Francophobia”. It was, in fact, looked down upon by critics as mere laudatory propagandism which upholds the greatness of the English hero Talbot. The spirit of the age and the people’s unified reaction to Talbot’s heroism has been referred to by Thomas Nash, a contemporary dramatist, who commented sometimes before August 1592:

How would it have ioyed braue Talbot (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumpe againe on the Stage, and haue his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least (at seuerall times), who in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding. (148)

The sentiments of Elizabethan men and women can appropriately be grasped herein. The heroic role of Talbot has been so tremendously highlighted that some critics have even suggested that the play should be called the *Tragedy of Talbot*. But Tillyard rightly comments:

The whole truth in this matter is that though the action revolves round Talbot, though he stands pre-eminently for loyalty and order in a world threatened by chaos, he is not the hero. For there is no regular hero here, either in this or any of the other three plays; its true hero being England or Respublica after the fashion of the Morality Play, .... (163)

To the Elizabethan people, France stood for religious wars, political intrigues leading to the massacre of St. Bartholomew, so that it was no place
for any form of sanctity or of sainthood. Hence Shakespeare’s ungenerous representation of Joan of Arc even after her posthumous rehabilitation in 1456 in a re-trial that nullified the earlier judgement against her as a witch, had obviously been a source of pleasure for such a nationalistic audience. Mainly two ideas were dominant among the early critics regarding the entirely blackened image of Joan as presented in the final Act of *Henry VI, Part 1*. Some attributed this scene to "composite authorship", while others felt that the scene resulted from Shakespeare’s desire to please a prejudiced national audience. S. C. Sengupta sums up both the concepts by pointing out:

Shakespeare’s Joan of Arc is at the same time a holy virgin and a strumpet, a divinely inspired patriot and a fiendish witch, a prophetess and a liar. Such incompatibility, more than anything else, supports the theory of composite authorship, which has been hotly debated by scholars. It is possible that the libellous part of the portrait was an inferior dramatist’s work which Shakespeare touched up but could not wholly transform. Or, since the scenes of denigration occur towards the end of the play, it may be that Shakespeare at first conceived a heroic Maid of Orleans and then blackened her to satisfy the prejudice of his audience (63).

But this simple concept of the drastically deviating images of Joan has been challenged by the Feminist critics. Since mid-1970s there has been a flood in
feminist reading of Shakespeare's plays, and his controversial creation – Joan, has been presented in an entirely new perspective. As early as 1975 Juliet Dusinberre argued the revolutionary concept that "the drama from 1590 to 1625 is feminist in sympathy" (5). Marilyn French in *Shakespeare's Division of Experience* (1981) went a step further and argued that *1 Henry VI* presents a battle "waged by the masculine principle against the feminine" (49). Both Ivo Kamps and Deborah Barker carried this critical trend forward when in their 1995 compilation *Shakespeare and Gender: A History* they included Gabriele Barker Jackson's essay "Topical Ideology: Witches, Amazons and Shakespeare's Joan of Arc", wherein the misogynistically mistreated heroine is presented in positive light. The editors (Ivo Kamps and Deborah Barker) point out in their Introduction:

> Employing a careful analysis of historical, literary and mythological allusions, she argues against traditional interpretations of Joan as simply a negative foil to set off the English hero Talbot: 'Although she triumphs over the English, and so must be negative, she carries with her a long positive tradition reaching back to Plato's assertion that women could and should be trained for martial exercise, and to the figure of the armed Goddess Minerva'. (15)

Emma Smith expresses a similar attitude towards the portrayal of Joan in her editorial compilation *Shakespeare's Histories* (2004). In her section
titled “Gender and Sexuality” she includes Leah Marcus’s study of “Elizabeth”, in which she finds the Queen’s refracted image in the play 1 Henry VI. In this essay Marcus goes to the extent of drawing “a provocative topical parallel” between the French strumpet and the Virgin Queen Elizabeth - an idea also expressed by Gabriele Barker Jackson. And this comparison between two apparently conflicting historical personages – a queen on one side and a shepherdess on the other, a virgin Goddess of purity and a lascivious strumpet – is highly relevant to the present work and here we have to dwell at length to speculate upon the salient features which point significantly towards Shakespeare’s positive treatment of Joan, a woman castigated by the Church and the English ruling class as a witch.

Shakespeare, as pointed out by the Romantic poet John Keats, was a dramatist possessing “negative capability” – an ability to remain in doubts and uncertainties, “without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”. Probably it was this quality which prompted Shakespeare to maintain in his plays a duality of purpose and ambiguity, which often resulted in problems of interpretation. In Henry VI, Part 1 too, there exists a similar ambivalence in the presentation of Joan of Arc’s life and character. For the French, she comes as a boon; for the English she is a bane and scourge. For the French Dauphin she is a “sibyl”, while for the English lords she is the abominable
Hecate. The drastic contrast is, however, purposeful and enlightening and holds up almost a mirror to the age. In her the English audience might have discerned echoes of a controversial but contemporary regal figure – their most beloved (and often mistrusted) Queen Elizabeth. Throughout the play there are echoes which link Joan to the Queen, and this shows the similarity to be purposeful.

The Virgin Queen sitting on the English throne had been a subject of much eulogized contemporary references. As pointed out by Leah S. Marcus:

she was the divine Astraea returned or, in place of the Holy Virgin banished from Protestant spirituality, a secularized Virgin Mother to the nation. She was a Queen of shepherds, a new Deborah, a Cynthia or Diana, the unreachable object of male desire and worship. (149)

Now, in order to understand the significance of the parallelism between the two figures we must look at Shakespeare's initial presentation of Joan. In Act I, scene ii, the Bastard of Orleans compares Joan to the "nine sibyls of old Rome" and calls her "a holy maid'. Joan herself admits to be a simple shepherdess, a virgin chosen by "the mother of God". Again, the overwhelmed Charles compares her to "Deborah", "Helen, the mother of Constantine" and "Saint Philips' daughter". She is the bright star of Venus and finally, when she wins the battle of Orleans, Charles comments in gratitude:
Divinest creature, Astraea's daughter,
How shall I honour thee for this success?
Thy promises are like Adonis's gardens,
That one day bloom'd and fruitful were the next.
France, triumph in thy glorious prophetess!

(I. vi. 4-8)

For the audience of the age of Queen Elizabeth these echoes would have been too profound to be missed.

But there was another aspect of the Queen which was the subject of much controversy and which links her even more profoundly to Shakespeare's Joan. It relates to the manly aspect of her nature and demeanour. Joan of Arc is a cross dressed woman, and it was this cross dressing which led the Church to convict her as a witch. Edward Hall reports:

Where was her womanly behauor, when she cladde her self in a mannes clothing, and was conuersaunt with euery losell, geuyng occasion to all men to judge, and speake euill of her, and her doynges. Then these thynges, beyng thus plainly true, all men must nedes confess ...... she was no good woman,.... she was not sainct. (152)

Again, Holinshed records this same issue and discusses the many charges levelled against Joan. He writes:
Wherein found though a virgin, yet first, shamefullie rejecting her sex abominablie in acts and apparell, to have counterfeit mankind ..... to be a pernicious instrument to hostilitie and bloudshed in divelish witchcraft and sorcerie, sentence accordinglie was pronounced against her.(167)

So, one of the most popular and widely publicized reasons for Joan’s prosecution was her “cross dressing”. In fact, society at that time considered “cross dressing” or women dressing in male attire to be a threat to the accepted norms of society. People believed that these types of women who dared to be different and “who refused the place of silent subjection” were mostly castigated as “witches”.

Joan, therefore, as presented by Shakespeare appears to be a statement against such a prevailing crime of his time. Through the historical personage of Joan, Shakespeare appears to be presenting an image of a woman who dared to challenge the established norms of female behaviour and had to pay for it by being burnt alive at the stakes. Shakespeare’s tenderness in presenting the character of Joan appears to become an obvious statement on account of the close semblance it bears to the persona of the reigning Queen herself.

If cross dressing was a crime worthy of fatal punishment, then how would society react to a Queen who herself was guilty of it? Both Gabriele Barker Jackson and Leah Marcus refer to this “cross dressing” of Queen
Elizabeth I. In fact, Elizabeth I took advantage of the Tudor concept of the “Queen’s two bodies” – her “body natural” was the body of a frail woman; her “body politic” was the body of a king, carrying the strength and masculine spirit of the best of her male forebearers (Marcus:150). In fact, prior to the Spanish invasion she addressed the soldiers as the “King of England” and even appeared before the troops in the martial attire of a King:

In 1588, on the eve of the expected Spanish invasion, Queen Elizabeth visited her soldiers in the camp at Tilbury ‘habited like an Amazonian Queene, Buskind and plumed, having a golden Truncheon, Gantlet, and Gorget’, according to Heywood’s later description. (Jackson: 153)

This male attire of the Queen had been a subject of suspicious reservation and speculation on the part of the conservative Elizabethans. But none could challenge a Queen – had she been an insignificant shepherdess like Joan this crime might have caused her tale to have a virtually different ending.

The parallel to the Queen image persists even in the final maligned portrait of Joan. Even if the critical assumption be accepted that Shakespeare purposefully destroys his sensitively built up image of Joan in order to satisfy the Age’s overtly chauvinistic sentiments, yet, the parallel to the Virgin Queen Elizabeth I still persists. Joan, in Act V, sc.iv, speaks proudly of her much proclaimed virginity. Here she appears to be a Godly angel proclaiming Divine Wrath on her English persecutors, who thus inhumanly
mistrusted their female folk. Joan had dared to hold up a mirror to her
contemporary age, thereby exposing the hollowness of the much publicized
manly power and heroism. Like the proverbial “Amazon” she herself had
challenged manly prowess in open battle and also shattered the myth of
female weakness and had to pay for it at the terrible stakes. The English
Lords in the play harbour no sympathy for her. In fact a barbaric, almost
cannibalistic pleasure is detected in Warwick’s declaration:

And hark ye, sirs; because she is a maid,
Spare for no faggots, let there be enow:
Place barrels of pitch upon the fatal stake,
That so her torture may be shortened.

(V. iv. 55-58)

The terror of such a death by fire which is made to blaze even further with
the help of combustible elements such as “faggots” and “pitch” was enough
to drive the sanest mind crazy. So, when Joan tries to save herself by falsely
claiming to be pregnant, it appears to be a normal human reaction enough:

Law of any civilized nation does not levy capital punishment upon pregnant
women and Joan here seeks shelter under this plea. But the practice of witch
hunting and killing is comparable to an insane social malady that, once
unleashed, follows no law and hence Joan, too, finds no respite.
Here it must be remembered that at this time, another much publicized case of witch trial was going on in Scotland. *News from Scotland* (1591) made this case of Barbara Napier well known to the people of England, and Joan's attempt to seek refuge under the pretext of pregnancy, in reality, appears to be a throwback upon this case. Barbara Napier was known to be a friend of the Earl of Bothwell, and together they were said to have consulted with witches to bring about the fall of King James VI of Scotland. But Napier claimed to be with child, and Christina Larner refers to the letter written by King James on this occasion:

> Try by the mediciners' oaths if Barbara Napier be with bairn or not. Take no delaying answer. If you find she be not, to the fire presently, and cause bowel her publicly (12).

In his enthusiasm, the King here appears to be comparable to the bloodthirsty characters of York and Warwick in Shakespeare's play. In fact, King James was more than displeased when Napier was saved by the jurors. He feared treason and sorcery provided him a golden scope to punish suspected traitors. But Joan in this play is far more unfortunate than Barbara Napiere, for unlike the latter, she receives no clemency.

There are echoes of Elizabeth present in Joan's claim to unwedded pregnancy and her reference to a string of men as her possible lovers. Leah Marcus argues:
Almost incredibly, the two Frenchmen she [Joan] confesses to have taken as lovers are the duke of Alencon and the duke of Anjou (Reignier) – precisely the names of the two French noblemen Elizabeth had come closest to marrying in the decades before: first the duke of Anjou, then his brother the duke of Alencon, later also called Anjou (162). The topicality of these allusions, therefore, is too closely linked to be attributed to mere chance. Moreover, the reversal in the characterization of Joan also hints at an important prevailing belief regarding witchcraft.

V

Stuart Clark in “Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft” points out:

That witches did everything backwards was as much a commonplace of scholarly demonology as it has been of romantic fiction since.... Such festive occasions shared a calendrical license to disorderly behaviour or “misrule” based on the temporary but complete reversal of customary priorities of status and value (100-101).

Inversion, therefore, was supposed to point toward a deviations from the established norms of society and one “was the exchange of sex roles involved in the image of the ‘woman on top’ or transvestism” (Clark: 101).
In *1 Henry VI*, Joan is a prototype of such inversion. Right from the first she challenges male hegemony with her avid violation of female norms and codes of behaviour. Her “Amazon” image is truly in keeping with this “woman on top” position. On her first appearance, when her divine inspiration is doubted, she proves her authenticity first by identifying Dauphin and then by defeating him in an open combat. And Charles Dauphin who had earlier declared “I fear no woman” is forced to cry out:

Stay, stay thy hands; thou art an Amazon,
And fightest with the sword of Deborah.
(I. ii. 104-105)

Her forceful nature prevails over male vanity, and this is also apparent in the manner in which she turns down Charles’s courtship. Her answer is simple but firm:

I must not yield to any rites of love,
For my profession’s sacred from above:
(I. ii. 113-114)

Shakespeare further establishes this principle of “inversion” in Joan’s assertive power when she is shown to have subdued Talbot (the supreme symbol of male prowess) in battle. Obviously, the only resource left with the archetypal male is to castigate her as a “strumpet” and “witch”. In confusion Talbot declares:
Heavens, can you suffer hell so to prevail?

My breast I’ll burst with straining of my courage,

And from my shoulders crack my arms asunder,

But I will chastise this high minded strumpet.

(I. v. 9-12).

Accepting defeat at the hands of a woman makes him reflect in utter despondency:

My thoughts are whirled like a potter’s wheel,

I know not where I am, nor what I do:

A witch by fear, not force, like Hannibal,

Drives back our troops and conquers as she lists:

(I. v. 19-22)

But Joan of Arc is not the only character in the play who typifies “inversion”. Here it must be remembered that if “inversion” was integral to such depiction of witches in the Age of Shakespeare, then it was also a part of the court proceeding. Stuart Clark points out:

Throughout the late medieval and Renaissance period ritual inversion was a characteristic element of village folk-rites, religious and educational ludi, urban carnivals and court-entertainment (101).

So one of the prominent places of inversion was also the court and as if to suggest this trend of thought Shakespeare also makes his royal characters depict inversion. In fact,
1 Henry VI begins with a suggested “inversion” in the state of the monarchy. The play begins with the death of one king who was an epitome of princely virtues:

Virtue he had, deserving to command:

His brandish’d sword did blind men with his beams:

His arms spread wider than a dragon’s wings

His sparkling eyes, replete with wrathful fire,

More dazzled and drove back his enemies

Than midday sun fierce bent against their faces.

(I, i. 9-14)

But the prince he leaves behind is an “effeminate” one, a virtual schoolboy. He is unable to control the warring nobles who are instantly divided into several factions. In the very first scene of the play tiding after tiding reaches the English court informing the nobles about the “inverted position” of the English in France. The reasons offered are many and varied:

- want of men and money.

Amongst the soldiers this is muttered –

That here you maintain several factions:

And whilst a field should be dispatch’d and fought,

You are disputing of your generals;

One would have lingering wars, with little cost;

Another would fly swift, but wanteth wings;
A third thinks, without expense at all,
By guileful fair words peace may be obtain’d.
(I. i. 69-77)

Here it is to be noticed that up to this period there is no mention of Joan of Arc. She has not yet appeared on the French scene and already the English were losing ground in France owing to a multitude of reasons. So when Joan appears and through her pragmatic marshalling of military affairs turns the tide in favour of the French, she certainly does not use any witch-like magical power. She only puts to use, like an able General, the situation which had already turned in favour of the French. This point is further proved in the battle of Bordeaux where Talbot is shown to die. Here Shakespeare defies historical truth to prepostulate Talbot’s death by 22 years, but never once does he make Joan use any dark ploy to bring about his fall. Rather in two explicitly poignant scenes. (Act IV. Sc. iii. & Act IV. Sc. iv) he proves that it is the dissension between the English nobility which leads to the fall of their illustrious countryman. The Duke of York awaits supply from his arch enemy the Earl of Somerset and laments his failure to aid Talbot in the hour of extreme need:

A plague upon the villain Somerset
That thus delays my promised supply
Of horsemen that were levied for this siege!
Renowned Talbot doth expect my aid,
And I am louted by a traitor villain
And cannot help the noble Chevalior.
God comfort him in this necessity!

(IV. iii. 9-15)

Indeed, Sir Lucy’s comments appear to be the dramatist’s own true summation of the situation:

The fraud of England, not the force of France,
Hath now entrapp’d the noble minded Talbot:

(IV. iv. 36-37)

So Joan is not the so-called “dark force” which spells ruin for the English – operative behind the scene are other “darker forces” represented by English gentry and clergy. From this view point, the castigation and burning of Joan as a witch appear to be a mere ploy by the real “dark” forces to appease the common English sense of nationalism and hide the true reasons of their failure, in the battlefield.

Of course, the English gentry and clergy were not the only real “dark forces” who used common men’s fear of the supernatural to satisfy their own self-interest. Shakespeare was a dramatist with a much wider mental horizon and therefore, his concept of “dark forces” appears to indicate “all powers in general” – he seems to be hinting at corruption and
inherent in royalty and clergy at large, irrespective of nationality. As if to indicate this, the French Dauphin is shown to be as much a party to Joan’s ultimate fall, as the English commanders. In fact, a carefully crafted scene, Act V, sc i, shows that royal and religious powers together with the approval of the Pope conspire to declare peace and the Dauphin is excused – and to appease the English who would not accept such undue conclusion of truce, Joan is burnt at the stake. So “Godly peace” is concluded between the realms of England and France at the instruction of the Pope, but even the credibility of the Pope is put to question when the new Cardinal (Winchester) openly offers bribe to the Pope’s agents for his elevation:

Stay, my Lord Legate; you shall first receive
The sum of money which I promised
Should be deliver’d to his Holiness
For clothing me in these grave ornaments.

(V. i. 51-54)

Indeed, such explicit reference to the commercial attitude of the Roman Catholic Church does not appear to be a careless piece of dramatic action on the part of Shakespeare. Rather, these words spoken just prior to Joan’s final fall and condemnation put to question the sanctity of her trial and judgement. We are left wondering whether Joan is truly a witch, “a dark force” or whether there are other darker forces operative from behind.
But what did such inversions indicate? It was supposed to portray misrule or the disruption of harmonious order of the Universe. The supporters of witchcraft theory like King James I felt that the Witches challenged God’s rule and hence they represented misrule. But a similar disruption of order is, observed in the rule of the “universal” female, since this defied the patriarchal norm of father’s rule over the family. As if to stress this point Shakespeare makes his Joan Act V, sc. iv. disown her shepherd father who came to visit her:

Decrepit miser! Base ignoble wretch
I am descended of a gentler blood;
Thou art no father nor no friend of mine.

(V. iv. 7-9)

But this very maiden had declared upon her entry in Act I, sc. ii;:

“Dauphin, I am by birth a shepherd’s daughter”

So, what does the dramatist desire to convey through this drastic change of attitude? If we take this to convey a challenge to the set norms of a patriarchal society by a woman who has already proved superior to the menfolk (through her pragmatic marshalling of warfare and personal bravery); then it becomes clear enough that the dramatist hints at the immediate fate of such women who thus subvert the social and moral order. Joan opposes social norms through inversion and is given capital
punishment by the “Powers of the day”. Her subversive conduct is presumably to be the proof of her being a witch. Judged from this point the logic appears simple enough.

But this simple logic is challenged when we remember that other and more powerful characters in the play have already been depicted by the dramatist as reflecting the “inversion” – the King is not kingly at all, rather he is effeminate and childish; the Lords are not loyal but are brewing an upcoming civil war; the Clergy and the Pope are indulging in anti-religious activities through buying and selling of favours. So, following the logic of inversion which castigates Joan as a witch is indicative of misrule: rather it can be said that all these powerful men are guilty of practicing more heinous forms of witchcraft. Truly enough, we are led to infer that if Joan be a “dark force”, then in actuality she is a mere scapegoat for far darker forces.

Brian Walsh in his recent essay “‘Unkind Division”: The Double Absence of Performing History in 1 Henry VI’ has made a highly significant comment regarding the perspective study of history in popular theatre. He writes:

*Henry VI, Part 1* proposes that to perform history in the Elizabethan popular theater 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. The play of history opens a space in which the
players and the audience, the totality of the transient theatrical event, are left continually to signify and resignify the past as "material for labour" in the present (120).

\textit{1 Henry VI}, truly enough, is teeming and troubling with possibility which as a researcher I have endeavoured to project in my study. But whatever may be the "image behind the presented image", it all reinforces that one central idea – behind the so-called dark forces such as "witches" there are always evident far darker forces; the Church and the rulers (as well as the English and French forces in the case of Joan) here who are really responsible for the evil rampant within society. The weak and the innocent, and specially the challenging female, were castigated as the so-called "dark forces" to serve as scapegoats for their sins, and crimes.

\textbf{VI}

A close reading of \textit{King Henry VI, Part 1} convincingly shows that the "dark powers" operating through the courses of historical action in the play originated less from divine or diabolical sources (as has been demonstrated in the activities of Joan of Arc) than from the political and religious sources. It has been believed that God sought to punish the England of this period for
certain sins, such as, the murder of Richard II, which meant the shedding of blood of God’s earthly representative. The punishment came in the form of Henry IV’s uneasy reign, Henry V’s untimely death and hence the termination of his brilliant rule, and then, during Henry VI’s rule, the intensification of factional conflicts among the English lords (the Wars of the Roses) leading to various disasters. We see in this play *King Henry VI, Part 2* the heinous murder of Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, the emergence of a devilish nexus of forces led by York, the destruction of Humphrey’s first two murderers and also of the other two murderers (York and Queen Margaret) through their growing enmity. As Tillyard comments: “Through these happenings the country had been brought to the edge of chaos” (188). As a result of these factional wars, not only the prime agents (the nobles) were affected, but the moral-spiritual fabric of the whole nation covering the common people and the middle classes got corroded. So the prime agents of the ruling class became more diabolical in character than the so-called witches and fiends of popular belief, which, as represented in this part of the play (I.iv. and II.i) appear to be childishly ludicrous.

While reading *Henry VI, Part 2* as a sequel to the earlier play, we clearly see Shakespeare’s strategy to expose the devilish nature of the lords surrounding the King. The last scene of *Henry VI, Part 1* shows how Suffolk
successfully persuades the young King to cancel his earlier betrothal to the daughter of the (French) Earl of Armagnac and switch over to the fabulously beautiful Frenchwoman Margaret, daughter of King of Naples, even at the cost of two French counties, Anjou and Maine, surrendered to her father as dowry. Margaret was actually Suffolk’s beloved, and the latter hooked the King through her and also dislodged Gloucester who wanted the King to be true to his Earlier betrothal. In *Henry VI, Part 1* Suffolk says:

> Margaret shall now be Queen, and rule the King;  
> But I will rule both her, the King, and realm.

(V.v.107-108)

The second part of the play begins with the implementation of Suffolk’s plan, with Queen Margaret being presented before the lords who are made to kneel and accept her as the Queen. Thus the play seems to begin with the process of the moral fall of the King, a process that is actually working out the fatal sins of the dynasty. These seeds of degeneration also find expressions in various forms, including curses and prophecies, anticipations and forebodings uttered by some characters.

> May never glorious sun reflex his beams  
> Upon the country where you make abode;  
> But darkness and the gloomy shade of death  
> Environ you, till mischief and despair
Drive you to break your necks or hang yourselves!

(King Henry VI, Part I: V. iv. 87-91)

These are the parting and prophetic words of the English scourge Joan, and they reverberate in our mind as we move on to King Henry VI, Part 2 – a play dealing essentially with pride and ambition, self-interest and ruthless civil strife. Towards the end of Part 1, the weak-spirited King Henry VI is led to a breach of betrothal, and the result is another French woman, a veritable she-wolf sitting on the English throne. A.S.Cairncross in his Introduction to King Henry VI, Part 1 argues:

And that breach, like others in the historical series, is inevitably visited with retribution – the retribution of the French maid who becomes his queen and the fury, the ‘bloody scourge’, the she-wolf, of the later plays (xlix).

So, Henry VI, Part 2 witnesses the entry of Margaret – a queen dearly bought and her entry itself is greeted with rancour and ill-will. Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, Protector and uncle to the King, feeling genuinely worried about the new development says:

O peers of England! Shameful is this league,

Fatal this marriage, canceling your fame,

Blotting your names from books of memory,

Razing the characters of your renown,

Defacing monuments of conquer’d France,
Undoing all, as all has never been!

(I. i. 97-102)

He is supported further by the Duke of York who, however, is irked by the unseemliness of the match, not on moral grounds, but because England has to concede two French regions as dowry to Queen Margaret's father, Duke of Anjou. So he angrily says:

France should have torn and rent my very heart
Before I would have yielded to this league.
I never read but England's Kings have had
Large sums of gold and dowries with their wives;
And our King Henry gives away his own,
To match with her that brings no vantages.

(I. i. 125-130)

At the same time, however, there are other lords who do not agree with the views of the Lord Protector, Humphrey. The Cardinal, his arch-rival, is quick to caution:

Look to it, lords; let not his smoothing words
Bewitch your hearts; be wise and circumspect.
What though the common people favour him,
Calling him "Humphrey, the good Duke of Gloucester",
Clapping their hands, and crying with loud voice
"Jesu maintain your royal Excellence!"
With "God preserve the good Duke Humphrey!"

I fear me, lords, for all this flattering gloss,

He will be found a dangerous Protector.

(I. i. 155-163)

But, the words of the Cardinal, or the Lords who support him, are not to be believed. As the Cardinal and his conspiratorial faction-lords leave, Salisbury comments on their character:

Pride went before, Ambition follows him.

While these do labour for their preferment.

Behooves it us to labour for the realm.

I never saw but Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester,

Did bear him like a noble gentleman.

(I. i. 179-183)

It is evident herein that all the Lords were fighting for their own personal gain and were not really concerned about the King or the country. The Cardinal or the "God's man" is depicted as an extremely cunning and power-hungry individual. His character had already been exposed by Shakespeare in Part 1 of the play, where he had been graphically presented as a corrupt person sending bribes to the Pope in return for his investiture in the office of the Cardinal. Hence when such a man accuses the "Good Duke Humphrey" of being self-interested and a threat to the King, then his own
words and actions come under suspicion. He is not a man to be believed, and Salisbury points out:

Oft have I seen the haughty Cardinal –
More like a soldier than a man o’ th’ church,
As stout and proud as he were lord of all –
Swear like a ruffian, and demean himself
Unlike the ruler of a commonweal.

(I. i. 184-188)

So this very first scene of King Henry VI, Part 2 presents the beginning of the devilish nexus against the good and gracious Humphrey, the Lord Protector who is committed to the general good of the nation and quite a few of the lords joined the nexus led by the proud and ambitious prelate, Cardinal Beaufort, the Bishop of Winchester.

VII

But chronicle account (Hall’s) never really presents these characters in such clearly denoted black and white colours. S.C.Sengupta refers to this and recounts how even Humphrey was not a very clean person in his personal life:
Being a historian, Hall is not blind to the Protector’s frailties, particularly his weakness for women – his questionable relations with Jacqueline of Hainault, whom he stole from her first husband, and with Eleanor Cobham, who was first his ‘soveraigne lady and paramour’ and then his wife. And Hall concedes, too, that the Cardinal of Winchester was ‘a great stay to the Kyng and the realme’, and that after his death, ‘the affayres in France, were neither well looked to, nor the governors of the country were well advised.’

But Shakespeare, though following his source closely in other matters, here effects a revisioning. His Cardinal is presented throughout as a “Machiavellian villain”, forever scheming and plotting and without any trace of good in him. On the other hand, the dubious aspects of Duke Humphrey’s nature is left entirely unmentioned in the play with the effect that he appears to be a nobleman much wronged and sinned against. But what was Shakespeare’s purpose behind such gross simplification of complicated characters?

A search for a possible answer leads us to another case of revision of the source, a case which in this play is closely linked by the dramatist to the fall of the “Good Duke”, Gloucester. According to the chronicles, the fall of Eleanor Cobham, the wife of the Good Duke occurred four years before the marriage of Henry VI, and Shakespeare in his play defies historical accuracy
to show this to be a result of her personal rivalry with the Queen as well as the cunning contrivance of her husband’s opponents. According to Tudor Chroniclers - as Peter Saccio points out:

The rivalry of the ladies is pure fiction. Eleanor’s downfall occurred four years before Margaret came to England.... Witchcraft was a serious business in the Middle Ages, And Eleanor was certainly guilty of some of the charges brought against her. Gloucester’s opponents did not contrive the whole affair. More modestly, they took advantage of his wife’s indiscretions to weaken his political position....(119-120)

But Shakespeare arranges his material in such a manner in the play that it all appears to be a trap by the Cardinal and other opponents of the “Good Duke”, into which the Duchess unwisely falls. When Queen Margaret voices her deep hatred for Duchess Eleanor, the Duke of Suffolk soothes her by commenting:

Madam, myself have lim’d a bush for her,
And plac’d a quire of such enticing birds
That she will light to listen to their lays,
And never mount to trouble you again.

(I. iii. 88-91)

On the other hand, John Hume, the priest, is presented by Shakespeare as having enticed the Duchess in seeking advice from the conjurer Henry
Bolingbroke and Margery Jourdain, a witch. Being aware of Eleanor’s ambition to see her husband succeed the childless King, Hume says:

This they have promis’d me, to show your Highness
A spirit rais’d from depth of underground,
That shall make answer to such questions
As by your Grace shall be propounded him.

(I. ii. 78-81)

The unassuming Duchess, led by miscalculated personal ambition alone, falls into the trap set by other ambitious and far craftier power-seekers. As the double-tongued priest comments:

Yet have I gold flies from another coast:
I dare not say from the rich Cardinal
And from the great and new-made Duke of Suffolk;
Yet I do find it so: for, to be plain,
They, knowing Dame Eleanor’s aspiring humour,
Have hired me to undermine the Duchess,
And buzz these conjurations in her brain.

(I. ii. 93-99)

Witchcraft here, therefore, appears to be a mere ploy used by the “crafty power-seekers” to demean those who served as obstacles on the path of their personal advance. The Lord Protector Gloucester, as presented by Shakespeare, appears to be the one man who was an insurmountable
stumbling block for the ambitious conspirators such as, the Cardinal and the Duke of Suffolk. So, these people used witchcraft as a mere trap for demeaning and thereby reducing the political power of Duke Humphrey.

Another noticeable factor about Shakespeare’s “revisioning” of source and re-presentation of the episode of Eleanor’s fall is the fate of Hume, the priest. It has been significantly pointed out that the priest, besides being a hypocrite, is also presented as a middleman who contrives the meeting between the Duchess and the conjurer and the witch. So, Shakespeare considers him as guilty a participant as the others who are accused of dabbling in witchcraft. If witchcraft, therefore, be a sin deserving capital punishment, then the priest, too, must share this fate. So, Shakespeare makes his King Henry VI, a just ruler in spite of all shortcomings, pronounce the sentence:

Receive the sentence of the law for sins
Such as by God’s book are adjudg’d to death.
You four, from hence to prison back again;
From thence unto the place of execution:
The witch in Smithfield shall be burn’d to ashes,
And you three shall be strangled on the gallows.

(II. iii. 3-8)
In reality, however, John Hume was not executed, for, as Hall points out in his chronicle, “John Hum had his pardon....” (159). This fact is supported by Peter Saccio, who records:

All were convicted, Eleanor by both ecclesiastical and secular tribunals that included her husband’s opponents on the council. Hume was pardoned. (119)

It is almost impossible that Shakespeare, who was well acquainted with the Chronicles, was ignorant about the pardon granted to the priest John Hume. So, in spite of this knowledge when he makes Hume suffer the same punishment as the conjurer Bolingbroke, his purpose raises definite questions. Shakespeare probably wishes to suggest that if witchcraft was a condemnable sin, then men like Hume, though he be in the clergy, was as much condemnable (if not more) as thousands of innocent individuals who regularly fell prey to this ruthless system nurtured by society.

But the question still remains, is witchcraft as condemnable as it is made out to be? Strangely enough, Shakespeare’s witches are the only truth-speakers in a world torn apart by ambitious politicians and self-seeking religious leaders. Speaking about the witches in Macbeth, Terry Eagleton has commented, “They are poets, prophetesses and devotees of female cult....”(48). He has set out to prove that in Macbeth the witches are the only positive force, the only truth-speakers who possess the power of prophesy.
In *King Henry VI, Part 2*, Shakespeare, once again, appears to have presented his witches and conjurers as possessing a prophetic power. The spirits raised by Bolingbroke, the conjurer and Margery Jourdain, the witch, make prophesies which turn out to be the ultimate truth.

_Spir._ Ask what thou wilt. That I have said and done!

_Boling. [Reads.]_ “First, of the King, what shall of him become?”

_Spir._ The duke yet lives that Henry shall depose;

But him outlive, and die a violent death.

[As the Spirit speaks, Southwell writes the answer.

_Boling._ “Tell me what fate awaits the Duke of Suffolk.”

_Spir._ By water shall he die and take his end.

_Boling._ “What shall betide the Duke of Somerset?”

_Spir._ Let him shun castles:

Safer shall he be upon the sandy plains

Than where castles mounted stand.

Have done, for more I hardly can endure.

_Boling._ Descend to darkness and the burning lake:

False fiend, avoid!

[Thunder and lightning. Exit spirit.

(I. iv. 27-39)

Strangely enough, all these prophesies made by the spirits turn out to be true in course of time. Thus, in this play, the supernatural powers are made to
expose hypocrisy and falsity. Indeed, Shakespeare is here representing an idea “against the grain” which can be easily perceived. At the same time, the ambiguity of Shakespeare’s art exposes the frivolity and pointlessness of the whole supernatural exercise, when York and Buckingham with their guards break in and arrest the whole lot of the conjuring party including the Duchess of Gloucester. The ludicrousness of the whole supernatural project is further highlighted in Act II, scene i through the episode of a Townsman of Saint Albans, crying “A miracle! a miracle”. The Townsman accompanying one Simpcox borne in a chair, announces to the multitude of people in presence of King, Queen, Cardinal, Gloucester and other lords including the Mayor of Saint Albans that this man who was born blind has been blessed with sight by his offering at the holy shrine. But when closely questioned, the miraculous cure of the man who was supposed to have been crippled by an accident is found to be a hoax, and when threatened with whips, he runs away:

[After the Beadle hath hit him once, he leaps over the stool and runs away; and they follow and cry, “A miracle!”]

All these miracle-mongerings are actually meant to denounce Gloucester, whose wife Lady Eleanor has been found to be:

The ringleader and head of all this rout,

Have practis’d dangerously against your state,
Dealing with witches and with conjurers:
Whom we have apprehended in the fact;
Raising up wicked spirits from underground,
Demanding of King Henry's life and death,
And other of your Highness' Privy Council,
As more at large your Grace shall understand.

(II. i. 162-169)

The conspiracy succeeds. Gloucester loses his position as Protector and is later thrown into prison on the charge of high treason, though against the King's conscience. Gloucester expresses his foreboding to the King:

Ah! Gracious lord, these days are dangerous.
Virtue is chok'd with foul Ambition,
And Charity chas'd hence by Rancour's hand;
Foul Subornation is predominant,
And Equity exil'd your Highness' land.
I know their complot is to have my life;
And if my death might make this island happy,
And prove the period of their tyranny,
I would expend it with all willingness.
But mine is made the prologue to their play;
For thousands more, that yet suspect no peril,
Will not conclude their plotted tragedy.
Beaufort's red sparkling eyes blab his heart's malice,
And Suffolk's cloudy brow his stormy hate;
Sharp Buckingham unburthens with his tongue
The envious load that lies upon his heart;
And dogged York, that reaches at the moon,
Whose overweening arm I have pluck'd back,
By false accuse doth level at my life.
And you, my sovereign lady, with the rest,
Causeless have laid disgraces on my head,
And with your best endeavour have stirr'd up
My liefest liege to be mine enemy.
Ay, all of you have laid your heads together—
Myself had notice of your conventicles—
And all to make away my guiltless life.

(III. i. 142-167)

In this connection, we may refer to Clemen's article "Anticipation and Foreboding in Shakespeare's Early Histories", in which he cites some instances of ominous "foreboding which was already established as a traditional convention in the pre-Shakespearian chronicle plays and tragedies and of which he also read in Holinshed and Hall: prophesies, omens and dreams" (25-26).

Both Part 1 and Part 2 of King Henry VI appear to suggest an antithetical concept which goes against the established norms of the
contemporary society. Elizabethan society castigated the so called "dark forces", i.e. witches, conjurers, spirits etc. as evil-mongers, but operative behind them was an even greater and truly evil nexus of churchmen and aristocrats — two power-hungry and ever-warring factions. In fact, in most cases the witches, spirits etc. were innocent victims of other truly evil powers. Shakespeare, with his humanitarian sensibility and pragmatic attitude was well aware of such prevailing social crimes of his time. In King Henry VI, part 1 and part 2 he appears to be suggesting this truth through well-thought and often highly veiled and even antithetical images and concepts. Indeed, the master dramatist seems to have penetrated into the heart of true evil and his earliest plays leave ample ground for critical exploration.

The factional feud goes on uninterrupted. Queen Margaret's Joining the faction against Gloucester adds a new dimension to the diabolical nexus. The Queen, Suffolk, York and Cardinal conspire to have Humphrey secretly murdered in the prison. Suffolk undertakes implementing it through two murderers who report the success of the plan. When the young King, conscience-stricken, wishes to review Humphrey's case, Suffolk enters there, and a false drama is enacted:

King. How now! why look'st thou pale? Why tremblest thou?
Where is our uncle? What's the matter, Suffolk?

_Suf._ Dead in his bed, my lord; Gloucester is dead.

_Queen._ Marry, God forfend!

_Car._ God's secret judgement: I did dream to-night

The Duke was dumb and could not speak a word.

[The King swoons]

_Queen._ How fares my lord? Help, lords! The King is dead.

_Som._ Rear up his body; wring up his nose.

_Queen._ Run, go, help, help! O, Henry, ope thine eyes!

_Suf._ He doth revive again: madam, be patient.

_King._ O heavenly God!

_Queen._ How fares my gracious lord?

_Suf._ Comfort, my sovereign! Gracious Henry, comfort!

_King._ What, doth my Lord of Suffolk comfort me?

Came he right now to sing a raven's note,
Whose dismal tune bereft my vital powers,
And thinks he that the chirping of a wren,
By crying comfort from a hollow breast,
Can chase away the first-conceived sound?

Hide not thy poison with such sug'red words;
Lay not thy hands on me; forbear, I say:
Their touch affrights me as a serpent's sting.

Thou baleful messenger, out of my sight!
Upon thy eye-balls murderous Tyranny
Sits in grim majesty to fright the world.
Look not upon me, for thine eyes are wounding:
Yet do not go away; come, basilisk,
And kill the innocent gazer with thy sight;
For in the shade of death I shall find joy,
In life but double death, now Gloucester’s dead.

(III. ii. 26-55)

The Queen’s hysterical play-acting is meant to attract the King’s attention to herself and to screen the villainies of her lover Suffolk. The common people break into a riotous uproar over the murder of Humphrey, for which Suffolk and Cardinal are the main suspects. The King prays to God:

O Thou that judgest all things, stay my thoughts –
My thoughts that labour to persuade my soul
Some violent hands were laid on Humphrey’s life.
If my suspect be false, forgive me, God,
For judgement only doth belong to Thee.

(III. ii. 135-139)

We now see the working out of God’s judgement. The King accepts the people’s demand and banishes Suffolk. God’s judgement seems to strike two of Gloucester’s murderers: Suffolk is taken prisoner by the captain of a warship and executed after the captain reads out a long list of his crimes; the
Cardinal suffers agonies of conscience and dies. The other two conspirators, Queen Margaret and Duke of York (whose punishment is completed in the next part of the play), become rivals and fight against each other.

The curse incurred by Henry IV's dynasty from the murder of Richard II continues working towards greater disasters. There is a revolt in Ireland, York is sent there as Regent with troops collected by Suffolk. York conceives a devilish plan to use Suffolk's men to fulfil his own purpose of stirring up a revolution in England by further inciting the Irish rebel Jack Cade and the followers of Kent into a riot. At last the rebellion is suppressed. While the Lancastrian party is controlling the Court, York returns from Ireland in full force. But when he finds that the Queen has procured the release of Somerset from imprisonment in the Tower, York becomes openly defiant:

How now! Is Somerset at liberty?

Then, York, unloose thy long-imprison'd thoughts
And let thy tongue be equal with thy heart.
Shall I endure the sight of Somerset?
False king! why hast thou broken faith with me,
Knowing how hardly I can brook abuse?
King did I call thee? No, thou art not king;
Not fit to govern and rule multitudes,
Which dar'st not, no, nor canst not rule a traitor.
That head of thine doth not become a crown;
Thy hand is made to grasp a palmer's staff,
And not to grace an awful princely scepter.
That gold must round engirt these brows of mine,
Whose smile and frown, like to Achilles' spear,
Is able with the change to kill and cure.
Here is a hand to hold a sceptre up,
And with the same to act controlling laws.
Give place: by heaven, thou shalt rule no more
O'er him whom heaven created for thy ruler.

(V. i. 87-105)

The Yorkist party becomes dominant, with Edward and Richard (York's sons) and Salisbury and Warwick (the two Nevils) joining together. In the battle of Saint Albans York becomes victorious: Somerset is killed by Richard, but Queen Margaret escapes safely to stage a comeback. The play ends with chaos engulfing the microcosmic order of King Henry VI's kingdom:

*York.* I know our safety is to follow them;

For, as I hear, the King is fled to London,

To call a present court of Parliament:

Let us pursue him ere the writs go forth.
What says Lord Warwick? Shall we after them?

*War.* After them! Nay, before them, if we can.

Now, by my faith, lords, 'twas a glorious day:

Saint Albans battle, won by famous York,

Shall be eterniz'd in all age to come.

Sound drums and trumpets! and to London all:

And more such days as these to us befall!  

*[Exeunt]*

(V. iii. 23-33)
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