

# Henry IV, Part 1

by: William Shakespeare

directed: Ms. Paula Barrett

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Henry Bolingbroke – now King Henry IV – is having an unquiet reign. His personal disquiet at the means whereby he gained the crown – by deposing Richard II – would be solved by a journey or crusade to the Holy Land to fight Muslims, but broils on his borders with Scotland and Wales prevent that. Moreover, his guilt causes him to mistreat the Earls Northumberland and Worcester, heads of the Percy family, and Edmund Mortimer, the Earl of March. The first two helped him to his throne, and the third claims to have been proclaimed by Richard, the former king, as his rightful heir.

Adding to King Henry's troubles is the behaviour of his son and heir, the Prince of Wales. Hal (the future Henry V) has forsaken the Royal Court to waste his time in taverns with low companions. This makes him an object of scorn to the nobles and calls into question his royal worthiness. Hal's chief friend and foil in living the low life is Sir John Falstaff. Fat, old, drunk, and corrupt as he is, he has a charisma and a zest for life that captivates the Prince, born into a world of hypocritical pieties and mortal seriousness.

The play has three groups of characters that interact slightly at first, and then come together in the Battle of Shrewsbury, where the success of the rebellion will be decided. First there is King Henry himself and his immediate council. He is the engine of the play, but usually in the background. Next there is the group of rebels, energetically embodied in Harry Percy – Hotspur – and including his father (Northumberland) and led by his uncle Thomas Percy (Worcester). The Scottish Earl of Douglas, Edmund Mortimer and the Welshman Owen Glendower also join. Finally, at the center of the play are the young Prince Hal and his companions Falstaff, Poins, Bardolph, and Peto. Streetwise and pound-foolish, these rogues manage to paint over this grim history in the colours of comedy.

As the play opens, the king is angry with Hotspur for refusing him most of the prisoners taken in a recent action against the Scots at Holmedon (see the Battle of Humbleton Hill). Hotspur, for his part, would have the king ransom Edmund Mortimer (his wife's brother) from Owen Glendower, the Welshman who holds him. Henry refuses, berates Mortimer's loyalty, and treats the Percys with threats and rudeness. Stung and alarmed by Henry's dangerous and peremptory way with them,

they proceed to make common cause with the Welsh and Scots, intending to depose "this ingrate and cankered Bolingbroke." By Act II, rebellion is brewing.

As Henry Bolingbroke is mishandling the affairs of state, his son Hal is joking, drinking, and whoring with Falstaff and his associates. He likes Falstaff but makes no pretense at being like him. He enjoys insulting his dissolute friend and makes sport of him by joining in Poins's plot to disguise themselves and rob and terrify Falstaff and three friends of loot they glean from a highway robbery, purely for the fun of watching Falstaff lie about it later, after which Hal returns the stolen money. Rather early in the play, in fact, Hal informs us that his riotous time will soon come to a close, and he will reassume his rightful high place in affairs by showing himself worthy to his father and others through some (unspecified) noble exploits. Hal believes that this sudden change of manner will amount to a greater reward and acknowledgment of prince-ship, and in turn "earn" him respect from the members of the court.

The revolt of Mortimer and the Percys very quickly gives him his chance to do just that. The high and the low come together when the Prince makes up with his father and is given a high command. He vows to fight and kill the rebel Hotspur, and orders Falstaff (who is, after all, a knight) to procure a group of footsoldiers and proceed to the battle site at Shrewsbury. The easy life is over for now.

Shrewsbury (see Battle of Shrewsbury) is crucial. If the rebels even achieve a standoff their cause gains greatly, as they have other powers awaiting under Northumberland, Glendower, Mortimer, and the Bishop of York. Henry needs a decisive victory here. He outnumbers the rebels, but Hotspur, with the wild hope of despair, leads his troops into battle. The day wears on, the issue still in doubt, the king harried by the wild Scot Douglas, when Prince Hal and Hotspur, the two Harrys that cannot share one land, meet. Finally they will fight – for glory, for their lives, and for the kingdom. No longer a tavern brawler but a warrior, the future king prevails, ultimately killing Hotspur in single combat.

On the way to this climax, we are treated to Falstaff, who has "misused the King's press damnably", not only by taking money from able-bodied men who wished to evade service but by keeping the wages of the poor souls he brought instead who were killed in battle ("food for powder, food for powder"). Now on his own Falstaff is attacked by the Douglas during Hal's battle with Hotspur, but plays possum and is presumed dead. After Hal leaves Hotspur's body on the field, Falstaff revives in a mock miracle. Seeing he is alone, he stabs Hotspur's corpse in the thigh and claims credit for the kill. Though incredulous of this report, Hal allows Sir John his disreputable tricks.

The play ends at Shrewsbury, after the battle. The death of Hotspur has taken the heart out of the rebels, and the king's forces prevail. Henry is pleased with the

outcome, not least because it gives him a chance to execute Thomas Percy, the Earl of Worcester, one of his chief enemies (though previously one of his greatest friends). Meanwhile Hal shows off his kingly mercy in praise of valor; having taken the valiant Douglas prisoner, Hal orders his enemy released without ransom. But the war goes on: now the king's forces must deal with the Archbishop of York, who has joined with Northumberland, and with the forces of Mortimer and Glendower. This unsettled ending sets the stage for *Henry IV, Part 2*.

## *Henry IV, Part 2*

The play picks up where *Henry IV, Part One* left off. Its focus is on Prince Hal's journey toward kingship, and his ultimate rejection of Falstaff. However, unlike *Part One*, Hal and Falstaff's stories are almost entirely separate, as the two characters meet only twice and very briefly. The tone of much of the play is elegiac, focusing on Falstaff's age and his closeness to death.

Falstaff is still drinking and engaging in petty criminality in the London underworld. Falstaff appears, followed by a new character, a young page whom Prince Hal has assigned him as a joke. Falstaff enquires what the doctor has said about the analysis of his urine, and the page cryptically informs him that the urine is healthier than the patient. Falstaff promises to outfit the page in "vile apparel" (ragged clothing). They go off, Falstaff vowing to find a wife "in the stews" (i.e., the local brothels).

He has a relationship with Doll Tearsheet, a prostitute. When news of a second rebellion arrives, Falstaff joins the army again, and goes to the country to raise forces. There he encounters Mouldy, Bullcalf, Feeble, Shadow and Wart, a band of rustic yokels who are to be conscripted into the loyalist army, with two of whom, Mouldy and Bullcalf, bribing their way out. He also meets with an old school-chum, Master Shallow, and they reminisce about their youthful follies.

In the other storyline, Hal remains an acquaintance of London lowlife and seems unsuited to kingship. His father, King Henry IV, has apparently forgotten his reconciliation with his son in *Henry IV, Part One*, and is again disappointed in the young prince. Another rebellion is launched against Henry IV, but this time it is defeated, not by a battle, but by the duplicitous political machinations of Hal's brother, Prince John. King Henry then sickens and appears to die. Hal, seeing this, believes he is King and exits with the crown. King Henry, awakening, is devastated, thinking Hal cares only about becoming King. Hal convinces him otherwise and the old king subsequently dies contentedly.

The two storylines meet in the final scene, in which Falstaff, having learned that Hal is now King, travels to London in expectation of great rewards. But Hal rejects him,

saying that he has now changed, and can no longer associate with such people. The London lowlives, expecting a paradise of thieves under Hal's governance, are instead purged and imprisoned by the authorities.

At the end of the play, an epilogue thanks the audience and promises that the story will continue in a forthcoming play "with Sir John in it". In fact, the subsequent play, *Henry V*, does not feature Falstaff except for a brief mention of his death.