

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Henry IV. Part II 1597

Shakespeare

OVERVIEW

Reimagination. *Henry IV. Part 2* is the third play in Shakespeare's second tetralogy of historical plays, in which he invests his huge powers of reimagination in events dominating his nation's history during two centuries of self-formation, self-reversal, and self-advertisement, and during the heydays both of sharply diverse historical reigns, and of pockets of comedic/tragic entertainment (Falstaff at the head) which are emblematic of Shakespeare at his risk-taking best. The present, third play, is preceded by *Richard II* (1595) and *Henry IV, Part 1* (1597), and followed by *Henry V* (1598-9). It would be folly to praise plays (the first two Henrys) of which Samuel Johnson said that 'none of Shakespeare's plays are read with more delight than the first and second parts of Henry IV.' But praise we must. This is fine reading, or watching.

It need only be remembered, for prelude, that while the *Henry IV Part 1* concluded with the victory of Henry IV at the Battle of Shrewsbury, the second part opened on a weakened and ill King, a Hal who is beginning to take seriously the prospect of royal succession, and, yes, a Falstaff who imagines he still enjoys the intimate trust of Hal, but who has yet to learn the hard facts of succession, when his drinking buddy becomes King of the Realm.

CHARACTERS

The King's Camp

King Henry IV (formerly Henry Bolingbroke)

Henry, Prince of Wales, Hal, eldest son of Henry IV, and King Henry V by play's end.

Prince John of Lancaster, a younger son of the King.

Prince Humphrey of Gloucester, another son.

Sir John Blunt

The King's page

Rebels and their relatives

The Earl of Northumberland

Lady Northumberland

Lady Percy, widow of Hotspur

The Archbishop of York; a major spokesperson for the rebel cause, ultimately arrested by King Henry on faked charges of treason.

Lord Mowbray

Sir John Coleville

The Falstaff group

Sir John Falstaff; no longer an old drinking buddy of Hal, but part of the tavern scene, and with hopes of pulling down a strong job under the new King.

Poins

Bardolph

Pistol

Mistress Quickly

Doll Tearsheet

Others

The Lord Chief Justice
 Shallow, a rural justice
 Silence, another justice
 Fang, an officer
 Snare, another officer

Speaker of the epilogue

STORY

Falstaff. *Henry IV Part II* opens after the Battle of Shrewsbury, that victory for Henry and the royal forces, a victory which was to usher in a new world, and which was on its way to seeing Henry V crowned, the rebels soundly defeated, and Falstaff dead. Although Falstaff survives the present play, he has been largely, and very sadly, cut off from the friendship of Hal.

Taverns. From early on in the play, Falstaff is still frequenting the Eastcheap tavern area in London, and adding to his cohort of comic down and outers and tavern mistresses—like Mistress Quickly and Doll Tearsheet. For some time the tavern becomes the center of action. The Lord Chief Justice enters, looking for Falstaff, in connection with robberies; Falstaff deploys into a series of moves—feigned deafness, mistaken identity, then an effort to distract the Justice, and then, in the ultimate turn off, Falstaff tries to borrow a thousand pounds from the man, who retreats from his quest to arrest the Fat Man.

Antics. The antics continue, after the departure of the Justice, then continue as Doll, a prostitute, flirts with Falstaff, and then gets into a fight with Pistol, Falstaff's ensign, whom Falstaff throws out of the tavern. At that point, as Doll is inquiring of Falstaff about Hal, Falstaff makes a sensitive and important mistake: failing to realize that one of the tavern musicians is Hal in disguise, he makes a number of derogatory remarks about his old drinking buddy, and the regent to be. (Hal's sharp turn against his old friend, by the play's end, may have its very human roots in a couple of careless sentences.) Falstaff visits an old school friend, Justice Shallow, with whom he reminisces about their old time antics, and Falstaff continues recruiting among very dubious candidates, as part of taking a small contingent to the front, to fight in what is rumored to be about to recur, a second stage of rebellion.

King. At another angle of plot development, it turns out that the King, who is approaching death, is once again fretting at the behaviors of his son Hal, who continues to tavern hop and associate with characters unsuitable for building a royal personality. This disappointment is turned around in moving scenes, as the King lies on his death bed, when Hal makes it deeply clear, to his father, that he is humbled and awed by the thought of wearing the crown, and that he deserves ascendancy to the representation of the whole British people. In a particularly moving scene Hal, thinking the King dead, takes the crown into an adjoining chamber and meditates on the awesomeness that lies before him: 'uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.'

Letdown. The play ends on what is a bitter letdown for Falstaff and his tavern buddies. Falstaff travels to London to see the coronation of his old drinking buddy, only to find that Hal has turned against 'such lowlife.' Jail, rather than ministerial positions, is the more likely outcome to the present situation. The merry days of *Henry IV Part I* are far in the past, and the boisterous, less elegiac tone of *Henry V* is on the immediate horizon.

THEMES

Tavern life Shakespeare continues to count on the interplay of seedy, witty and promiscuous characters to divert the audience from too much reflection on the heavy burdens of the affairs of state. If one includes the five shaky recruits, whom Falstaff wishes to take into battle, at least a third of the characters in the play are drawn from tavern life. By this characteristic move, Shakespeare takes full

advantage of his skills at the changing in dramatic level, his mastery of the tones of death and merriment, and his never resting delight in word play.

Royalty King Henry IV is by this point familiar to us, as an example of enlightened royalty, mild, compromising when possible, as forgiving of his son Hal as a monarch could be, and were it not for his conniving son, John, a good candidate for the peacemaker of his time. By the end of the present play, and the death of this king, who has learned to reconcile with his son and successor, we feel that a figure has left the scene who will be hard to emulate.

Ingratitude In *King Lear* Shakespeare treats us to a mad and exhausting scenario of the results of ingratitude. (Or rather, of presumed ingratitude, because Lear actually misunderstands his daughter's presumed attitude toward him.) In *King Henry 4, Part II* Falstaff hears that the king is dead, and that Hal, his old drinking buddy, has assumed the throne. Falstaff hurries to London, to attend the new king's coronation, but quickly learns that his old buddy Hal is no longer his old buddy, but is a public figure with no interest in the old days of the tavern.

Maturity Perhaps the most powerful speech in the play is Hal's, who is speaking with the King on the king's deathbed, and who needs urgently to convince the dying man that he, Hal, does not covet the crown but dreads the responsibility that goes with it. If we think back from this speech to the Hal of the beginning of *Part I*, joking with Falstaff in the tavern, pickpocketing on the roadside, even robbing from Falstaff what Falstaff himself had robbed, we realize what a tremendous portrait of personal maturing Shakespeare has given us in these two *Henry 4* plays.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

King

Character King Henry IV dies at the end of the present plays, and is depicted as a man at peace. From Part I of the *Henry 4* plays, the king has struggled both with an external enemy, the rebellion of Scots and Welsh forces loyal to King Richard, Henry's cousin and contentious predecessor on the throne, and—the second struggle—with the personality of his eldest son, Hal, whom Henry perforce contrasts sharply with Harry Hotspur, the gung ho ready to fight macho son of the Earl of Northumberland, leader of the Rebellion.

Parallels Complex father son relations frequently generate either inter-generational hostilities or simply conflicts, and have proved so rich for the arts that they abound. Odysseus' relation to Telemachus, in the *Odyssey*, is to a large extent virtual, composed of absences and longing, though at the end of the epic the two fought together, shoulder by shoulder. Euripides' *Hippolytus* builds a complex and tragic relation between Theseus and his hunting-loving son, whom Theseus is deceived into viewing as the lover of Phaedra, Theseus' wife. Shakespeare himself has created a model of the complexity that can attend on the relation of a son like Hamlet and a step-father like Claudius, who is the murderer of Hamlet's father.

Illustrative moments

Tired At the beginning of Act III the King is starting to succumb to his illness, and calls on sleep to ease him, 'to weigh his eyelids down.'

Apprehensive Henry looks forward with anxiety to the period which will follow his death, and all control and discipline will be lost, when Hal's 'headstrong riot knows no curb.'

Bitter 'Thy life doth manifest, thou lovest't me not,' says Henry again to his son, as the King's illness begins to make him giddy, and he falls back into old hopelessness about his successor.

Advice The last piece of advice—virtually the only—the King gives Hal is the Macchiavelian wisdom, that the King should learn out to distract his people, by giddily diverting their attention to foreign affairs.

Hal

Character King Henry's eldest son features as a playboy in Part I of *Henry IV*, but by *Part II* Hal has been brought, by the imminent death of his father, and by the stark realities of war and rebellion, to take life very seriously. There is a brief moment, near his father's death bed, when Hal feels the thrill of power, but that moment passes, and even his father can see that he has a true son to whom he can pass on his inheritance.

Parallels Many works of 'modern fiction' deal with the *Bildungsroman* pattern: a young man passes from carefree, and even spendthrift, youth to the realities of mature life. Herman Hesse's novel about the Buddha, *Siddhartha*, tracks the independent path taken by the Buddha, as he divorces himself from a life of luxury and takes off into the forest to meditate. Mark Twain's Huck Finn grows into manhood on the river where he and Tom Sawyer have declared their independence from parental overshadowing. Holden Caulfield makes the same gutsy, and adventurous, move, in cutting out of his prep school life and heading along into the big world, in *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Illustrative moments

Hypocrite? Hal sits down near his father's bedside, at the news of the old man's serious illness. He ponders whether or not to weep—which he wants to do—but is afraid he will, given his personal history, be taken for a hypocrite.

Pondering Sitting at the bedside of his dying father, Hal meditates on the crown, which is lying near him. His hopes, pride, fears, anxiety all lie in this gilded object of meditation.

Responding King Henry once again takes up the tone of reprobation of his eldest son, even though it is the tone of a dying man. For Hal the tension is too much, and he begs his father to hear him out, and to realize how deeply his son has matured.

Venomous Hal, who has overheard Falstaff mocking him, turns his venom on his old drinking buddy, whom he calls a 'whoreson candle-mine,' and worse. The honeymoon is over, between these two improbable bed fellows.

Discussion questions

How does Hal convince the King that he has changed his ways, and that he deserves to wear the crown? How does the King show that he is convinced? Try to answer these two questions by reference to the rhetoric and verbal strategy of specific lines and phrases.

What is the cause of the serious rift between Falstaff and Hal the new king? Has Hal gotten too big for his britches? Has Falstaff simply classed himself out of the market by the company he keeps?

Has Shakespeare devoted awkwardly much attention in this play to the comic scenes involving Falstaff? How do those scenes, not only with Doll Tearsheet and Mistress Quickly, but with Shallow and his legal buddies, reinforce the ultimate point or points of the play?