

Henry IV Part 1: Harmony of Contrasts?

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The bustling energy and variety of *Henry IV Part 1* are at once the source of its immediate attractiveness, and the occasion of critical concern. Consider the abundant interests of the play: a great and complicated rebellion in the nation; an impressive but deeply troubled king; a young prince apparently avoiding his destiny, wavering between duty and sowing his wild oats; scenes in court and in the tavern, or with footpads on the highway, in carriers' lodgings, with the army on the march, or on the battlefield itself. Dr Johnson's neo-classical taste responded to the diverse interests of Shakespeare's history plays, but still found them unstructured:

His histories, being neither tragedies nor comedies, are not subject to any of their laws; nothing more is necessary to all the praise which they expect than that the changes of action be so prepared as to be understood, that the incidents be various and affecting, and the characters consistent, natural, and distinct. No other unity is intended, and therefore none is to be sought.¹

The unity of *Henry IV* has continued to be sought by later critics. For some the true subject of the play is the commonwealth: the hero is England. More specifically, the play is a study of kingship and statecraft, with scenes of state alternating with scenes of low life, the ways of power analysed among the conspirators as well as in the court, until the issues are resolved at the battle of Shrewsbury. The essential meaning of the play has at times been found in such abstractions as Order and Honour, with key passages of the text adduced in support. These interpretations all fix on elements in *Henry IV Part 1*, but our total experience of its diversity and vitality cannot be encapsulated in any one of them.

When we think of *Henry IV* we remember sequences –

1 *Dr Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. W. K. Wimsatt (Penguin, 1969), pp.68-9.

scenes, incidents, groups of characters following one another, juxtaposed in various ways. This invites an approach to the play that may be more fruitful than the pursuit of abstract themes. It is what one might call the 'piecemeal' method. Shakespeare seems to present his object (or his perception of something – of a person, of an event) separately and a number of times. Each presentation will be, as it were, afresh: what is on view may be seen each time in a different light: our perceptions may be sometimes even contradictory: yet we are persuaded to accept that it is the same thing we are perceiving. The method, to put it crudely, is to lay things side by side – in parallel – and to let (or seem to let) the consequences take care of themselves.

To illustrate this I shall refer mainly to the three principal characters because we can best look into the play through them. This study should, among other things, bring two topics to our attention, the concept of character and the relations of character to the play. So with the 'piecemeal' model in mind I turn first to the presentation of Hotspur.²

Hotspur's first appearance (I.3) with the 'popinjay speech' (ll. 30ff.) is obviously designed as a very big entrance: we feel, with great suddenness, the impact of his 'humours', his 'gunpowder' explosiveness, his short fuse, but with these, too, his rather endearing rashness. Then, in the latter portion of the scene, something different, but not incompatible – his rapture, both extraordinary and comic, at the thought of honour. 'By heaven, methinks it were an easy leap' is splendid and at the same time indicative of his eccentricity. A different 'shot' in II.3 – Hotspur, or the Hotspurs, at home. The tone is pleasant light comedy, very lively – pleasant I suppose depending on how the modern reader or playgoer receives Hotspur's somewhat masterful attitude towards his wife. In the next scene Hal's very funny caricature of the couple (II.4.96ff.) ('I am not yet of Percy's mind, the Hotspur of the North ...') serves more than one purpose. It pillories the eccentricity, if amiable eccentricity, of Percy, while it establishes the Prince's pleasant sense of humour, and his normality.

2 All quotations from *Henry IV Part I* are from the Challis Shakespeare, ed. E. A. M. Colman (Sydney University Press, 1987).

In the Welsh scene (III.1) his 'putting down' of Glendower, justified in its way, is both high comedy and also an indication of Hotspur's brashness, spectacular absence of tact and basic unprinceliness. His over-assertive behaviour in the division of the kingdom conveys a similar impression. But again something different – the social portion with the ladies gives us a piece of high comedy: in fact we are for the moment in another genre, comedy of the sexes, with reminiscences of Petruchio and Kate or of Beatrice and Benedick. And this in a way is another Hotspur.

Then with IV.1 and the beginning of the war it is Hotspur's superb and inspiring courage that is the keynote. This is not qualified or undercut in Shakespeare's treatment. IV.3 is interesting, incidentally, for Hotspur's interpretation of the career of the King (formerly Bolingbroke). This is only one of several accounts of the subject that we receive, none of them exactly coinciding; Hotspur's we can expect to be prejudiced but we cannot know exactly how much.

Deceived by the more worldly, and less honest, Worcester and Vernon (V.2), Hotspur is made now to speak like the hero he is ('Oh gentlemen, the time of life is short') in the true epic strain – is this the Percy we have known before? Then, dying (V.4), he is credited with final and plangent lines that might have come from one of Shakespeare's own sonnets:

But thoughts, the slaves of life, and life, time's fool,
And time, that takes survey of all the world,
Must have a stop. (V.4.81-3)

Hal's tender and reverent care of Hotspur's body serves as an enhancement to them both. Meanwhile we may be prompted to reflect in what ways he, the Prince, is – if he is – the better man.

Simply to lay out the facts in their order in this way is the best means of understanding and appreciating them. For example, and to put the matter baldly, we have not a Hotspur, but Hotspurs – one very gallant, one very eccentric, one very angry – or very charming, or very noble, and so on. We can observe the author composing in distinct and separate – and telling – strokes. We see one of his purposes is to make a character: the person

Hotspur is one of the 'values' of the play, one of its chief sources of enjoyment. Yet not everything associated with Hotspur in his scenes is consistent with or necessary for his characterization. The values of the play may come first. For example, the combination of the heroic and the comic which we associate especially with him is very much the dominant tone of the play itself. At the same time we may feel prompted to reflect on the very pointed contrasts made between Hal and Hotspur, which suggest thoughts about the right leader, the true prince.

The presentation of Hal is even more interesting as it even more central to the play. It highlights in a special degree that discrete or 'piecemeal' art which I have suggested as being peculiarly Shakespeare's. Hal's personality, his intentions, even the facts concerning him, when we inspect them, are partly different at different times. In the eyes of his father and of the rebels Hal is, during the course of most of the play, a young wastrel. The soliloquy at I.2.285ff. no doubt sets that right and reassures us about his nature and his intentions – or does so *in that place*. Yet Hal, in the tavern scenes, still conveys the sense that he is wasting time and his talents and shirking his duty. The riotous prince still exists. He says so: certain signs in his temper show he is aware of it. We are meant to deplore – and enjoy. But there is another interpretation of his behaviour which is supposed to exonerate him more thoroughly and of which much is made. This is the motif of the student prince who under the guise of dissipation is preparing himself to be a wiser and more humane ruler of his people. This motif is made explicit once, in Part 2, though it is scarcely put in an attractive way:

War. My Gracious lord, you look beyond him quite.
 The Prince but studies his companions
 Like a strange tongue, wherein, to gain the language,
 'Tis needful that the most immodest word
 Be look'd upon and learnt ...³

This is no doubt reassuring and edifying. But notice that it is said afterwards: it applies in retrospect. When the fun and games are

3 *Henry IV Part 2*, ed. A. R. Humphreys (The Arden Shakespeare, 1966), IV.iv.67-71.

in progress it is simply not in our minds.

But there is more to say about the Prince and the tavern. Recall again the 'I know you all' soliloquy. When Hal says

So when this loose behaviour I throw off
 And pay the debt I never promised,
 By how much better than my word I am,
 By so much shall I falsify men's hopes (I.2.198-201)

a common reaction has been to find him unpleasantly cold and calculating and to interpret everything he does or says in this light. But, in the first place, the effect of the passage is partly 'choric': we are being given essential information. But there is the echo of an old story motif, the tardy hero who eventually comes good. But in any case it is not possible to maintain very far such an adverse interpretation. We simply cannot hold on to it as we watch the Prince entering into the revels so zestfully, giving to the banter, the jests, the practical jokes his fullest energy, contributing less only than Falstaff to the enormous linguistic life and invention of the play. Consider the next words we hear him utter after that speech: 'Stand close ... Peace, ye fat kidney'd rascal, what a brawling dost thou keep Peace, ye fat guts. Lie down, lay thine ear close to the ground' (II.2.3, 5-6, 30-31). It is of course the highway scene. Hal is untouched by the real vices of the tavern: that is what we should want. Yet this does not detract from the impression that he is a whole-hearted participant.

Then consider his relations with Falstaff. He identifies him accurately:

That villainous, abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that
 old white-bearded Satan (II.4.440-41)

and indicates that we will dismiss him:

Falstaff Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.
Prince I do, I will. (II.4.456-8)

Yet he enjoys Falstaff's company most of all his enjoyments of the tavern. The pair spur each other to their greatest feats of sportful and fantastic eloquence. One thinks especially of II.4, of the 'flying' or contest in abuse (II.4.227ff.) and, that very

great highlight, the play-acting sequence. While such pieces are in progress they are wholly enjoyable, without reservation, as if there were nothing else to be said. Yet there is. When we contemplate the scenes between Hal and Falstaff in retrospect we recognize, or recall, that Hal's tone to him is characteristically abrasive, even aggressive, never sentimental, granting even the tough context of the Boar's Head tavern. Lastly – and the order in which such perceptions are received is important – Hal's pronouncement over the supposedly dead Falstaff contradicts the existence of deep personal attachment (or one that Hal himself acknowledges – can acknowledge?). This speech too, then, represents a backward look. Yet the wonderful, boisterous conviviality of the tavern scenes is not negated, it is there: it exists.

May I sum up my view of Hal in a slightly different way? Shakespeare in the last resort does not really want to rationalize the Prince's character: in a sense, he cannot afford to. Hal must be responsible and promise worthily: he must be irresponsible and fun-loving. And he must be the latter for more than one reason – to help generate all that tavern mirth, and to have a 'shameful' reputation from which to spring back so spectacularly. Along with this he will represent a strong and pervasive presence, all the more interesting for its ambivalence or, in modern critical terms, 'complexity'.

I am suggesting then that the art of *Henry IV* is, to a marked degree, one of presentation and the control of our perceptions. This seems to be at least one basis of its composition – I mean the presenting of separate, distinct facts of perception (Hal is at home in the tavern, he despises the tavern; Hal loves Falstaff, he doesn't really love him) and leaving them to interact in our minds. In such a method the order in which the perceptions occur is important. That which occurs last, the most recent in our minds, will have a special, but not necessarily conclusive, influence.

What of Falstaff? Falstaff is no doubt a 'function' (or a set of functions) of the play, but he is also that old-fashioned thing, a character: like Hotspur, but greater. The subtleties and elaborations which go to his making are extraordinary, especially when one considers that he exists within the confines of a play,

not a substantial novel, and a play full of other matters, of many persons and interests.

In proposing to study a character whole, and for its own sake, I may seem to be going back on what I have said above. But in fact one may still speak here in terms of audience or reader's 'perception': the author's intention in this case is to focus our interest, our 'perceptions', fully and in detail on a person. Character interest is another value that the author may wish to achieve.

What is it to perceive, to appreciate, a character? Among other things we recognize typical behaviour, typical speech, and consistent ways of thinking. There will be a good degree of predictability mingled with surprises. We will be conscious of being invited to contemplate a subject faithfully sustained and lovingly detailed. I shall try to illustrate this from some typical appearances of Falstaff.

First, his role as humorist and entertainer. Take the following short exchange:

Falstaff Oh, thou hast damnable iteration, and art indeed able to corrupt a saint. Thou hast done much harm upon me, Hal, God forgive thee for it. Before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing, and now am I, if a man should speak truly, little better than one of the wicked. I must give over this life, and I will give it over. By the Lord, and I do not, I am a villain. I'll be damn'd for never a King's son in Christendom.

Prince Where shall we take a purse tomorrow, Jack?

Falstaff Zounds, where thou wilt, lad, I'll make one – an I do not, call me villain and baffle me.

Prince I see a good amendment of life in thee, from praying to purse-taking.

Falstaff Why, Hal, 'tis my vocation, Hal. 'Tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation. (1.2.87-101)

In his first speech Falstaff's assumption of piety and injured innocence lays the basis for the game. The straight-faced nonsense in amusingly sustained, particularly the pietistic language – 'little better than one of the wicked'. The piling it on is the essence of the joke. (Note though that Hal himself has

begun the train of Biblical quotations in the speech previous to this.)

Hal's next move, 'Where shall we take a purse tomorrow, Jack?', sprung suddenly and out of the blue, produces a violent about-face by Falstaff. The actor playing him would need split-second timing and an instant change of dynamic to catch the way he positively jumps at the line. An interesting question, perhaps – how 'genuine' is Falstaff when he snaps on the bait? Is he really entrapped? Or is he completely conscious of what is happening and is acting totally?

To complete our look at the little comedy: Hal's triumphant rejoinder 'I see a good amendment of life in thee' is instantly countered by 'Why, Hal, 'tis my vocation, Hal'. Notice again the mimicry of Puritan-Biblical phraseology but now even funnier. Notice, too, Falstaff's sudden, in fact instantaneous, switch in tone to sweet, in fact complacent, reasonableness. The joy of the comedy consists particularly in Falstaff's extreme mental agility, that and his impudence. Cornered by the Prince, his wit supplies him instantly with the riposte.

This is exactly what happens, of course, at the climax of the sequence III.4.106-226 concerning the highway robbery. It will be remembered how Falstaff's outrageous lies provoke mounting disbelief but that this is, by a sort of tacit consent, a game that everyone is playing (it was planned in I.2). Eventually convicted by the facts, his response,

By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye
the biggest lie of all, presumably lives up to expectations.

One must see Falstaff as the professional humorist whose profession, or art, is his life. He is dyed in his trade. Everything he does is the occasion for a jest, or he makes it one. Listen to him in his role of highwayman:

Strike! Down with them, cut the villains' throats. Ah, whore-
son caterpillars, bacon-fed knaves, they hate us youth. Down
with them, fleece them!

And again:

Hang ye, gorbellied knaves, are ye undone? No, ye fat chuffs, I

would your store were here. On, bacons, on! What, ye knaves?
Young men must live! You are grand-jurors, are ye? We'll jure
ye, faith. (II.2.80-82, 85-88)

Hardly the serious highwayman; just as when he behaves in a cowardly way he is not, we feel, being the serious coward.

In the view of some critics Falstaff is a synthetic figure of the stage: comic, jester, comedian whose performance is not compatible with a real man. As I see it, however, Shakespeare wants us to feel all his humour as coming from a central instinct within the man as man: comic acts and stage routines, the calculated gags and leg-pulls, though recognizable enough, are absorbed into the circumstances of actual life. He is too funny to be true. No one could be so ready with a jest, be so shameless, devote himself so totally to humour, find himself in (or contrive to be caught in?) so many mirth-provoking situations. Yet he *is* a man, a particular humorous fat man. This dual identity, if I may so call it, sets him apart from the clowns and jesters and vaudevillians of the comedies.

Here then we have another instance of that double perception on our part involving, as I said, a sort of multiple identity on the part of the subject, inconsistent if we pause to examine, richly rewarding if we do not seek to tamper too much with the illusion. But the critic for his purpose will, I suppose, want to do just that – at least, to make us aware of this amalgam of jester and man, and how it is the humour we sense in the man himself that makes him finally so disarming and so winning.

Such considerations do in fact give us a fuller appreciation of Shakespeare's art – and of Falstaff in his typical operations. Thus he must keep the jokes going at all costs and more often than not, as with the professional jester or even as in the case of a humorous friend one knows, he makes himself the butt. A psychologist might say Falstaff has a strong self-image – another name, perhaps for a fine impudence, or a thick skin. In any case, the ground of such jokes is almost invariably his fatness, his moral degeneracy, or his cowardice. His gross body and everything gross and fat which it suggests are kept constantly before us – as if his extraordinary anatomy were food for infinite contemplation. And so with his drunkenness, gluttony, lechery

and the rest. Many of the jests on these subjects are cracked by other members of the cast – at his prompting. He deliberately feeds them the cues (and thus fences with the attack when it comes). As he himself says perhaps ruefully in Part 2:

I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men. (I.ii.8-9)

A notable instance of this process is found in the ‘play-acting sequence’ of II.4. Falstaff, while impersonating the King, commends himself, among other things, as ‘a good portly man in faith and a corpulent’. This is a very obvious incitement to the Prince who responds magnificently in

that trunk of humours, that bolting-hutch of beastliness, that swol'n parcel Of dropsies, that huge bombard of sack, that stuff'd cloakbag of guts, that roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly ... (II.4.428-31)

Such incidents great or small are to be found everywhere, enjoyable in themselves, additionally interesting if we see them as joint product of jester and man, artificial contrivance and portrait captured from the life. One little but very amusing exchange occurs between Falstaff and Bardolph:

Falstaff I ... lived well, and in good compass: and now I live out of all order, out of all compass.

Bardolph Why, you are so fat, Sir John, that you must needs be out of all compass – out of all reasonable compass, Sir John. (III.3.16-22)

Falstaff feeds him a simple cue which even the slow Bardolph can take up with, no doubt on his part, considerable satisfaction that he too can do what everyone else is doing. Falstaff, having helped him to this, now ‘does his thing’, his brilliant fantasia on Bardolph’s nose (ll. 28ff.) which soars away into the realms of surreal poetry. We realize that we are observing a social group centred round Falstaff in which he is its chief joker and its chief joke.

This brings to mind a quality of Shakespeare’s dramatic fiction – an extraordinary quality – which one is so familiar with that one overlooks it. Dr Johnson speaks of Shakespeare’s plays as holding up to their readers ‘a faithful mirror of manners and of

life',⁴ and the tavern scenes constitute just that. Falstaff, the Prince, Poins, Bardolph, Mistress Quickly and the others in their small social interactions remind us unmistakably of those modern studies of human behaviour, the 'games people play' and 'interaction ritual'. Here they are in the flesh. Such a presentation has more weight and impact than has comparable material in the Romantic comedies where this delicate art is associated with a world more removed, a world of artifice. But in *Henry IV* the same finesse in studying the nicer points of people's behaviour towards one another is directed to the life of the tavern, rough, coarse, and 'realistic'. This fact seems to me quite remarkable.

It is instructive in this regard to compare Shakespeare with his contemporaries in comedy. They use the same settings and material as those of the tavern scenes, but for much cruder purposes – sheer stage sensation, displays of horseplay, even brutality. In Shakespeare, on the other hand, we find ourselves 'studying' – shades of address by way of friendly insult; the feint, the blow (as it were) just withheld; aggression that is poised somewhere between the playful and the genuinely meant; rough but elaborately artful practical jokes in which again the component of aggression may be felt or suspected: on the other hand, the guard let down – Falstaff's special ploy – inviting the antagonist to 'come on'. This social milieu positively bristles with these and a variety of other fine points of human 'interaction', all the more telling and memorable because of the turbulent setting. And overall one is aware of the element of play, to which all the above contributes and which is the ultimate crown of all these scenes. (These qualities I have tried to indicate are not, by the way, exclusively confined to the scenes of low life. One other, the scene of the rebels meeting in Wales (III.1), is a wonderfully brilliant and colourful counterpart.)

The point I am making about Shakespeare's art is this: besides fulfilling the basic requirements of drama in scene, plot, and idea, he has also what I should call this generously 'presentational' quality which shows, studies – and causes us to 'study', to recognize, to contemplate. This is not by any means a

4 Johnson, *op.cit.* p.59.

predominant or a necessary feature of the great drama of the world which, more often, in the Classical manner, restricts itself severely to the pattern of events and the structure of ideas. Whereas that old praise of Shakespeare, now considered outmoded, as the supreme master of human nature and great painter of life is vindicated in a special degree by these tavern scenes. They convince me that the perceptions on this score of a Samuel Johnson or, I should maintain, of an A. C. Bradley, simple as they may have come to appear, are deeply true of Shakespeare's art and achievement.

But to complete our account of Falstaff, referring again to the partial or 'piecemeal' method of composition I have attributed to Shakespeare. He, Falstaff, can be seen in quite another aspect than that of jolly rogue and leader of revels.

As unofficial court jester and favourite to the Prince, familiar yet not familiar, he is in an ambivalent position – when, that is, we advert to the fact. When we do contemplate that situation we may perceive a Falstaff who is, by his sheer genius, maintaining a precarious position. We have noted the Prince's basically steely attitude to the relationship along with the signs of, it seems, unwilling affection. For Falstaff he, the Prince, represents society, status and bread and butter (or anchovies and sack!): yet we know that he loves his Hal in a way: at least we think he does (we want to think he does?). So here as elsewhere we are dealing with 'shots', perceptions, the objects of which, the 'facts', are not always certain and do not always add up.

But there is yet another side to the Falstaff portrait. Just as the Boar's Head is not by any means only a paradise of freedom and gaiety as some critics would have us think, so Falstaff is not all harmless, genial fun. Scrutinized from one angle he is a reprobate – glutton, drunkard, tavern brawler, cheat and rogue – he has 'misused the King's press damnably'. The reprehensible traits come to a head in Part 2 but IV.2 of Part I provides a foretaste. It is with a certain shock that we discover that Falstaff outside the Boar's Head tavern is a different quantity ('Tut, tut, good enough to toss, food for powder, food for powder' – IV.2.62-3). When we think of this he represents a positive social menace, and as confidant of a king a real danger. But we are not

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invited to contemplate that all the time – it is not the only ‘reality’. It is rather the spicy humorist, the comic genius of all that rough but salty mirth, who holds the centre.

Are there then two Falstaffs, or three, or four? The same principle operates as I have pointed out before, selective and guided perception. Such a principle of composition is different from that which may inform a modern novel where the art consists, by various subtle means, in conveying the character whole. Shakespearean character is different too from character in nineteenth-century realist drama where the playwright’s art works single-mindedly towards a methodical ‘exposure’ of the figure under scrutiny. But Shakespeare’s method may present just as comprehensive a picture. It gives us the complicated variety of the world as we perceive it, shifting appearances and all.