

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Henry IV. Part I. 1597

Shakespeare

OVERVIEW

Background. *Henry IV, Part I*, is an historically grounded play, taken from earlier British history, and written into the world of a small island, Britain, which was in the time of Shakespeare's plays finding its global voice largely through naval power—the defeat of the Spanish armada (1588)—and through trade which was already bidding fair to making Britain the commercial center of modern Europe. The play before us is the second in a four-part set of plays concerned with the successive reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V; *Henry IV, Part I* deals with the historical span reaching from Hotspur's battle at Homildon (Northumberland) and ending with the defeat of the rebels at the battle of Shrewsbury, in the middle of 1403. This play, dealing with fascinating in-your-face characters like Falstaff, Hotspur, and Hal, and managing in the background the subtle and dignified figure of King Henry IV, has turned out to be Shakespeare's most popular play.

History. It must be noted—for Shakespeare's history plays as a whole—that they break very different dramaturgic ground from his comedies or tragedies. The history plays might seem to labor under a distinction Aristotle made long ago, implying in the *Poetics* that the imagined is more powerful than 'the real.' As a master of transformations—Shakespeare's reading seems regularly to have born quick fruit on stage—Shakespeare was able to take the obduracy of the given, the 'historical fact,' and to reshape it into a new kind of potential, the ripeness inside what takes place in time.

CHARACTERS

The King's Alliance

King Henry IV (formerly Henry Bolingbroke)
Prince Hal (Prince of Wales; King's eldest son)
Sir Walter Blunt (one of the King's prominent lords)

The Rebels

Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, principal figure in the rebellion against King Henry

Northumberland's son, Harry Hotspur
Edmund, Lord Mortimer
Owen Glendower

Hal's Associates

Sir John Falstaff
Poins
Mistress Quickly

STORY

Prelude. The first act is essentially a prelude to rebellion, against Henry IV. The King falls into sharp conflict with Hotspur, Northumberland's son and a rising power figure among the dissidents. By Act's end, Henry's dictatorial attitude, toward an already dissident group, has threatened to drive dissidence into full blown rebellion.

Act Two. Act Two jumps us into another world, that of Hal, the King's son, Sir John Falstaff, and their buddies in fun and thievery, at a country inn where Londoners pass on their early morning way into the city. We are about to move into the sub theme which will rejoin the main theme at the play's end, when figures like Hal and Falstaff reappear in real life war situations, fighting (sometimes with humor) about life and death. At this point, in Act II we feast on the remarkable scenes that find the King's son, his aging pot-bellied, life-affirming drinking buddy, Falstaff, and an assorted knot of underworld thieves drinking and plotting in preparation for early morning robberies.

Development. From this point on, let it be said in advance, the entire play, which is obviously moving toward war, between the King's forces and the rebels, will deploy as a counterpoint between scenes of comic action—regularly juxtaposing the King's scapegrace son, Hal, and Sir John Falstaff—and scenes of real action, snapshots of the war mood rapidly developing between the King's forces and those of the rebels. It is of great importance that Hal, whose reckless behavior is driving his father the King crazy, has intimated from early on, that when push comes to shove, he will act responsibly—which he will—and that he will make his despairing father proud of him, which is what happens.

King. Shakespeare's blend of military politics with eruptions of the personal is so shrewd that we fully understand the popularity of this work. We see relatively little of the King, during the diurnal passage toward war—most notably, perhaps, when he breaks into weeping, as he tells his son he is ashamed of him. At most times this King is discreet, humble, eager for compromise and humanity, and for all his restraint a most winning character to anchor the turbulence of the entire play. Around the King and the looming action toward the Battle of Shrewsbury, in which the King's forces will be victorious, move the rich character developments ultimately destined to deploy into the play of personalities with which the drama will conclude. Among the vivid figures leaning toward rebellion, the most implacable and recklessly macho is Hotspur, the son of the rebel leader Northumberland. He is the perfect counterpoint to the king's son Hal, who despite his ultimate determination to serve his kingdom and his father—whom he will succeed—is still playing his bad youth to the hilt.

Shrewsbury. The conclusion, which sees the King's forces victorious, at the Battle of Shrewsbury, sees two distinctive symbols of triumph. Bad boy Hal, who has reformed and is ardently leading one of the King's regiments into battle, meets and kills Hotspur, the powder keg of the rebels, in single handed combat; while even Sir John Falstaff makes his military move, taking a regiment of men—subsequently nearly all killed—up the hill into battle. On the verge of finding himself killed by the Earl of Douglas, Sir John collapses into a fake death, a pile of blubber fat on the ground, and is saved from real death by the assumption that he is already in the next world. Rising from the dead, Falstaff grabs his sword and, finding himself on the ground not far from the corpse of Hotspur, stabs the thigh of the already deceased Hotspur, immediately claiming responsibility for the death of the Rebels' power soldier. To the credit of Hal's new maturity, he leaves the credit for the killing to Falstaff.

THEMES

War The presentation of war in this play is brilliant, and uses the limits and potentials of the stage to perfection. The movement of scenes, from the royal Palace of Henry to his council chambers, to the camp of the rebels, to the battlefield at Shrewsbury: all these brief (2-4 page) scene shifts keep the viewer's attention shifting and alert, like the sequence of events in an actual civil war, which is characteristically

local, small scale, and full of unpredictable developments. Nothing could more effectively set off the war scenarios than the Eastcheap and Gadshill revelries, tavern life, 'cakes and ale' and thievery—the low life events transpiring on the margins of London society.

Bravado Two kinds of bravado play through this drama. Falstaff himself is full of 'false' bravado, in those scenes in which he plays the conquering shyster, in combat with Hal who is master crook of their small underground demesne. This is the bravado that emboldens Falstaff to claim credit for the killing of Hotspur. There is another kind of bravado in the play, that of Hotspur, whose contempt of the feminine, the courtly, even the womanliness of his wife, leads him to distance himself from anything except the world of battle—the very stuff of his dreams, as his wife, Lady Percy, bitterly complains.

Monarchy Henry is our only representative of monarchy in the present play, and we know him as a quiet and inward man, who brings with him, into the kingship, a sense that his true vocation would have been to lead a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. (As it is, even in this current civil war, he is anything but belligerent, and holds out, to the rebels, many offers of compromise solution to the fighting.) In the end, of course, it is his country that he fighting for, and for that he will sacrifice everything.

Revelry The theme of tavern life, petty pilferage, and 'cakes and ale' interweaves throughout the present play. The value system at work in that corner of the demi monde has something of small scale organized crime about it, but normally limits itself to pick pocketing and easygoing extortion. (Noteworthy, in any case, that Prince Hal, who is involved in the thievery, and even in thieving from his fellow thieves like Falstaff, is at the same time conscientious about returning all stolen money to its rightful owners.)

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sir John Falstaff

Sir John Falstaff surges to the foreground, in this play with many fascinating figures—Hal and Hotspur in particular. The reason for the unique prominence of this old fat nobleman lies in the kind of lively awareness he has of his own life, and of the liveliness that resides in vital self-awareness. 'Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world,' he says, in a daring challenge to any who might think his white hairs a disqualification for pleasure. His pleasures are palpable: plenty of sack and mutton, a place to stretch out after eating, a bar wench—Mistress Quickly does the trick—a good buddy like Hal, with whom he can shoot the breeze and plan the heist—and even a chance, as we see at the end of the play, to play soldier, and stay alive at it. Falstaff is life itself, what the critics may call an 'organic character,' and part of nature.

Parallels Rabelais' Gargantua and Pantagruel foam with characters so super vital that they spring from the pages with the extravagances of their author's imagination; it is the author who makes us think of the character of Falstaff, himself the indomitable personality of Falstaff. The same kind of author—Rabelais on the one hand, Chaucer on the other—meets us in the tale of The Wife of Bath, who cheerfully buries her exhausted husbands. A leap into the world of modern entertainment could move us into a TV classic like MASH, with its indomitable Hawkeye, a life affirming cynic, who, like Falstaff, knows how to snarf his pleasures, shrug off the blows of fate, and make jokes of what the world takes seriously.

Illustrative moments

Planning In his favorite tavern in Eastcheap, Falstaff plans for the future he and Hal will have when Hal ascends to the throne. Falstaff is casual but has a kind of eye on the ball.

Complaining Falstaff complains bitterly that he has been robbed by someone he robbed! No honor among thieves!

Exaggerative Hal has arranged for a couple of henchmen to set on Falstaff, after the latter has pulled a heist in Eastcheap, and to take away from him the money he himself has stolen. In recounting the event to Hal, later, Falstaff grossly exaggerates the account of the number of men who set upon him, to relieve him of his own heist.

Feigning At the end of the play, during the Battle of Shrewsbury, Falstaff feigns his own death, in order to avoid being run through by a sword.

Flexible On a couple of occasions, Falstaff plays king to Hal's Hal, interrogating him on his own plans. These are Falstaffian training sessions, targeting Hal.

Discussion questions

Hal plays many tricks on Falstaff, as they carry out their revelries in Eastcheap. Is Hal a good friend of the old guy, or vice versa? Or do they simply play to have fun, without much personal feeling?

Does Shakespeare find himself able to develop ideas in an historical play, which he would have found it more difficult to work into a comedy or tragedy? (Does the historical play, because it works with what has happened, rather than with what might have happened, present a more substantive topic to think through, and understand, than does a topic made up, or made out of imagination?)

What themes do you see in the present historical drama that also penetrate Shakespeare plays which are comic or tragic? How about issues like grace, repentance, or forgiveness? (The relation of Hal to his Father seems to touch these matters, as does the rocky relation between Hotspur and his wife.) Do these value relationship issues emerge in *Romeo and Juliette*, *Hamlet*, or *The Tempest*? Does Shakespeare seem to you a naturally religious writer, who is regularly compelled by questions of personal moral value?

