

HENRY IV, PARTS ONE & TWO

by William Shakespeare

Taken together, Shakespeare's major history plays cover the 30-year War of the Roses, a struggle between two great families, descended from King Edward III, for the throne of England. The division begins in "Richard II," when that king, of the House of York, is deposed by Henry Bolingbroke of the House of Lancaster, who will become Henry IV.

The two Henry IV plays take us through this king's reign, ending with the coronation of his ne'er-do-well son, Prince Hal, as Henry V. In subsequent plays, we follow the fortunes of these two families as first one, then the other, assumes the throne, culminating in "Richard III," which ends with the victory of Henry VII, who ends the War of the Roses by combining both royal lines into the House of Tudor and ruthlessly killing off all claimants to the throne.

What gives the Henry IV plays their great appeal is the presence of a fat, rascally knight named Falstaff, with whom Prince Hal spends his youth. Falstaff is one of Shakespeare's most memorable characters and his comedy tends to dominate the action. He was so popular with audiences that Shakespeare had to kill him off in "Henry V," lest he detract from the heroism of young King Henry V.

"Henry IV, Part One," deals with a rebellion against King Henry by his former allies. The subplot concerns the idle life led by the heir to the throne, Prince Hal, who spends his time with London's riffraff, even going so far as to join them in robbery.

The play ends with the defeat of one faction of the rebels led by Hotspur, a young man as much in love with honor and battle as Hal is with pleasure.

"Henry IV, Part Two" picks up the story ten years later (although Shakespeare makes it seem to follow Part One immediately). The play continues the fight against the balance of Henry IV's enemies, but the historical action merely serves as a framework for the foolery of the "tavern gang" of Falstaff and his cronies. At play's end, Hal, now the king, coldly dismisses the fat knight and all his former friends, laying the groundwork for his appearance as the virtuous hero king in "Henry V."

The machinations of English royalty were common knowledge to English citizens. What made these plays so appealing to theatergoers was Shakespeare's intimate knowledge of the "underside" of English society and the vitality, insight, and accuracy with which he brings it to the stage.

Part One

The play begins with Henry IV hoping to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land as penance for the murder of King Richard II. But news of a victory by the Welshman, Owen Glendower, over Lord Mortimer interrupts his hopes. He then learns that young Harry Percy (Hotspur), fighting in Scotland, has taken numerous prisoners, but refuses to turn them over to the king. Henry sees in all this a plot by Worcester, Hotspur's uncle, to usurp the throne.

The second scene takes us to the Boar's Head tavern, where Prince Hal spends his time with Sir John Falstaff, a fat knight, given more to wine and scandalous behavior than to military exploits. Ned Poins, one of Hal's dissolute friends, enters with news that a quantity of gold and valuables will be passing through Eastcheap on its way to Canterbury. It would be an easy matter for them to waylay and rob the travelers. Hal refuses, but when Falstaff leaves, Poins tells him that they should prompt Falstaff to the theft and then rob him, in order to hear what lies he will tell afterward. Hal agrees and, when alone, excuses his behavior in a monologue, claiming that he will redeem all when he becomes king.

King Henry meets with Worcester, Northumberland, and Northumberland's son, Hotspur. A quarrel erupts and the king threatens his former allies if they do not obey him. Hotspur is beside himself with anger and is only calmed down when his uncle and father tell him that they have allied with others, including former Scotch and Welsh enemies, to overthrow the king. It is this scene that Hotspur delivers his striking speech about honor:

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,
Where fathom-line could never touch the ground,
And pluck up drowned honour by the locks;
So he that doth redeem her thence might wear
Without corrival, all her dignities:
But out upon this half-faced fellowship!

Carriers pause in their journey as one of Falstaff's cronies sizes up the prospect for robbing them. Further down the road, the thieves gather, but Poins and Hal have tied Falstaff's horse a distance away, so that the fat knight must go afoot. Hal and Poins leave and put on disguises. Falstaff and his men rob the travelers, bind them, and start sharing the money. Poins and Hal leap out at them, and chase the would-be thieves away. They then take the money and head back to the tavern to hear what Falstaff will say.

Hotspur receives news that an ally on whom he counted has decided not to join the rebellion. As he prepares to leave, his wife enters and demands to know what is going on in a playful scene between the two young lovers.

Prince Hal and Poins return to the tavern where the prince spends a considerable amount of time teasing a slowwitted servant boy. When Falstaff enters with his comrades, he tells a story of being set upon and robbed by men who multiply in number as the tale continues. When Hal and Poins reveal the truth, Falstaff has a ready explanation, but is disappointed to learn that Hal has returned the money.

A messenger arrives with news of the imminent rebellion. Falstaff tells Hal that his father will have harsh words for him soon, and suggests that they practice for the meeting. Falstaff plays King Henry at first, but Hal insists that they change places in what becomes a very funny scene.

A sheriff arrives looking for the thieves, especially a very fat one. Falstaff has hidden behind a curtain and Hal sends the sheriff away. Looking behind the curtain, he finds Falstaff asleep and goes through his pockets, finding that the fat knight spends all his money on sack (a form of wine).

The rebel conspirators meet, but soon get into an argument. Hotspur cannot take Owen Glendower's claims of spiritual powers seriously. His uncle Worcester calms him down as the ladies enter. Mortimer's wife sings a Welsh song as Hotspur and his wife tease one another lovingly.

Prince Hal is summoned into his father's presence and is roundly scolded for his behavior. He convinces the king of his loyalty and promises to take a leading role in the coming battle.

Falstaff complains to the hostess of the tavern that someone picked his pocket while he was asleep and claims to have lost much money and a valuable ring. Hal enters and shows Falstaff yet again to be a liar. He then tells Falstaff that he has obtained a command for him in the war - on foot - and leaves to join the war.

As Hotspur, Worcester, and their Scots ally, Douglas, prepare for battle, they learn that Hotspur's father, Northumberland, is ill and cannot join them. Sir Richard Vernon enters to inform them that Owen Glendower is delayed and will not be in the field either. Hotspur refuses to back down and urges them forward to fight.

Falstaff comes to the field with a ragged troop of men he has impressed. He has let the wealthy buy out their service by using poor men as substitutes. Hal and Westmoreland enter and all press on to the battle, but not before Falstaff makes his own statement about honor:

Well, 'tis no matter; honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on? how then? 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 in that word honour? what is that honour? air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? he that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? no. Doth he hear it? no. 'Tis insensible, then. Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? no. Why? detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon: and so ends my catechism.

The rebels argue, but Hotspur insists on fighting that very night. A messenger comes from Henry IV with offer of a parley. In the next brief scene, some of Hotspur's allies, absent from the field, worry about the outcome of the battle that is shaping up at Shrewsbury.

In parley, the king offers gracious terms to Worcester and Vernon if they will lay down their arms. Hal offers to fight Hotspur in single combat, but the king refuses.

As they return, Worcester gets Vernon to agree not to tell Hotspur of the king's generous offer. A messenger enters to tell them the king is in the field and they leave to fight.

In the heat of battle, the Scotsman Douglas kills a man disguised as Henry IV. After he and Hotspur leave, Falstaff enters, frightened that he might have to fight. When Hal enters, Falstaff boasts of his deeds. Hal tries to take a pistol from Falstaff's case, only to find that it contains a bottle of sack.

Douglas encounters the real King Henry and is on the point of defeating him when Hal enters and drives Douglas away. Hotspur then encounters Hal and they fight as Falstaff watches. Douglas reenters to fight with Falstaff who quickly feigns death. Hal gives Hotspur a mortal wound and the young man dies in the prince's arms. Hal then spies Falstaff, whom he assumes to be dead. After he leaves, Falstaff gets up, stabs the dead Hotspur in the thigh and takes him up on his back, to claim him as his victim.

Hal returns with his brother John and is amazed to find Falstaff alive, claiming to have defeated Hotspur in single combat. The battle ends in victory for Henry's forces and the play ends with a promise to continue the fight until all the rebels are defeated.

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Part Two

An actor who personifies "Rumor" starts the play by relating how contradictory accounts of the recent Battle of Shrewsbury are being circulated.

In the first scene, this is demonstrated as Lord Northumberland receives news that his son, Hotspur, has defeated the king, only to hear from a second messenger that Hotspur is dead and the king, victorious. Grieved at the news, Northumberland resolves to continue the fight, despite his illness.

Falstaff, now attended by a tiny page, begins his domination of the play with a humorous monologue, in which he asserts that he is "not only witty, but the cause of wit in other men." He is accosted by the Chief Justice, who once arrested Prince Hal for striking him. He accuses Falstaff of robbery but Falstaff claims the protection of Prince Hal and the Chief Justice leaves him alone, as Falstaff contends that he is on his way to York to serve the king.

Another groups of malcontents plot to rebel against the king: Mowbray, Archbishop York, Hastings, and Lord Bardolph.

Hostess Quickly has called in officers Fang and Snare to arrest Falstaff in order to collect the money he owes her. In the scuffle that follows, the Chief Justice enters and Falstaff promises to pay his debts. The Chief Justice receives a message that a war is at hand.

Hal tells Poins of his father's illness and his distress at the news. The page brings a letter from Falstaff and the prince decides that he and Poins will disguise themselves as servants to watch Falstaff's behavior with Hostess Quickly and a tavern prostitute, Doll Tearsheet.

Hotspur's widow urges his father, Northumberland, not to fight, but to escape to Scotland. He reluctantly agrees.

There follows a scene of foolery at the tavern with Hal and Poins watching an affecting scene between Falstaff and Doll Tearsheet in which Falstaff calls the prince a shallow fellow who might make a good servant. When Hal and Poins reveal themselves, Falstaff cleverly excuses himself. The tavern gang (Quickly, Tearsheet, Bardolph, and Peto) are joined by Ancient Pistol, a florid braggart who will continue from this point into "Henry V," finally supplanting Falstaff in that play. Word comes that a battle is taking shape and the Prince and Poins leave hurriedly.

King Henry, plagued by illness and remorse, cannot sleep. His monologue on this theme is a memorable one. ending with the familiar line: "Uneasy is the

head that wears a crown." Warwick assures him that his army will emerge victorious.

A long scene ensues, introducing Justices Shallow and Silence. Shallow was a student with Sir John Falstaff in their youth. The scene involves the recruitment of a shabby troop and the reminiscences of Falstaff and Shallow: a warm and richly funny sequence.

Westmoreland visits the rebels, rebukes them, and asks them to parley with Prince John, Hal's brother, who will offer them generous terms if they will quit the field. They agree to meet with him.

Prince John meets the rebels and offers them fair terms. The rebels dismiss their army, whereupon Prince John arrests them as traitors.

Sir John Colville surrenders to Falstaff who turns him over to Prince John. Prince John sends Colville to execution with the others and leaves. Falstaff complains that this prince is no friend of his, as is his brother. He explains that Prince John's cold nature is due to his not drinking sherry.

King Henry, very ill, receives news of his victory, but worries still about Hal. He is carried into the Jerusalem chamber.

Hal visits his sleeping father. He fears that he is dead. Musing on the crown, he places it on his head and briefly leaves the room. The king awakens and sees that his crown is missing. When Hal returns, the king chastises him for wishing him dead and himself the king. Hal movingly defends himself, in an artful lie, and the king, reassured, gives him advice on how to rule when he comes to the throne.

After Shallow converses with his servant, Falstaff prepares to leave for London, musing once again on Shallow's ridiculous behavior.

The Chief Justice hears that the king has died and fears that he will suffer under the new king, having jailed him in the pursuit of his duty. Hal enters and tells the Chief Justice that not only does he bear him no ill will, but will use him as his counselor, having need of such an honest and upright man.

Falstaff visits with Shallow. Pistol enters with news that the king is dead; Hal is now the new king. Falstaff and everyone prepare to rush off to London to revel in their new fortune under a king who is their friend.

Officers come to the tavern to arrest Hostess Quickly and Doll Tearsheet on orders from the Chief Justice.

Falstaff, Shallow and friends wait in the street to see King Henry V pass by. When he comes into view, Falstaff calls out to him, only to be coldly rebuked and dismissed:

I know thee not, old man: fall to thy prayers;
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!
I have long dream'd of such a kind of man,
So surfeit-swell'd, so old and so profane;
But, being awaked, I do despise my dream.
Make less thy body hence, and more thy grace;
Leave gormandizing; know the grave doth gape
For thee thrice wider than for other men.
Reply not to me with a fool-born jest:
Presume not that I am the thing I was;
For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
That I have turn'd away my former self;
So will I those that kept me company.

The fun-loving Prince is now a cold, ambitious king. As he rides away, the Chief Justice arrests Falstaff and all Hal's former friends.

Notes on the Henry IV Plays

The poet Robert Auden asserted that "It is difficult to imagine that a historical play as good as Henry IV will ever again be written."

It's a safe bet. This play sums up all of the things that made Shakespeare so wildly popular in his own time and place: lofty poetry, vivid characters, ample swordplay, romance, and comedy of the highest order.

This is arguably the best play with which to begin a study of Shakespeare. It delights audiences when seen and, after, rewards close reading.

On one level, the play is a study in contrast between the impetuous, hyperactive, honor-struck Harry Percy (Hotspur) and the cool, calculating, heir to the throne, Prince Hal. Shakespeare sharpens the difference between them until they meet and settle their rivalry on the field of battle.

A contrast may also be drawn between Hotspur and Falstaff. Both are voluble speakers. But Hotspur is active where Falstaff is passive. Hotspur is willing to force circumstance to afford him opportunity; he is willing to fight insuperable odds. Falstaff "surrenders to the moment" as Auden puts it. He takes only those opportunities circumstance gives him.

It is interesting to note that Hotspur scorns "mincing poetry," yet his language is vivid and dramatic, almost aflame with ambition and desire. Yet his desire is

not for mundane or homely things, but for honor in the field of battle and he is reckless in pursuit of it.

King Henry is two different people in the two plays. In Part One he is vigorous and involved. In Part Two, he is old and passive. He and his son are both calculating people. The father held himself aloof from the common crowd while his son spends all his time consorting with commoners, yet both cynically use people and situations to achieve their ends.

King Henry seems obsessed with worry, troubled by the manner in which he claimed the throne, guilty over Richard II's murder, and as possessive of his crown as a miser is of his gold. His speeches can be magnificent, but he becomes a much diminished character as the plays proceed.

There is a diminishment in Falstaff as well. While he is witty throughout, in Part One his imagery is drawn from Biblical and literary sources and displays a fine sensitivity to nature and sport. In Part Two, his images become more grotesque and ribald, betraying a certain deterioration of spirit.

The Falstaff subplot runs away with the story. Fairly balanced with the main plot in Part One, Falstaff and his cohorts simply swamp the kingly quarrels in Part Two. The first play builds to an exciting military climax while the impending battle in the second is avoided by the treacherous negotiations deceitfully conducted by Prince John.

Shakespeare gives all his characters their due; when Hotspur and Falstaff speak of honor, their opposite views are clearly and forcefully stated. Every role, however brief, is memorable. Even the absent carrier, Robin, in Act II, Scene 1, is fully drawn in a single line: "Poor fellow never joy'd since the price of oats rose, it was the death of him"

The plays were not written in chronological order. As nearly as scholars can place them, they follow in this sequence:

Henry VI, Parts One through Three 1589 - 1591
Richard III 1592-93
Richard II 1595
Henry IV, Parts One & Two 1596-98
Henry V 1599

The historical sequence of kings:

Richard II (1377 - 1399)
Henry IV (1399 - 1413)
Henry V (1413 - 1422)

Henry VI (1422 - 1461)
Edward IV (1461 - 1483)
Edward V (1483 - 1483)
Richard III (1483 - 1485)
Henry VII (1485 - 1509)

(Lancastrian kings are all named Henry; others are of the House of York)