

A Reading of Shakespeare's *I Henry IV*

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What a wide canvas Shakespeare uses for his study of late medieval England in *Henry IV*! It is like a tapestry, characters crowding in on one another, all sorts and conditions of men and women, the different regions of the country, their languages and local customs: *Henry IV* has an accommodating realism that includes more of the life of a people than almost any other work of art, literature and theatre.

There is also an ease with which this is done which is the mark of Shakespeare's genius in this play. It is part of the play's structure. *Henry IV* unfolds with its own appropriate pace. There seems to be relatively little action; the play flows steadily towards its climax on the battlefield at Shrewsbury. The action is largely the confrontation of people. Even at Gadshill and Shrewsbury where events come to a head, Shakespeare makes his characters at least as important as the events themselves. Falstaff telling lies or Falstaff playing dead is able to dominate the proceedings in a way that makes the human element in the play take on a unique meaning and value. It is a play that celebrates people.

Even the smallest characters are deftly drawn. Sir Walter Blunt seems to have the mud on his boots from his ride from Scotland. He argues his politics passionately when he has his say; and when he ends up a corpse on the battlefield and Falstaff bids him a grim farewell "I like not such grinning honour as Sir Walter hath", the audience feels it has known him in a full and rounded way. His loss is real.

So too with the other characters. Whether it is the carriers in the Rochester inn yard complaining how their horses are no longer ready for them "since Robin ostler died", or whether it is Hotspur making fun of Glendower's grandiloquent superstitions about the way the world reacted to his birth, or Lady Percy's understanding of warfare from listening to her husband talking in his sleep—*Henry IV* as a play delights in its world of detail. Shakespeare's knowledge of England, his acceptance of so many life styles, the humour with which he can introduce the Welsh accent of Mortimer's wife or point to Falstaff asleep or have Mistress Quickly lovingly but bitingly scold the fat old parasite in his drunkenness—these are qualities of artistic genius and profound human sympathy which mark the play.

Shakespeare's intelligence finds its way easily inside the historical material of *Henry IV*. The structure of the play, its manner of presentation in alternating scenes—now court, now tavern, now nobility, now low life—is a clear artistic design, and yet it seems natural in its context. The mood of the play also seems right for its

material. Even though it grows more and more sombre as the play goes on, the mood has the vitality of its material; it honours people and places and events. Falstaff is buoyant, Prince Hal strikes off from him and is brilliant, Hotspur can steal the show with his hot-tempered, high-humoured performance, and even Henry IV himself, who as Bolingbroke in *Richard II* had history flowing all his way but who now is the troubled king with rebellious forces challenging his rule and with a son going astray, is a moving figure of a man felt and imagined from the inside.

But nowhere does the achievement of the play show itself to better advantage than in its language. Falstaff seems like a walking encyclopedia and dictionary rolled into one. There is something about him that demands words, invites words, releases words, inspires words. He lives in words and off words. He speaks of the soldiers whom he had "pressed" into going with him to war in a way that gives an ironic image of England and of himself but in a way that at the same time is comic and affirmative. It teems with life.

I pressed me none but such toasts-and-butter with hearts in their bellies no bigger than pins' heads, and they have bought out their services, and now my whole charge consists of ancients, corporals, lieutenants, gentlemen of companies; slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth, where the glutton's dogs licked his sores, and such as indeed were never soldiers, but discarded unjust serving-men, younger sons to younger brothers, revolted tapsters, and ostlers trade-fallen, the cankers of a calm world and a long peace, ten times more dishonourable ragged than an old fazed ancient; and such have I to fill up the rooms of them as have bought out their services, that you would think that I had a hundred and fifty tattered prodigals, lately come from swine-keeping, from eating draff and husks.

Prose comes into its own in these lines. It allows a world of fact to flood into the play. The cataloguing of other men's depravity (and his own) makes Falstaff into a medium for Shakespeare's own entry into English life with a ranging, energising awareness. It is a realism that grounds the play firmly in English soil and in English society. And yet at its centre there is that leap into simile and metaphor in "slaves as ragged as Lazarus" which suggests the mind of Shakespeare and the mind of the play always ready to leap sideways, upwards, downwards and all around in order to see the real in the most rounded way. A spiritual and philosophical imagination takes the language and the facts of English social and political reality, and makes something humane out of something which is all too human.

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The play begins with the king presenting the general political situation of England. It is unusual to have such an eminent figure as the king giving the basic information and acting as expositor. But there is a clear point to it on Shakespeare's part. It takes the audience inside the king's own state of feeling right from the start;

he is immediately projected in personal terms in spite of his heavy regal manner. But more than this he is also presented as something of a spectator in his own kingdom. The initiative for action seems to lie with others. Henry had hoped for peace and a chance to lead his armies abroad in a new crusade on Jerusalem, but his wish to see his forces "march all one way" quickly collapses when news of Glendower in Wales and Douglas the Scot comes. England itself is in danger. Then as a climax to the irony of the king's situation emerges the contrast between Percy and Prince Hal. Shakespeare has made Hotspur half his actual age in order to enforce this comparison between the two "young" men. The general point of the play's beginning is clear: Henry IV has no security in his rule of England. "So shaken as we are, so wan with care" is Henry's opening line, and it remains the indelible impression in the play of a man who came to power through force and must now use force to retain his power.

Scene ii immediately makes a contrast between the king's world and Falstaff's. Falstaff is discovered asleep, and sleep itself is projected as having a meaning of real strength in the play. It takes on a symbolic status as being the world of rest, relaxation and self-satisfaction that is denied to Henry the king. Sleep is Falstaff's special gift, his hallmark and power. But when Hal wakes him up, the play at once leaps into action. Their banter is like a coil released. Falstaff's sleep is his source of energy, an energy admittedly stimulated by (and needing to be stimulated by) sack when awake but having this source in some dimension of life that stands over against the world of Henry IV's power, responsibility and worry.

Hal and Falstaff begin bantering about "time". Hal says time is irrelevant to Falstaff, or that it exists only on Falstaff's own terms. The effect of this exchange is double-edged. For while abusing Falstaff Hal is really celebrating and proclaiming Falstaff's life style. Shakespeare makes this banter his central technique in the play. It works brilliantly: it exists for its own sake as high spirits, gamesmanship and sheer play; it is intrinsically dramatic. Yet it also allows the release into the play of serious themes, such as the use of "time" and how the nighttime makes for an alternative world with an alternative morality. The contrast with the king's world is projected dramatically on the audience. Shakespeare uses this banter to focus the large thematic and structural interests of his play.

Seriousness always lies just beneath the surface of the wit. "Were it not here apparent," Falstaff exclaims, "that thou art heir apparent" in a pattern of humour and tension that is characteristic of the play's central achievement and style.

An old lord of the Council rated me the other day in the street about you, sir, but I marked him not, and yet he talked very wisely, but I regarded him not; and yet he talked wisely, and in the street too.

Falstaff's lines both admit and resist the moral judgment of the world outside the tavern. The playfulness with which Shakespeare uses the words "but" and "yet" in these lines is superb. They have the form but not the force of a negation. Falstaff staves off the judgment of the "old lord of the Council", but he certainly recognises the point.

Shakespeare handles Hal carefully in this opening scene. It is left uncertain just how much the Prince is involved in the planning of the Gadshill robbery. The initiative is subtly put on Poins and Falstaff, and Hal is brought actively in only when the escapade becomes a joke on Falstaff. This controlled way of using Hal underlies the important climax to the scene. "I know you all," the Prince can say when the others leave, "and will a while uphold / The unyoked humour of your idleness". Shakespeare has Hal know what he is doing at every point in the play. It is as though Hal speaks on behalf of the play as a whole and with Shakespeare's strategical and artistic mind. His speech is not simply an expression of "character". If it is taken only in this way Hal must seem cold, patronising and overly rational. Hal may indeed have these qualities, but the important thing is that Shakespeare is creating him, and presenting him to the audience, as a creature of two worlds. Prince Hal is the future King Henry V. History and the total structure of the play demand that he be seen in this way. His final speech in Act I Scene ii is therefore an expression of all these concerns and not solely a matter of "character".

Scene iii is distinguished by Hotspur with his choleric humour that at times approaches satire. What is fascinating here is the way Shakespeare exploits feelings. Personal feelings in themselves become the material of history. The needs of dramatisation determine this move on Shakespeare's part, and he seizes the opportunity in a remarkable way. There is an incompatibility of temperament between Henry IV and Hotspur that leads to the dramatic breaking of relationships. Henry has a basic political and historical motive for his behaviour in his fear of Mortimer and his claim to the throne. But it is really the clash of temperaments that matters, dramatically speaking. Hotspur's ultra-chivalric projection of himself:

By heaven methinks it were an easy leap
To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon,
Or dive into the bottom of the deep

suggests how impossible it is for him to live in the same world as the politic, cautious and fearful Henry IV. Hotspur's self-projection in these lines works both to elevate him and to undercut him as a character in the eyes of the audience. If he had to speak these lines out of context, and by himself as Hal spoke his at the end of Scene ii, Hotspur would seem a fool. The context, however, justifies his passion, and when he cries "But out upon this half-faced fellow-

ship" he is regaining his balance and moving to the centre of the play's concerns. Shakespeare is as careful in his positioning of Hotspur as he is with Hal. He is preparing them both to be worthy antagonists of each other, and to bring to the whole play different qualities which will add to the audience's full sense of the possibilities of English life.

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Act II begins with a short scene which can easily be overlooked in the larger concerns of *Henry IV*. It is, however, a scene which captures in many ways the essence of the play. In its picture of ordinary English life and in the way it creates a vantage point for simple people to have their say and show an awareness of "the commonwealth" it is embodying Shakespeare's most realistic and generous vision of the nation. Two carriers in Rochester are impatient to make an early start for London. They have work to do, and their concern with "time" is quite different from that of Falstaff or Henry IV. They pressure the ostler just as Hal and Poins will shortly be pressuring Francis the drawer in the Eastcheap tavern. But their sense of pressure is real, and in this way they are characteristic of so much of the life of the play.

The carriers speak in a special language of their own. To an audience it is almost impossible to understand. Their words are so close to the things of their lives—horses, merchandise and occupations. It is a prose world which concentrates attention on concrete idiomatic human experience. Yet it is also a prose world that opens out into the broader moral and philosophical interests of the play. Gadshill, who is there to spy out the movements of the travellers in preparation for the robbery, is led on in his conversation with the Chamberlain to give, almost inadvertently it seems, a powerful image of England as "the commonwealth":

And yet, zounds, I lie, for they pray continually to their saint the commonwealth, or rather not pray to her, but prey on her, for they ride up and down on her, and make her their boots.

Chamberlain: What, the commonwealth their boots? Will she hold out water in foul way?

Gadshill: She will, she will, justice hath liquored her.

England is felt as a body, a feminine body, on which the boots of men are trampling. Gadshill is speaking against himself and his princely companions, and flaunting an immoral manner. But the play in a larger sense is registering something more than his bravado. He is speaking a greater truth than he knows. For a moral point of view is being prepared in advance by Shakespeare in these lines, a point of view that stays in the mind of the audience as they witness Falstaff, Poins, Hal and the rest go about their "robbery" in the next scene.

Act II, Scene ii is pure comedy. It is a game within a game within a game. Falstaff in this scene is a world of comedy in himself, and the robbing of the robbers tends in the theatre to balance out the immoral aspect of the deed. It lets the audience enjoy the scene without too many moral qualms. Again, it is worth noting how Falstaff dominates the beginning and Hal the end of the affair.

Prince Henry: Away good Ned, Falstaff sweats to death,
And lards the lean earth as he walks along.
Were't not for laughing I should pity him.

Poins: How the fat rogue roared!

When Hal is responding to Falstaff, he speaks in a wonderfully fine and exact way. These lines of his perfectly catch in image, metaphor and emotion what the play is saying and feeling about Falstaff. Pity stands there waiting at the edges of the laughter to move in on "the fat rogue".

In Act II, Scene iii Shakespeare leaps brilliantly across to the world of Hotspur and Lady Percy. Hotspur is excited over the prospects of rebellion, and cannot or will not hear what his wife is saying. They make two remarkable extremes, his rashness and her love. Yet Shakespeare makes them meet in the middle. Their kind of banter and love-play compares with that of Falstaff and Hal, but it is fraught with tragic overtones. When "Kate" gives her lengthy catalogue of the turmoil of war, a catalogue she has learnt from her husband talking in his sleep and dreams, it is as though the subconscious life of a nation at war is being tapped and revealed. The play is releasing through this scene a profoundly double-edged image of war; the martial challenge to which Hotspur is responding is set off against the turbulence and anguish in his wife's mind and feelings.

Act II, Scene iv is almost a play on its own, so comprehensive and rounded are its concerns. Hal is allowed to define himself first of all in his relations to the common people of England. It is an important moment for the total image of the Prince that the play is working towards. His education as the future king demands this kind of initiation into the life of the people. He does not lose his royal manner and the condescension that goes with it; yet the long opening speech which Shakespeare gives him in this scene is famous for the relish with which Hal enters into the life of the tavern. Any false sentimentality which his speech may arouse is then quickly dispelled by the game which Hal and Poins play on Francis. Amusing as it may be, it is also cruel. Francis is caught between conflicting demands as Hal and Poins both call for him from separate rooms, and while the moment is one of farce it also touches on the most general situation of the play. The clash of mighty opposites affects every person in *Henry IV* from the king down to the simplest commoner. But just when the game with Francis touches a raw nerve and is on the point of hurting, Shakespeare makes Hal turn away from Francis to satirise the frenetic

activity of Hotspur. Here Hal's wit finds a true object for itself: "I am not yet of Percy's mind, the Hotspur of the North, he that kills me six or seven dozen of Scots at a breakfast, washes his hands, and says to his wife, fie upon this quiet life, I want work". Between Francis and Hotspur, and the images they suggest to Hal of pointless activity, the scene allows Hal to release his own restless energy in brilliantly savage humour. It needs the presence of Falstaff to recapture a more buoyant mood. "Call in ribs, call in tallow", cries Hal, feeding as it were off the very size and shape of Falstaff for a new kind of effect and encounter.

Shakespeare's success in the exchange that follows between Falstaff and Hal is one of the high points of his art. Falstaff tells his lies about the robbery, and then when confronted with the truth by Hal and Poins turns the tables on his accusers with an even greater lie. Unlike Francis Falstaff is able to rise above his antagonists. His lies have a creative force to them; they spring up from nowhere and have a quality of inexhaustible vitality to them. It is a quality which Hal recognises in spite of himself:

These lies are like their father that begets them, gross as a mountain, open, palpable. Why thou clay-brained guts, thou knotty-pated fool, thou whoreson obscene greasy tallow-keech—

Hal begins to participate in the life that he is attempting to castigate. The wild, fantastic string of adjectives is reaching out towards the abandonment of forms and the discovering of new experience that is an essential part of the phenomenon of Falstaff.

Much is made in this scene of what the characters "know" or say they know. "All?" Falstaff queries, "I know not what you call all", and then caps this false naivety with his climax of pretended omniscience: "By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye". It is as if Shakespeare is making a comedy out of knowledge. What one character knows can be comic to another character who knows more, all of which is even more comic to the audience who do in fact know all. Shakespeare exploits this self-conscious dimension in the relations of actor and audience for some of his surest comic effects.

But as with all the incidental humour of the play this scene converts itself into considering serious matters of history and politics. When Hal and Falstaff act out the relation of King and Prince, of father and son, they are dealing with the issue of "succession" which was perhaps the most sensitive topic of the Elizabethan stage. Doing it in the form of "role-playing" was Shakespeare's way of insulating the effect while openly looking at the problem. Having the two characters then exchange their "roles" was an even happier stroke of genius.

Falstaff is the butt both ways. Playing the King Falstaff ends with a great celebration of himself: "there is virtue in that Falstaff; him keep with, the rest banish". Hal playing the King ends with

an opposite effect: "That villainous abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan". The humour and wit of the scene is almost inexhaustible, but nothing is more remarkable than the way in which the presence and phenomenon of Falstaff provides a containing form for the consideration of the nation's most worrying concern. It is a masterstroke of theatre, and yet it is itself capped by the way the scene turns darkly back upon Falstaff to suggest his own downfall. The word "banish" once mentioned becomes an obsessive motif of the proceedings. "Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world", Falstaff half exclaims in mock horror. "I do, I will" Hal replies as the King, but also with a sense that he himself means it. The audience will remember this exchange when Hal rejects Falstaff at the end of Part II. But at this point in the play it is right that Hal says too little rather than too much. The scene belongs to Falstaff. The qualities of life and humanity which are his are magnificently on display here, and so it is fitting that Shakespeare gives him the last laugh, poignant as it is, when he is discovered asleep behind the arras.

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Act III brings a change of mood into the play. The exuberant comedy of the central Hal-Falstaff relationship has largely spent itself by this time, and from here on it is muted or less directly rendered. In its place the world of historical events begins to rise in importance. Hotspur, Glendower and the rebellion in Scene i and King Henry and Hal in Scene ii turn the play in a new direction, and such comic strains as appear do so not as ends in themselves but more simply as aspects of personality, situation and local custom. When Falstaff reappears in Scene iii, he seems to reflect this change of mood and structure in the play.

Bardolph, am I not fallen away vilely since the last action? Do I not bate? Do I not dwindle? Why, my skin hangs about me like an old lady's loose gown.

The play is beginning its long movement towards the sombre recognition that the two worlds of Falstaff and Hal cannot belong together. It is remarkable that they should have come into contact at all, and England seems all the more attractive as a society for permitting it to happen. Hal has been broadened in his sympathies and insight by the experience, but Falstaff was offering something much larger than the Prince was needing. Falstaff, too, had his needs which the Prince could not, or would not, fill. It was their relationship that mattered rather than their individual fortunes. When they met in their wit combats, they sparked off a definitive display of liberated, racy, human intelligence. Fun, wit, anarchy, licentiousness, leisure and sheer male humanity—these are the qualities and at times the threatening values in their experience of each other. Their verbal games, above all, put the English language

to the test, and found how wide-ranging, flexible, idiomatic and exact could be its powers.

The Hotspur-Glendower exchanges which rise up in Act III as a new strength within the play have a different structure and effect. Hotspur finds himself outdone in fantasy by the eccentric Welshman, and so moves to a position more in the centre. His critical intelligence and his dynamism as a leader add style to his down-to-earth realism when the pressures mount up. But his temperament always leaves him vulnerable, especially before the growing strength of the King's forces consolidating around the emerging new figure of Hal and supported by the more sober presence of his brother Prince John. Hotspur and Glendower introduce extreme possibilities of the nation's life into *Henry IV*; their relationship occurs on the peripheries, geographical and personal, of English existence. They move toward the centre. Hal and Falstaff in their relationship, on the other hand, move from the nerve centre of the nation outwards. Shakespeare seems to have an instinctive structural sense of how the kingdom is made up of forces moving to and fro in this way within the body politic.

Scenes i and ii in Act III complement each other along these lines. The scene in Glendower's castle has a wild extravagance of imagination and experience to it in the way it throws up clashing temperaments, eccentric ideas, Lady Mortimer and her Welsh style, and two intimately drawn marriage relationships. The scene in London between King Henry and Prince Hal focuses on the most serious and central issue in England. Shakespeare handles it with an appropriate solemnity and weight. The speeches are long and sententious, but allow a deeply moving image of two men to emerge who become not only King and Prince but also father and son.

Falstaff, when he appears in Scene iii, is placed among new companions. Bardolph and Mistress Quickly alter the environment in which he moves; they draw out of him his characteristic humour but there is now a darker colouration and a sharper, even sinister, edge to their comic style. Money raises its head and Falstaff begins to show a kind of self-interest which seems parasitic. Even when Hal comes to the tavern the encounter they share while sharp and energetic shows signs of turning sour. Hal seems to be playing with Falstaff, and Falstaff is beginning to need the Prince's support in an unattractive way. Hal brings news of the war and of his procuring for Falstaff the command of "a charge of foot". "I would it had been of horse", Falstaff cries in one of the best (and worst) puns in the play. The humour here seems somewhat awkward and strained.

Act IV builds up towards the battle of Shrewsbury. The rebels in Scene i are finding how difficult it is to have things "march all one way" as Henry IV did at the beginning of the play. The facts of political life are now working their discordant and unpredictable

ways, and in this context Hotspur's impetuosity is appearing as both a gain and a loss. In addition, a new image is circulating in the play of Prince Hal. "I saw young Harry with his beaver on," exclaims Vernon. His tone of voice is an important point for Shakespeare. For it is here that the long and sustained crescendo of praise for the future Henry V begins. A transcendent hero is emerging. First at Shrewsbury, then later at Agincourt England will have its warrior-king. Hotspur becomes merely a means of defining a stage along the way. So too does Falstaff.

Scene ii of Act IV, for all that it is in prose, has a poetic and choric quality to it. Falstaff and Bardolph are on their way to the war, and Falstaff is given the chance to reflect on his fortunes. What he says certainly is self-centred. Yet it is also broader than this. The scene becomes a meditation on war. War and society, war and the economy, war and the common man—Falstaff's mind and mood allow Shakespeare to range through these areas in a penetrating and realistic way. There is, indeed, a unique realism to this scene: it is so easily delivered, so knowledgeable in its interests, and so darkly comic in its mood. Prince Hal when he comes upon Falstaff can expostulate:

But tell me Jack, whose fellows are these that come after?

Falstaff: Mine Hal, mine.

Prince Henry: I never did see such pitiful rascals.

Falstaff: Tut, tut, good enough to toss, food for powder, food for powder; they'll fill a pit as well as better; tush man, mortal men, mortal me.

So many ideas and feelings flow in and out of this statement! There is Falstaff's own greed and exploitative use of his "charge of foot". There is the insight into the way the English lower classes are pressed into fighting the nobles' wars. And there is the broader and more philosophical fatalism in the reflection that this is the lot of all men. Falstaff's weary humour and the way his prose grounds itself in reality leave an indelible impression. The war-manoeuvering which follows among the leaders in Scenes iii and iv is absorbed into the mood which Falstaff here defines.

Falstaff's role in Act V develops this same irony. His presence, ambiguous as it is, becomes a moral presence in the midst of war. His voice is one of naked commonsense.

Worcester: For I protest,
I have not sought the day of this dislike.

King Henry: You have not sought it? How comes it then?

Falstaff: Rebellion lay in his way, and he found it.

Prince Henry: Peace chewet, peace!

Four points of view and four contrasting styles are felt in the dynamics of this brief exchange. Falstaff's irony is devastating, and is too strong. So the Prince has to silence him. But at the end of

Scene i Falstaff has the last say, and the wisdom in the humour of his mind here has become almost proverbial.

Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honour? A word. What is that word honour? What is that honour? Air—a trim reckoning. Who hath it? He that died a Wednesday.

It takes someone with as huge a body as Falstaff's, with such obvious self-interest as he has, and with the sardonic insight he possesses to say such things as these. He can use the simplest of words to say the most profound things. The play has led him to this point.

Falstaff's presence humanises the battlefield. "Who are you?" he cries, "Sir Walter Blunt? There's honour for you, here's no vanity". The pathos in this remark is set off against the more complex qualities next of Falstaff's own "dying". When he falls down and pretends to be dead alongside Hotspur, the audience is aware of a range of intense emotions having to do with life and death. It is comic drama at its highest point. The mood remains buoyant while the insights are terrifying. Prince Hal can only observe and supervise this strange ritual of Falstaff's dying and rising. Like the play itself Hal seems to endorse and indulge the possibility of Falstaff and all that it means. The way he stands aside and lets Falstaff bear away the body of Hotspur is a point of pure and natural drama. It is Shakespeare's final way of bringing "history" to life in the theatre.

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