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Shakespeare

HENRY IV PART ONE



Paul Hozar

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THE FIRST PART OF
KING HENRY THE
FOURTH

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INTRODUCTION

TOWARDS the end of *The First Part of Henry IV*, Prince Hal stands over two bodies. One is his dead rival, Hotspur, and the other, Falstaff, who, having been attacked by Douglas, has fallen down 'as if he were dead'. It is for Hal a moment of triumph. He has shown himself superior in battle, made 'this northern youth exchange | His glorious deeds' for Hal's own indignities, and redeemed the promise made to his father in their scene of reconciliation.

This representation of the victorious Hal standing over the two prostrate bodies is emblematic of an important aspect of the play. To Elizabethan audiences, well aware of the myth of the regenerate Hal, it must have seemed an almost mystical moment. There was a long way to go before Agincourt, but, for an audience to whom the story was familiar, this was the moment when Hal could be seen to have triumphed not only over Hotspur but also over those characteristics of his own waywardness epitomized by the fallen Falstaff.

A lesser dramatist might have made this the last moment of the play, allowing it to linger in the memory as the audience drifted from the theatre. But this is not quite the end. Hal's two epitaphs are not fashioned to give an audience the thrill of victory.

*No, Percy, thou art dust,
And food for –*

'For worms,' adds Hal, as Percy dies before being able to complete his sentence.

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*When that this body did contain a spirit,
A kingdom for it was too small a bound.
But now two paces of the vilest earth
Is room enough. . . .
But let my favours hide thy mangled face. . . .*

V.4.88–95

Hal speaks sadly, regretfully; there is no glorification of victory. But that is not all. Even before Falstaff undergoes his comic resuscitation we have speeches by Hal that subtly modify the moment of triumph. ‘O, I should have a heavy miss of thee’ (V.4.104), he says over Falstaff’s ‘dead’ body. The pun is obvious and it recalls a line in the epitaph spoken over Hotspur, which might so easily have been comic if spoken over Falstaff:

*This earth that bears thee dead
Bears not alive so stout a gentleman.*

Hal, as he looks down on the two bodies, is a symbol of what he has striven for throughout the play – reformation that will glitter like bright metal on a sullen ground. He has found the mean between the two extremes that Aristotle described in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that which results from excess and that which results from defect. His centrality is paramount, yet, curiously, not a single title-page of any of the early quartos, nor the title of the play in the Folio of 1623, so much as mentions Hal. Nominally the play concerns Henry IV, and it is in his reign that all the events occur, but the title-pages go to some trouble to publicize the names of Hotspur and Falstaff. Even the very first mention we have of the play, in the Stationers’ Register, 25 February 1598, does exactly the same:

*. . . a booke intituled The historye of HENRY the IIIJth
with his battaile of Shrewsburye against HENRY*

*HOTTSPURRE of the Northe with the conceipted mirth
of Sir JOHN FALSTOFF.*

The battle is rightly and historically given as Henry IV's and it is language such as this which, with slight variations, is used on the title-pages of edition after edition. Shakespeare was almost certainly not responsible for the advertising matter that appeared on the title-pages of his plays. We cannot be at all sure that the description in the Stationers' Register stemmed from him. Nevertheless, in a play in which the central character is so clearly Prince Hal, it is, at first sight, a little surprising that his name should invariably be omitted.

If Hal is central to *1 Henry IV*, Falstaff is undoubtedly the play's most attractive character. He immediately became enormously popular and there have come down to us a large number of references to him and the play in the correspondence and literature of the time. One example will show how eagerly those first audiences hung on his words. In a commendatory poem by Sir Thomas Palmer, printed in the Folio edition of the works of Beaumont and Fletcher in 1647, there appeared these lines:

*I could praise Heywood now ; or tell how long
Falstaff from cracking nuts hath kept the throng.*

During the Commonwealth, when the theatres were closed, at least one short farcical piece – a droll – was extracted from *1 Henry IV*. It was called *The Bouncing Knight, or, The Robbers Robbed* and later in the seventeenth century a second playlet was similarly extracted – *The Boaster: or, Bully-Huff caught in a trap*.

As the titles indicate, the subject of these adaptations is Falstaff. Just as the attention of audiences has been attracted to Falstaff, so has that of critics. Inevitably one is

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in danger of seeing the play as his, whereas it is undoubtedly the development of Hal's character which is the play's major concern.

Although Shakespeare did not write his history plays in chronological order, he did, so far as we can tell, dramatize the three successive reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V in that order, and he probably wrote all four plays within a period of five or six years. We do not know whether, when writing *1 Henry IV*, Shakespeare had a second part in mind. It is possible he intended to write only one play on this reign but found he had too much material for a single play and thus began to prepare for a second part by building up the character of Hal's brother, John of Lancaster, and suggesting, by means of the scene with the Archbishop of York (IV.4), that though Hotspur was to be beaten, further rebellion would follow.

Perhaps the success of Part One, and of Falstaff in particular, encouraged the businessman in Shakespeare to provide a second play. Certainly the pattern of scenes of each part is remarkably similar, as if a formula were being followed, and it is curious that Hal and his father should be as estranged in Part Two as ever they were in Part One. However, when Shakespeare wrote *1 Henry IV*, probably in 1596, he was an experienced man of the theatre and it is difficult to believe that by the time he was half-way through *1 Henry IV* he did not realize he had a success on his hands. Thus, if a second part was not planned from the beginning (which at least seems possible), it was probably projected when Shakespeare came near to the completion of *1 Henry IV*.

Whether the two parts were ever performed successively in the late 1590s we do not know. From the evidence we have of actual performances of plays in two parts (such as

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*), it is not unlikely. In Shakespeare's lifetime the two parts were rather roughly put together to make a single play and a manuscript of this, the Dering version, exists. A conflation of the two parts, at least as rough, was presented at the Edinburgh Festival in 1964. The practice of performing both parts in a single day, though still uncommon, was initiated in 1923 by Birmingham Repertory Theatre (the first company to play *1 Henry IV* in full, at least since Shakespeare's day).

There is no doubt at all – because we have the evidence of the plays themselves – that Shakespeare thought of these plays as a group. It is possible he had in mind the whole sequence of plays when he first set about writing *Richard II*. Though Shakespeare's style develops from one play to the next, the continuity of theme is so strong, and the references from one reign to another so frequent, that the four plays give a strong sense of unity.

To what extent the differences in style are a result of the development of Shakespeare's art, and to what extent they are a result of his finding a medium for the particular events he wished to dramatize, it is difficult to say. Certainly we seem to move from a medieval world in *Richard II* – medieval in its attitude to kingship, in its values, and in its style – to a world that, if very different from ours, is nevertheless one with which we seem to have much in common. It would not be possible to imagine the Gardener of *Richard II* (III.4) speaking his symbolic verse in the inn yard at Rochester. The Carriers who complain of bots and peas and beans in II.1 would seem incongruous in the earlier play. Yet the transition is nothing like as sudden as these extremes might indicate. When Worcester offers to read 'matter deep and dangerous' we are very close to the world of medieval romance:

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*As full of peril and adventurous spirit
As to o'er-walk a current roaring loud
On the unsteadfast footing of a spear.* I.3.189-91

When Vernon describes those who follow Hal, 'Glittering in golden coats like images', and tells how he saw young Harry with his beaver on, we are not far from the chivalric tourney that takes place in the third scene of *Richard II*:

*His cuishes on his thighs, gallantly armed,
Rise from the ground like feathered Mercury,
And vaulted with such ease into his seat
As if an angel dropped down from the clouds
To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus,
And witch the world with noble horsemanship.*

IV.1.105-10

Yet here in *1 Henry IV*, and more obviously when Hotspur speaks of his willingness 'To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon', we are aware that the world of Hal is not the world of Richard and Hotspur. Hotspur's eagerness is at once captivating and out-dated. If there is a touch of high romance in Worcester's description of the dangers he unfolds, there is not an atom of romance about the speaker. Glendower, recounting the names of devils who are his lackeys, telling of the dreamer Merlin and his prophecies, and conjuring music from the air, is a high-romance figure from an age that goes back even before the medieval period. Alas, the past that is recalled by Glendower is as out-dated as Hotspur's concept of honour. Shakespeare deliberately makes a gentlemanly, if comically irascible, figure of poetry and music out of the barbarian he found in Holinshed and the crafty dreamer described by Thomas Phaer in *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), but in the 'jolly jar | Between the king and Percy's worthy bloods'

(as Phaer puts it), Glendower is disastrously ineffective. The worlds of chivalry and romance, though they are not lost entirely from sight, are already of another age.

The divinity that attended upon King Richard is also departed. Once effective usurpation of a monarch divinely appointed was seen to be possible, then clearly the concept of divinity could no longer be maintained. What matters in a secular authority is the quality of the man, and it is for this reason that Hal's evolution was so fascinating and so important a subject for Shakespeare and his audiences. Henry IV was tainted, for he had usurped the throne. Despite his desire to rule well, he is burdened by an intolerable burden of guilt, for he took not only Richard's throne but also his life. 'The hot vengeance and the rod of heaven' punish his 'mistreadings', he says (*1 Henry IV*, III.2.10-11). In the Second Part of the play he is more open:

*God knows, my son,
By what by-paths and indirect crooked ways
I met this crown . . .* *2 Henry IV*, IV.5.184-6

And Hal himself, when Henry V, can beg,

*Not today, O Lord,
O not today, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown!*
Henry V, IV.1.285-8

Henry's sin was something Shakespeare iterated at great length no fewer than four times in *1 Henry IV*. Twice Hotspur recounts the story of Henry's usurpation (I.3.158-84 and IV.3.54-92); once Henry himself tells the story (III.2.39-84); and finally Worcester, as guilty as Henry in the actual usurpation, gives his version (V.1.32-71). It is this burden of guilt that makes Henry IV seem

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so sick and aged in the plays of his name (though he was active enough at the end of *Richard II*) and it is partly for this reason that Shakespeare takes such care to dissociate Hal from his father (just as he dissociates Hotspur from the policy of his father and uncle). The taint of the tavern is to be preferred to that of the parent.

Shakespeare retells the fall of Richard for a purpose that was obvious to his audiences but is less apparent to us. We are inured to missing many of the puns and to being unable to follow some of the allusions in an Elizabethan play. A modern audience cannot be expected to know that there were two Edmund Mortimers alive at the same time, two kinds of Marcher Lords (Welsh and Scottish), and two Walter Blunts. As Shakespeare was confused over the Mortimers and the Earls of March, and did not bother to distinguish between the Blunts, we are in good company. Nor can we, unless we have specialized knowledge, readily see Poins's witticism at II.4.211 when Falstaff explains that the points of the swords of the nine men in buckram were broken. This kind of difficulty we expect and, although it is meat to annotators, it is usually of small account in performance.

A more serious difficulty is the difference between Elizabethan and modern conceptions of the use of history. To an Elizabethan, history was directly educative in a way which we should consider naïve. By holding up a mirror to the past it was thought possible to learn how to amend one's own life and how to anticipate events. Further, since the time when John Bale had written his play, *King John* (about 1534), drama had been a means by which subjects and their rulers might be instructed in their duties one to another.

The experience of the past made the Elizabethans fear rebellion and disorder so greatly that it was considered

better to obey a tyrant than to foment civil war. It is probably this attitude rather than Shakespeare's specific political beliefs (whatever they may have been) that has led some critics to see Shakespeare's histories as politically conservative. It is as if, for many people, Shakespeare's attitude were like that of York in *Richard II* when, perhaps, they would wish it were like that of his son, Aumerle. There are two further difficulties that face us. First of all, before Shakespeare's play was performed, Hal was a legend; Falstaff – Shakespeare's Falstaff, at least – was totally unknown. Shakespeare would need to characterize Hal in such a way that the audience would accept him as the man they imagined him to be. In this apparent disadvantage, however, lay an asset that Shakespeare used in similar circumstances in other plays – in *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, in dramatizing Ajax, Achilles, and Cressida herself. In dramatizing Hal, Shakespeare could rely on the strength of the legend – Hal's 'given personality' – and might, simultaneously, gently reassess Hal in a way that would pass almost unnoticed except by the most thoughtful. It was an ideal technique for pleasing a large audience of widely differing intellectual standards.

We have no such 'received opinion' of Hal and as a result our view of Hal, taken simply from what Shakespeare has given us, may become distorted. It led George Bernard Shaw to call him 'an able young Philistine' who repeatedly made it clear that he would turn on his friends later on, and that 'his self-indulgent good-fellowship with them is consciously and deliberately treacherous'. Shaw may exaggerate a modern view of Hal, but it is a view that is not uncommon. Shakespeare is a little critical of Hal, but his criticism does not amount to condemnation. Hal, as Henry V, is to represent an ideal of kingship, in so

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far as it is possible for human beings to create such an ideal.

The final difficulty for us springs from dramatic and not national history. Before *1 Henry IV* there was a long history of Morality drama. In Shakespeare's day, though it was old-fashioned to the relatively sophisticated Globe audience, it was still performed in country districts and was often parodied in London (as it is in *1 Henry IV*). Besides referring to a place known for the stage-plays performed at its fairs, Manningtree, Shakespeare mentions on a number of occasions figures from Morality plays. The law is Father Antic (I.2.60), and Falstaff is 'that reverend Vice, that grey Iniquity, that Father Ruffian, that Vanity in years' (II.4.441-2). The whole world and meaning of Morality drama is assumed by Shakespeare to be within the knowledge of his audience. Not only are there references that are for us oblique and often obscure, but the implications of the deceptions of Falstaff as that 'villainous abominable misleader of youth' (II.4.449), and his relationship to Hal, stem from the Morality tradition. It is not that the relationship is identical; it is not as if Falstaff *were* The Vice, or Hal were Everyman, or Magnificence, or Temporal Justice, but that they exist, as dramatic characters, in a relationship which has grown out of a tradition familiar to the original audiences.

The traditional position of man in a Morality play was between his good and evil influences. Faustus, in Marlowe's play, is flanked by good and evil angels, but these angels are not wholly and unequivocally good or evil, as their names might suggest. Shakespeare, in dramatizing Hal, Hotspur, and Falstaff, seems to have had this kind of Morality pattern in the back of his mind, but the result is