After Jack Cade's barbaric destructiveness in Part 2, a bloodier and more anarchic sequel seems at first unimaginable, but as Edgar in King Lear tells us, "The worst is not So long as we can say 'This is the worst'" (IV.1.28). From the entrance of the bloody Yorks to the on-stage murder of Henry VI, 3 Henry VI relentlessly explores "the worst": the absolute nadir of the English past, the grotesque brutalities of the War of the Roses. The law of the scabbard leads to the bloodbath of a civil war, not only with the inevitability of a cynical power politics of naked force but also with a metaphysical certainty through which the actively destructive energies of chaos reveal their own perverted (and even in its own way artistic) compulsion to shatter all bonds of order.¹ Not simply a passive condition in which order is absent nor a totally unpredictable and unheeding urge to set all things at strife, chaos forms part of the paradoxical metaphysics of the natural and the social mystery, and its energies cause the absoluteness with which we regard the oppositions of order/anarchy, natural/unnatural, and so on to collapse upon themselves. In political terms, the dogs of war have been unleashed and there’s no getting them back into the kennel; in physical terms, man is carried along in his precarious existence by the gales and tides of fortune’s tempests.

In Henry VI’s image, the political is compared to the natural, both of which are at war with themselves:

This battle fares like to the morning’s war,
When dying clouds contend with growing light,
What time the shepherd, blowing of his nails,
Can neither call it perfect day nor night.
Now sways it this way, like a mighty sea
Forc'd by the tide to combat with the wind;
Now sways it that way, like the self-same sea
Forc'd to retire by fury of the wind.
Sometime the flood prevails, and then the wind;
Now one the better, then another best;
Both tugging to be victors, breast to breast;
Yet neither conqueror nor conquered.
So is the equal poise of this fell war.

(II.5.1–13)

The contention spells the way of the world; nothing stands still and all changes and there really emerge no victors, only combatants caught in sportive struggle of winds and waves, which are themselves combatants. Margaret's long speech in Act V uses the storm-tossed ship as a metaphor for her condition, repeating Henry's sense of hopelessness but exhorting her followers to courageously battle the ruthless elements rather than sit still and lament. Oxford, Somerset, and her son, Prince Edward, praise her valiant and resolute spirit, yet Margaret's comparisons of the Yorks to the elemental forces of nature underline how doomed their struggle is (V.4.1–37). Margaret's image connects the Yorks with the primordial, elemental, nonhuman, destructive power of nature; avoiding such a power is impossible and opposing it is futile. The storm-tossed ship provides as well an image of the groundlessness of political action, a groundlessness concisely expressed later in Richard's mockery of pity, love, fear, and all "which greybeards call divine" (V.6.81). Authority is sheathed in the scabbard, whose "law" is man's imitation of the destructive energies of nature.

The play sets out – almost programmatically – to destroy every vestige of man-made order, as the Yorks challenge and violate the ceremonial, formal, liturgical, and familial bonds of civilized living, forcing as they do the violent revenges of the Lancasters and their followers. 3 Henry VI is a drama of mutilation, its stage filled with severed heads, dead bodies, heads on gates, paper crowns, bloody armor, bloody swords, bloody handkerchiefs. Its opening speeches set the tone: the bloody Yorks boasting of their killings, Richard exposing the severed head of Somerset. Look what we have done, cry his sons Richard and Edward, as the father proceeds to assume possession of the English throne, his right by the strength of naked force. The Yorks become from the beginning predators in this jungle of politics; they literally storm the stage, invading