Overview of Area of Study 1:

Reading and Responding

In Area of Study 1 you are expected to engage in a close reading of a text and to respond, primarily in analytical or expository essay mode, to essay questions which focus on the text’s characters, thematic concerns and its construction. You will study one text in Unit 3 and another in Unit 4, and will be assessed on each one as part of your School Assessed Coursework. In the end-of-year examination you will be presented with two essay questions on each text; you are expected to produce one essay on your preferred text.

In your essays you must respond directly to the question you have chosen, working closely with the text to produce a thoughtful, relevant and detailed discussion. You must support your arguments with detail from the text, drawing on evidence in the form of accurate quotation and analysis of an author’s use of
language and other literary devices. Among other things, you are encouraged to explore the following areas in your responses:

- the characters, ideas and themes of the text
- how an author constructs meaning (through language and structural or stylistic devices or features)
- the social, cultural and historical values evident in the text
- how a text is open to different interpretations.

This article on *King Henry IV Part 1* offers an analysis of the text which incorporates discussion of these four areas. If you need to revisit the plot first, try reading this entertaining online summary from Shmoop: http://www.shmoop.com/henry-iv-part-1/summary.html

**HISTORICAL context**

William Shakespeare (baptised 1564, died 1616), English playwright and poet, is regularly dubbed the greatest writer in the English language. Whether or not you personally agree, it is hard to deny the man’s contribution to literature: his 38 plays and 154 sonnets receive more critical attention than any other English author’s work, with many of them still widely studied in schools and universities around the world. Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, but from his early 20s he spent much of his time in London as a writer, actor and part-owner of a playing company known as the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (and later under King James I as the King’s Men). It is believed that he retired to Stratford-upon-Avon around 1613.

*King Henry IV Part 1* is the second of four plays written and performed between 1595 and 1599, late in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, and referred to as ‘the second tetralogy’. When combined with ‘the first tetralogy’ (written 1589–1593) the eight plays offer Shakespeare’s colourful perspective on a famous period of English history: from 1398, late in the troubled reign of Richard II, until the death of Richard III in 1485 at the Battle of Bosworth. Note that the first tetralogy is known as such because it was created first, not because the historical events occurred first. Following the historical chronology the plays would unfold as follows:

The Second Tetralogy (written 1595–1599)

- *Richard II*
- *Henry IV Part 1*
- *Henry IV Part 2*
- *Henry V*

The First Tetralogy (written 1589–1593)

- *Henry VI Part 1*
- *Henry VI Part 2*
- *Henry VI Part 3*
- *Richard III*

*King Henry IV Part 1* deals primarily with the power struggles around the troubled reign of Henry IV in the early 15th century, as well as the remarkable transformation of his son Prince Henry, or ‘Hal’ (who will later become what is possibly England’s most famous monarch, King Henry V). It is also the play that introduces one of Shakespeare’s most famous comic characters: Falstaff.
All of the history plays in Shakespeare’s tetralogies are closely linked, with characters reappearing and the actions and events of earlier plays being referred to in subsequent performances. For example, consider lines 7–18 of King Henry IV’s opening speech in 1.1:

No more shall trenching war channel her fields,  
Nor bruise her flow’rets with the armed hoofs  
Of hostile paces: those opposed eyes,  
Which, like the meteors of a troubled heaven,  
All of one nature, of one substance bred,  
Did lately meet in the intestine shock  
And furious close of civil butchery,  
Shall now, in mutual well-beseeming ranks,  
March all one way, and be no more oppos’d  
Against acquaintance, kindred, and allies.

The ‘civil butchery’ mentioned in line 13 refers to the events of the previous play in this tetralogy, Richard II, specifically Bolingbroke’s (later King Henry IV’s) invasion of the north of England in King Richard’s absence and the assassination of that king under Bolingbroke. As with all of Shakespeare’s plays, a wonderful sense of irony is established in these words—we hear desperation in Henry IV’s desire for peace in his ‘troubled heaven’, while understanding that the ‘opposed eyes’ of line 9 could describe his own defiance of King Richard II in the previous play. Furthermore, the chilling simile equating ‘the edge of war’ to ‘an ill-sheathed knife [which]/No more shall cut his master’ brings to mind Bolingbroke’s connection to Richard II’s assassination. The death of Richard II clearly haunts Henry IV, acting as a weight on his conscience which is played out in his strained language and increasingly defensive behaviour.

RENAISSANCE theatre—remembrance and reflection

Looking again at King Henry’s lines above, consider the simile equating England’s subjects to ‘meteors’ that are ‘of one nature’ and yet have ‘lately’ been engaged in ‘furiously’ civil conflict. This natural imagery helps to establish a tension between natural and unnatural, or moral and immoral, which would have prompted Shakespeare’s audiences to evaluate the actions and events of the play on moral grounds; or, to phrase it differently, to assess the actions of characters in terms of their moral integrity.

Shakespeare’s audiences would have been comfortable with this theatrical intention. His plays, perhaps especially the history plays, were designed to offer a window into the past; to provide a form of remembrance which could offer instruction or inspiration for the present and future. Consider this observation from the preface to Sir Thomas North’s Plutarch’s Lives, which was the source of a number of Shakespeare’s plays:

For it is a certaine rule and instruction, which by examples past, teacheth us to judge of things present, and to foresee things to come: so as we may know what to like of, and what to follow, what to mislike, and what to eschue.

Shakespeare clearly understood that his performances could be used to stir the conscience and to arouse emotions such as guilt, fear, deep sadness, elation or patriotic fervour for the purpose of reflection and education. When we consider that Queen Elizabeth I, her successor King James I, and members of the royal
court and nobility saw many of Shakespeare's plays in private performances, it seems natural to conclude that these performances offered such opportunity. Hereafter we will explore some of the ideas that this particular play presents to audiences.

**TIME and change—from medieval to Renaissance**

In some ways, *King Henry IV Part 1* can be seen as a playing out of a preoccupation with time. In other words, we might consider the play an exploration of the transition from a period of medieval instability (seen primarily in *Richard II*, but also in *King Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*) into a form of social ‘rebirth’, as the name ‘Renaissance’ suggests (from the French *renaître*, ‘to be reborn’, and the Latin *nasci*, to be born).

In as much as this is the case, Prince Hal can be seen as an embodiment of, as scholar E.M. W. Tillyard put it in his publication *Shakespeare's History Plays*, ‘the abstract Renaissance conception of the perfect ruler’ (p. 227).

While this view of Hal seems in some ways an oversimplification of Shakespeare’s complex and contradictory character, there is still much merit in the description. For in Hal we see a remarkable transformation: from wayward timelessness and abandon in the play’s earlier acts to an awareness of the importance of, and his own place in, time as the production gathers speed.

Consider, for example, our introduction to this future ‘perfect ruler’, as Tillyard would have it, in 1.2:

Falstaff: Now, Hal, what time of day is it, lad?

Prince: Thou art so fat-witted, with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon, that thou hast forgotten to demand that truly which thou wouldst truly know. What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? Unless hours were cups of sack and minutes capons and clocks the tongues of bawds and dials the signs of leaping-houses and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta, I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of the day: (1.2.1-12)

Perhaps the most confronting aspect of the prince’s opening speech is its coarseness and familiarity—why on earth is this future king of England speaking of ‘bawds’, ‘leaping-houses’ (brothels) and a ‘fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta’? And why in prose, rather than the more elevated rhythms of verse, is the iambic pentameter so typically employed by Shakespeare to differentiate nobility from the common man? Why, also, does he appear to be insulting his drinking partner, this man of generous proportion, whom the prince describes rather cunningly as ‘so fat-witted, with drinking of old sack’ as to be asking ‘superfluous’, or needlessly inquisitive, questions?

Yet Shakespeare’s audience would have understood the dramatic intention here. Historically speaking, the young prince’s waywardness was well known and, hence, this early characterisation of him as a man who cares not for time or responsibility helps to render his subsequent transformation—his eventual acknowledgement of ‘the time of day’ and his role as a prince and future king—all the more fulfilling.

The motif underpinning the dialogue above is a rejection of time, because an acknowledgement of time requires an acknowledgement of one’s place within history. It would seem from this introduction that the prince is not prepared to accept his responsibility as a ruler, and yet as the play unfolds we will witness this transition, from timelessness to an acceptance of a place within time, through Hal’s acceptance of his royal identity and his pursuit of honour.

The prince’s acknowledgement of this responsibility is made resoundingly clear in one simple line during the Battle of Shrewsbury in 5.3. When a request of Falstaff for a weapon (‘I prithee lend me thy sword’) is met with a bottle of sack rather than anything useful, Hal’s anger at such tomfoolery on the battlefield is palpable:

What, is it a time to jest and dally now? (5.3.55)
It would appear that Hal’s transition from a prince lost in a timeless haze of vice to a hero who (in the king’s own words) ‘hast redeem’d thy lost opinion’ (5.4.47) and accepted his place in time is almost complete. All that remains is for the now-reformed son to eliminate his heroic opposition in Hotspur, and even Hotspur himself acknowledges that ‘the hour is come’ (5.4.67) for this moment to unfold. So a king is (re)born, and the rest, as they say, is history.

**Birth of a ‘modern’ political world**

To see Hal’s transformation as symbolic of a smooth transition from medieval instability to Renaissance enlightenment would, however, be to oversimplify Shakespeare’s complex view of the changing times in England. For it is also made clear that this ‘modern’ world that Hal comes to represent is rife with hypocrisy and deceit, at odds with the valour and honour embodied by Hotspur (however outdated his conception of honour might seem).

Nowhere is this ambiguous ‘modern’ world view made more clear than in Hal’s famous soliloquy in 1.2, where in a shift from common prose to elevated verse, and from playful banter to a possibly colder, more cynical voice, we might see a rather unnerving form of duplicity:

> I know you all, and will awhile uphold
> The unyok’d humour of your idleness.
> Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
> Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
> To smother up his beauty from the world,
> That, when he please again to be himself,
> Being wanted he may be more wonder’d at
> By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
> Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.
> If all the year were playing holidays,
> To sport would be as tedious as to work;
> But when they seldom come, they wish’d-for come,
> And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents:
> 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;
> And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
> My reformation, glitt’ring o’er my fault,
> Shall show more goodly, and attract more eyes
> Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
> I’ll so offend, to make offence a skill,
> Redeeming time when men least think I will. (1.2.190-212)
The closing reference to ‘redeeming time’ subtly conveys Hal’s awareness, even at this early stage, of his present rejection of it. Far more revealing, however, is the third line, ‘Yet herein will I imitate the sun’, which phrases this transformation as a form of falsehood, an imitation of a ‘sun’ (the symbol of royalty and a pun on ‘son’). This implies that Hal sees his future ‘reformation’ as a performance, rather than something genuine or organic. Furthermore, in describing the transformation as being ‘like bright metal on a sullen ground ... glitt’ring o’er [Hal’s] fault’, Shakespeare draws attention to its artificiality, and through the words ‘bright’ and ‘glitt’ring’ he conveys a sense of superficial, rather than substantial, rebirth.

In some ways this speech can be read as a challenge to common medieval (and even Renaissance) notions of kingship as reflecting the natural order, as ordained by God, and therefore pure and sanctified. It appears, rather, to embrace a Machiavellian conception of princely power as stemming from insincere forms of authority and contrived, dishonest performance. The ambiguity of the opening line ‘I know you all’ (to whom is Hal speaking? the other characters? the audience? both?) hints at the prince’s potential for manipulation, and the references to corruption (‘base contagious clouds’, ‘foul and ugly mists / Of vapours’) compound the audience unease. Given Henry IV’s usurpation of Richard II’s throne—proof that a divinely appointed monarch can be overcome—it seems unsurprising that Shakespeare might contemplate a challenge to the feudal order in a vision of kingship as ‘imitation’ rather than something divine and natural.

Yet it is also possible to produce a slightly more sympathetic reading of Hal’s soliloquy. Rather than it seeming like a gleeful unveiling of a dark conspiracy, his confession to the audience can be viewed as an honest revelation from a young man maturing into a leader aware of his immense responsibility. The language of economics which conveys Hal’s intention to ‘pay the debt [he] never promised’, and the ‘redeeming’ of time, in the final line, can be read as an admission of the need for compensation in the wake of the sins of the past. Here, Shakespeare establishes a point of contrast with Henry IV’s illegitimacy as king, by pitting the son in direct opposition to these past acts of corruption and establishing an altogether new future vision of kingship.

So our view of a heroic, ‘redeem’d’ Hal at play’s end remains marred, perhaps, by certain ‘base contagious clouds’ and ‘foul and ugly mists’ in his nature. On the one hand, we are encouraged to applaud his duty to his father’s throne, his valour in battle and his acknowledgement of the heroism of others (even the rebellious yet ‘noble Scot, Lord Douglas’, whose compassionate release sits in contrast to the king’s earlier slaughtering of rebellious war prisoners). Yet on the other, we struggle to shake off our awareness of the ease with which this honourable soldier and ‘feathered Mercury’ transformed from rebellious rascal stained by ‘riot and dishonour’ to ‘an angel dropped down from the clouds’. If indeed Hal’s earlier identity is merely ‘loose behaviour’, easy to ‘throw off’ as circumstance dictates, can his latter identity be seen as any more noble or honest?

Herein lies the wonderful ambiguity of a very human character, compromised in certain respects by a sense of public duty and political convenience, but nonetheless worthy of some praise and admiration.

**SHIFTING perceptions of kingship and nobility**

While we are encouraged to see Hal as shifting from a rejection of his father’s world to an acceptance of his place within it, we are also shown the ways in which this future King Henry V might be a different political animal. For if he appears capable of the pragmatism which his modern political landscape requires, he also seems more versatile in his relationships with others; as a result, he is perhaps more able to marry the different worlds of the play, to achieve stability where there seemed only ‘trenching war’ and ‘hostile paces’.

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Political instability is established immediately in this play, in Henry IV’s opening speech in 1.1:

So shaken as we are, so wan with care,
Find we a time for frighted peace to pant,
And breathe short-winded accents of new broils
To be commenc’d in strands afar remote.
No more the thirsty entrance of this soil
Shall daub her lips with her own children’s blood,
No more … (1.1.1-7)

Our first perception of this world is of one ‘shaken’ by insecurity and civil unrest, not only through our understanding of the events of Richard II and King Henry IV’s own usurpation, but also through the Earl of Westmoreland’s present account of the ‘gallant Hotspur’ and ‘brave Archibald’ battling in a ‘sad and bloody hour’ at Holmedon. It seems that this new king has been unable to settle his subjects, as the present unrest in both Scotland and Wales testifies, and equally unable to settle his own soul, given the frank and private nature of this most public figure’s opening claim of feeling ‘shaken’ and ‘so wan with care’. The repetition of ‘no more’ helps to establish his desperate desire for peace, both social and internal. Furthermore, in his subsequent insistence on a crusade to the ‘sepulchre of Christ’ or holy land (which, rather ominously, he must ‘break off’ to deal with more pressing matters of civil unrest), we sense the weight of a heavy conscience. The tone of this opening is grave, and it sets an ominous mood for the action which will follow.

It appears that in his dubious assumption of the throne, the king has lost the youthful appeal and vigour which characterised his presence in Richard II. He seems suddenly and strangely old and frail in this opening scene, and is described in disapproving terms by those who should follow him, such as Hotspur:

... this unthankful king, / ... this ingrate and cank’red Bolingbroke (1.3.134-5)

As an audience we are encouraged to contemplate the reasons for this fall from grace: why are men such as the Percys, Mortimer, Douglas and Glendower so disgruntled now, when they seemed supportive of Bolingbroke during his rise to the throne? Some of this, at least, can be put down to the king’s apparent arrogance. His gloating to Westmoreland in 1.1 about the prisoners that Hotspur has captured at Holmedon seems cold and unnecessary:

On Holmedon’s plains; of prisoners Hotspur took
Mordake, Earl of Fife and eldest son
To beaten Douglas, and the Earl of Athol,
Of Murray, Angus and Menteith:
And is not this an honourable spoil?
A gallant prize? ha, cousin, is it not? (1.1.70-4)
Then in his argument with Hotspur in 1.3, about the latter’s refusal to deliver up these ‘spoils’ of war unless his ‘brother-in-law, the foolish Mortimer’ is released from prison, the king’s potential for ruthless inhumanity is clear:

... shall our coffers then

Be empty’d to redeem a traitor home?

Shall we buy treason, and indent with fears

When they have lost and forfeited themselves?

No, on the barren mountains let him starve;

For I shall never hold that man my friend

Whose tongue shall ask me for one penny cost

To ransom home revolted Mortimer. (1.3.84-91)

Again, Shakespeare’s irony is evident: this new king is repeating the sins of the past by replicating the bad behaviours which brought down the previous monarch, Richard II, in the previous play. In these mirrored portraits of kings as increasingly proud, aloof and unsympathetic, Shakespeare establishes an image of tarnished royalty; of ‘counterfeit’ kings unfit for, and perhaps incapable of, honourable leadership.

The question of honour

It is this concept of honour that weaves clearly through King Henry IV, Part 1 as a unifying thread. Henry IV’s accession is painted as dishonourable in its violation of the divine right of kings, as is his subsequent abuse of privilege and lack of compassion as leader. As we will see later, Hotspur’s code of honour is romantic and chivalrous, but it is also of another time and therefore destined to be relegated to the history books. Falstaff, at the other end of the spectrum, sits in direct opposition to Hotspur’s romantic conception of honour: he completely rejects the supposed morality of a world founded on notions of duty, obedience and subservience to authority.

Falstaff’s wonderful ‘catechism’ (an examination or form of questioning) in 5.1 cleverly undermines the abstract nature of honour, by pitting it against that most tangible of all realities, death:

‘Tis not due yet; I would be loath to pay him before his day. What need I be so forward with him that calls not on me? Well, ‘tis no matter; honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour pricks 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. (5.1.127-41)

In his metaphorical descriptions of honour as ‘air’ and also a ‘scutcheon’ (funeral banner), Falstaff makes clear his rejection of this abstract notion in favour of self-preservation.

So, it appears the world of King Henry IV Part 1 is one lacking in relevant, inherently modern (that is, practical) notions of honour; a world floundering under the misrule of a ‘counterfeit’ king and various rebellious factions.

Cue Hal: a future king who points to a more inclusive, compassionate and honourable leadership style boasting emotional intelligence and an ‘everyman’ quality distinctly lacking in his father. Evident in this portrait is Shakespeare’s vision of a ‘modern’ political animal, one not without heart, but with an ability to don the appropriate clothes, and language, to suit the occasion.
In the tavern scene of 2.4 we learn of Hal’s expertise in ingratiating through language, and we cannot help but hear the calculation of the soliloquy in 1.2 which introduced a knack for performance:

I have sounded the very base-string of humility. Sirrah, I am sworn brother to a leash of drawers; and can call them all by their christen names, as Tom, Dick, and Francis. They take it already upon their salvation, that though I be but the prince of Wales, yet I am king of courtesy; and tell me flatly I am no proud Jack, like Falstaff, but a Corinthian, a lad of mettle, a good boy, by the Lord, so they call me, and when I am king of England, I shall command all the good lads in Eastcheap. They call drinking deep, dyeing scarlet; and when you breathe in your watering, they cry ‘hem!’ and bid you play it off. To conclude, I am so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour, that I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life. I tell thee, Ned, thou hast lost much honour, that thou wert not with me in this sweet action. (2.4.5-21)

The prince’s removal of his own name from the well-worn phrase ‘Tom, Dick and Harry’ is significant, in that it acknowledges his ‘otherness’, his exclusion from a class to which he seems determined to become a ‘sworn brother’. There also seems a hint of condescension in his claim to have ‘sounded the very base-string of humility’ by fraternising with ‘a leash of drawers’, and it is hard to stomach the ambition of the line ‘when I am king of England’ when it is paired with the boastful claim to have mastered ‘so good’ the tinker’s own language ‘in one quarter of an hour’. We might ask if this future king is any more able than his father to rule with humility...

And yet it also seems wrong to conclude that this behaviour is nothing more than cynical or conceited manipulation—does he not love these ‘brother[s]’, these ‘good lads’? Is his relationship with Falstaff and other inhabitants of this world not built on a foundation of genuine familiarity and brotherly affection? (Certainly, his willingness to ‘gild [a lie] with the happiest terms’ on Falstaff’s behalf in 5.5 would suggest so.) And is it not a good thing for a king to know, perhaps even love, his people?

In her chapter on *King Henry IV Part 1* in ‘Shakespeare After All’, critic Marjorie Garber takes this spirit of generosity further in pointing out that Hal is directly compared to Jesus Christ throughout the play. In her view, this comparison stresses both Hal’s royal powers of redemption and his human heart:

Prince Hal is not the first princely son to be rebuked for associating with thieves and murderers. In a play that draws strongly on biblical typology, he is both implicitly and explicitly compared to Christ—who defended the woman taken in adultery, who took common fishermen for his disciples, who washed the disciples’ feet and urged the rich to sell all they had and give the money to the poor, who dined with publicans and sinners. Hal becomes one of the people, as Christ descended to Earth, to learn about them, to instruct them, and to redeem them. Where Bolingbroke, Hal’s father, wooed the common people as a calculated act (“Off goes his bonnet to an oysterwench”), Hal’s wooing, though in a sense no less calculated, is much closer to an act of love. Like all the most successful monarchs—including Queen Elizabeth—he is a master of role-playing. (pp. 334–5)
In order to become ‘one of the people … to learn about them’, it is necessary to embrace their language. Hal’s willingness to do so sits in stark contrast to Hotspur’s impatience and deficiency on this front—consider the latter’s humorous but insensitive rejection of Glendower’s Welsh heritage in their argument about property division in 3.1:

Hot. I’ll have it so, a little charge will do it.
Glen. I’ll not have it altered.
Hot. Will not you?
Glen. No, nor you shall not.
Hot. Who shall say me nay?
Glen. Why, that will I.
Hot. Let me not understand you then, speak it in Welsh.
Glen. I can speak English, lord, as well as you,
For I was trained up in the English court,
Where being but young I framed to the harp
Many an English ditty lovely well,
And gave the tongue a helpful ornament –
A virtue that was never seen in you.

Hot. Marry and I am glad of it with all my heart!
I had rather be a kitten and cry ‘mew’
Than one of these same metre ballad-mongers.
I had rather hear a brazen canstick turned,
Or a dry wheel grate on the axle-tree,
And that would set my teeth nothing on edge,
Nothing so much as mincing poetry:
’Tis like the forced gait of a shuffling nag. (3.1.111-129)

Hotspur’s hilarious but harsh transfiguration of the Welshman’s ‘English ditty’ into ‘mincing poetry … like the forced gait of a shuffling nag’ indicates (aside from a healthy dose of snobbery!) his refusal to embrace language, in all its forms, as a political tool. This flaw is again accentuated in 5.2, before the Battle of Shrewsbury—Hotspur has no time to read the letters that come on the eve of the conflict, and his declaration of ‘I profess not talking’ seals his fate as ill-suited to the modern world of political compromise and negotiation which Hal will soon control.

It can be argued, then, that although Hal’s performances are calculated and contrived, they constitute a necessary form of ‘grooming’ for the office of honourable kingship, a way of working through the expectations of a monarch through a process of education and identity formation. Hal seems to understand that kingship is, in many ways, a public form of role-playing; an abstract ideal to which a mortal human can only strive, as best they can. In his tavern education and transformation, we see a future leader striving to achieve a form of honour in his own playing out, his own performance, of this ideal.

**The problem of Falstaff**

If Hal’s transformation forms the main dramatic thrust of this production, the character of Falstaff can certainly lay claim to providing the comedic heart. So much of the play’s humour (and there is plenty of it) is found in this man’s bawdy yet sharp wit, exaggeration and misrule. In his inspiration for this character Shakespeare seems to have cast the net wide, combining the well-known medieval morality play figure of Vice with other playful theatrical archetypes such as the Clown, the Jester and the Fool, to create a complex comic figure that occupies a unique position in the play.
Ultimately that position is outside, or beyond, the confines of morality and law; through Falstaff Shakespeare celebrates the human desires of rebellion and anarchy which are usually denied or controlled by ‘civilising’ influences. Enid Welsford describes this character’s captivating presence as follows:

... under the dissolving influence of [the Fool’s] personality the iron network of physical, social, and moral law, which enmeshes us from the cradle to the grave, seems—for the moment—negligible as a web of gossamer. The Fool does not lead a revolt against the law; he lures us into a region of the spirit where ... the writ does not run. (The Fool, 1935)

Falstaff can also be seen to embody the ‘spirit of carnival’, as defined by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, carnival represented:

...the second life of the people, who for a time entered into the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance. (Rabelais and His World, 1965)

In its celebration of indulgence, or the ‘playing holidays’ and ‘sport’ of Hal’s famous soliloquy in 1.2, carnival draws attention to the physical body and all of its associated functions. From this, it is not hard to see how Falstaff fits the picture—the ‘whoreson round man’, the ‘fat paunch’, is a physical expression of the ‘abundance’ aspect of carnival, and in his generosity of frame he symbolises a rejection of restraint.

It is Falstaff’s ‘abundance’ of spirit, along with the other positive carnival qualities of ‘community, freedom, equality’ on display in his world, which provides so much joy for audiences. We do not laugh at Falstaff merely because he is overweight; we marvel at the sense of reckless abandon and indulgence that has produced such a waistline, knowing that to indulge similarly ourselves would be devilish, beyond the bounds of social decorum and restraint.

The world of the tavern offers up the remaining carnival qualities. For example, there is ‘community’ in the genial, intimate banter amongst Hal, Falstaff and Poins:

Poins. ... If you will go, I will stuff your purses full of crowns: if you will not, tarry at home and be hanged.
Fal. Hear ye, Yedward, if I tarry at home and go not, I'll hang you for going.
Poins. You will, chops?
Fal. Hal, wilt thou make one?
Fal. There's neither honesty, manhood, nor good fellowship in thee, nor thou cam'st not of the blood royal, if thou darest not stand for ten shillings.
Prince. Well then, once in my days I'll be a madcap.
Fal. Why, that's well said. (1.2.127-39)

Then there is ‘freedom’ from time and lawfulness in the rebellious identity these men have established for themselves. Pitted in opposition to the order symbolised by the light of day, Falstaff and Hal stake their claim to being ‘squires of the night’s body’ and ‘the moon’s men’ respectively. Our initial perspective of them is of idle, lawless thieves cloaking their misrule under the blanket of night:

Fal. Marry then sweet wag, when thou art king let not us that are squires of the night’s body be called thieves of the day’s beauty: let us be Diana’s foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon; and let men say we be men of good government, being governed as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal.
Prince. Thou sayest well, and it holds well too, for the fortune of us that are the moon’s men doth ebb and flow like the sea, being governed as the sea is, by the moon—as for proof now, a purse of gold most resolutely snatched on Monday night, and most dissolutely spent on Tuesday morning, got with swearing ‘Lay by!’, and spent with crying ‘Bring in!’, now in as low an ebb as the foot of the ladder, and by and by in as high a flow as the ridge of the gallows. (1.2.23-38)

And of course, there is a form of ‘equality’ in the simple fact of Hal’s presence in this tavern world. Falstaff’s ‘when thou art king’ above is a clever reminder, in this moment of wicked merriment, that Hal will indeed one day be England’s head of state. His present mischief-making as one of ‘the moon’s men’ offers up a rebuke
of the sober and regimented subservience demanded by his father’s reign, blurring (if only temporarily) the boundaries between work and play, rule and misrule.

And yet Falstaff is much more than a source of idle merriment for theatre audiences, with his deviousness and self-interest making for uncomfortable viewing at times. At odds with the positive carnival elements outlined above lie his more sinister traits, seemingly derived from the Vice figure of medieval Morality drama. Although the Morality tradition might have seemed a little old fashioned to Renaissance audiences at the Globe theatre, its key components remained familiar. When Hal refers to Falstaff as ‘that reverend vice, that grey iniquity, that father ruffian, that vanity in years’ (2.4.447-9) and a few lines later as ‘That villainous abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan’ (456-7) a dark subtext of cold subversiveness is made clear. At this moment Shakespeare clearly associates Falstaff with the allegorical figures Vanity and Iniquity, the Vice who serves Satan.

These more sinister elements of character come out most clearly in the play’s latter stages, particularly during the Battle of Shrewsbury where honour is put to the test. As we have seen, Falstaff rejects honour outright in his humorous ‘catechism’ on the subject; yet his dishonourable qualities run deeper than this famous speech and we are encouraged to view his attitudes and actions at war as condemnable.

To put it differently: we are aligned with honour and duty and pitted against the world of misrule and carnival—urged to support Hal, who is moving out from behind ‘the base contagious clouds’ of his soliloquy of 1.2 and away from his fellow ‘moon’s men’ to become ‘the sun’ that he must ‘imitate’ as king. This alignment is achieved in part through Hal’s heroism and benevolence at war, but also through juxtaposition with Falstaff’s callousness.

Consider Falstaff’s soliloquy in 4.2, where he reveals his shameless breach of the responsibility he bears for raising troops in King Henry’s name. He has accepted bribes from citizens who are reluctant to fight, and is left only with ‘slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth... the cankers of a calm world’:

If I be not ashamed of my soldiers, I am a soused gurnet. I have misused the King's press damnably. I have got, in exchange of a hundred and fifty soldiers, three hundred and odd pounds. I press me none but good householders, yeomen's sons; inquire me out contracted bachelors, such as had been asked twice on the banns; such a commodity of warm slaves—as had as lief hear the devil as a drum, such as fear the report of a caliver worse than a struck fowl or a hurt wild duck. 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 servingmen, younger sons to younger brothers, revolted tapsters, and ostlers trade-fallen, the cankers of a calm world and a long peace, ten times more dishonorable-ragged than an old feazed ancient; and such have I to fill up the rooms of them that 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. (4.2.11-36)

His exploitation of these desperate men is made all the more evident in the subsequent dialogue with Hal, where a chilling lack of compassion is conveyed in his willingness to ‘toss’ them into the jaws of death as ‘food for powder’:

Prince. … but tell me, Jack, whose fellows are these that come after?
Fal. Mine, Hal, mine.
Prince. I did never see such pitiful rascals.
Fal. 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 men. (4.2.61-7)

Sure enough ‘they’ll fill a pit’, and Falstaff’s tendency toward self-preservation rather than courage or honour is all too brazen in his curt acknowledgement of the men’s sacrifice on the battlefield in Act Five:

I am as hot as molten lead, and as heavy too: God keep lead out of me, I need no more weight than mine own bowels. I have led my ragamuffins where they are peppered; there’s not three of my hundred and fifty left alive, and they are for the town’s end, to beg during life. But who comes here? (5.3.33-9)
Overall, in this complex mixture of comedy and sin, humour and immorality, joviality and self-interest, Falstaff becomes a destabilising force in the play. He is difficult to read at times, and almost impossible to pigeonhole: his selfishness is always apparent, yet his spirit of friendship is generous; he plays the fool, but his wit is unparalleled; he is a troublemaker and degenerate, yet sought for at a time of national crisis; he leads men into danger on the battlefield, yet shuns honour himself. And, as with the Percy rebellion yet in a very different way, he constitutes a threat to the king’s authority.

Finally, despite their close bond—one which seems more compassionate than that shared between the king and Hal—Falstaff represents a source of tension for the prince. This conflict stems from the conventional position of man in the Morality drama tradition: between competing instincts toward good (the ‘rusty curb of old father Antic the law’, as Falstaff dismissively describes it on line 59 of 1.2), and evil (the characteristics that Falstaff embodies in his rebellion against authority, his indulgence and his dishonesty).

Hal’s ‘education’, therefore, becomes a case of first learning what it is that this world of misrule can offer him—perhaps love, friendship, humility—and then rejecting its immorality in order to re-enter the world of law and order as its future head. In The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare’s History Plays, author Warren Chernaik summarises the complexity of Hal’s predicament and sacrifice as follows:

> For the future King of England, to ‘banish plump Jack’ is a necessity, personal and political. But to do so is, as Shakespeare strongly suggests, to ‘banish all the world’, to cut off an entire area of experience, to opt for emotional poverty rather than wealth, to banish part of himself, forsaking love for the pursuit of power. (p. 134)

The ‘emotional poverty’ Chernaik mentions here is clear in the lack of connection between Henry IV and Hal as father and son. The former’s public declaration of his admiration of Hotspur in 1.1 as ‘sweet Fortune’s minion and her pride’, and his desire that ‘some night-tripping fairy had exchanged’ the two youths is telling of the cold detachment that haunts his reign as king. By contrast, there is a warmth and intimacy to the bond between Falstaff and Hal which in many ways replaces the biological father/son relationship.

The initially jovial, then increasingly tense tavern ‘play-acting’ sequence in 2.4 nicely captures the changing nature of Hal and Falstaff’s connection across the two Henry IV plays: whilst their bond is clearly genuine and forged through intimacy, it must end if Hal is to accept his place in time as a ‘lawful’ King Henry V. Hal’s chilling and perfunctory end to the tavern performance (appropriately in the role of his father, the king) is confirmation of this sad outcome:

---

**Fal.** But to say I know more harm in him than in myself, were to say more than I know. That he is old, the more the pity, his white hairs do witness it; but that he is, saving your reverence, a whoremaster, that I utterly deny. If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked! If to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old host that I know is damned: if to be fat be to be hated, then Pharaoh’s lean kine are to be loved. No, my good lord; banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poins: but for sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff, and therefore more valiant, being, as he is, old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry’s company, banish not him thy Harry’s company: banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.

**Prince.** I do. I will. (2.4.453-66)

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**THE problem of Hotspur**

The other key source of tension for Hal lies with his dramatic opposite, the valiant and courageous-to-a-fault young Henry ‘Hotspur’ Percy. The familiar name is appropriate—he is a figure so clearly cast in the old heroic mould, driven by an at times wild desire for immortal glory, and it is this drive and hotheadedness which proves his undoing.
Shakespeare seems to suggest that, whilst Hotspur’s epic code of honour is inspirational and even admirable in its rigidity (unlike the slippery politicking of Henry’s court), it is ultimately an out-dated form which will be superseded by Hal’s more modern brand of leadership. Hotspur is heroic, idealistic and brave, but he lacks the political judgement required of a leader in this new age of pragmatism and expediency. Hotspur’s worth is established early, with even the disgruntled king acknowledging the valiant young man’s courage despite being denied his political prisoners:

\[
\text{Yea, there thou mak'st me sad, and mak'st me sin}
\]
\[
\text{In envy that my Lord Northumberland}
\]
\[
\text{Should be the father to so blest a son;}
\]
\[
\text{A son who is the theme of honour's tongue,}
\]
\[
\text{Amongst a grove the very straightest plant,}
\]
\[
\text{Who is sweet Fortune's minion and her pride;}
\]
\[
\text{Whilst I by looking on the praise of him}
\]
\[
\text{See riot and dishonour stain the brow}
\]
\[
\text{Of my young Harry. O that it could be prov'd}
\]
\[
\text{That some night Tripping fairy had exchang'd}
\]
\[
\text{In cradle-clothes our children where they lay,}
\]
\[
\text{And call'd mine Percy, his Plantagenet! (1.1.77-88)}
\]

Note the natural imagery which singles Hotspur out as ‘the very straightest plant’ in the ‘grove’. This establishes his moral fortitude and integrity, his adherence to a creed of idealistic heroism which seems at odds with the corrupt modern world of shifting loyalties inhabited by Henry IV. The fact that Shakespeare draws on an image of nature at this point suggests that he saw, perhaps, something very positive in this code of honour, however out of place it might seem in the shuffling new court.

This positive view is also evident in Hal’s subsequent admiration of Hotspur’s courage during the Battle of Shrewsbury:

\[
\text{Hot. O Harry, thou hast robbed me of my youth!}
\]
\[
\text{I better brook the loss of brittle life}
\]
\[
\text{Than those proud titles thou hast won of me;}
\]
\[
\text{They wound my thoughts worse than thine sword my flesh:}
\]
\[
\text{But thoughts, the slaves of life, and life, time's fool;}
\]
\[
\text{And time, that takes survey of all the world,}
\]
\[
\text{Must have a stop. O, I could prophesy,}
\]
\[
\text{But that the earthy and cold hand of death}
\]
\[
\text{Lies on my tongue: No, Percy, thou art dust,}
\]
\[
\text{And food for –}
\]

\[
\text{Prince. For worms, brave Percy. Fare thee well, great heart!}
\]
\[
\text{Ill-wear'd ambition, how much art thou shrunk!}
\]
\[
\text{When that this body did contain a spirit,}
\]
\[
\text{A kingdom for it was too small a bound;}
\]
\[
\text{But now two paces of the vilest earth}
\]
\[
\text{Is room enough. This earth that bears thee dead}
\]
\[
\text{Bears not alive so stout a gentleman. (5.4.76-92)}
\]

The word ‘stout’ on line 92 means valiant; this in conjunction with the words ‘brave’ and ‘great’, and the acknowledgement that an entire ‘kingdom’ could not contain Hotspur’s ‘spirit’ in life, renders Hal’s admiration obvious. Consider also Hotspur’s speech: he seems more perturbed by the fact that Hal has robbed him of his ‘proud titles’ (that is, his name and honour) than of ‘life’ itself, confirming his strict adherence to
an outmoded code of heroism. Note also his reference to being ‘time's fool’ and the exclamation ‘O, I could prophesy’; this is the language of a medieval world, undone by its modern heir.

This rivalry between the two men can be seen as part of Hal's process of discovering his own form of honour, one more suited to a modern political realm. Perhaps this new form is less chivalrous, but certainly it is more flexible; it may be less proud and more selfless, yet it is perhaps also less heroic.

As is so often the case with Shakespeare, the reality remains complex.

Questions for discussion and student writing

1. If Renaissance theatre offered up opportunity for remembrance and reflection, what might Shakespeare have wanted his audiences to consider in Henry IV Part 1? Create a bullet-point list, or a mind map, of the play's central concerns and preoccupations.

2. In a coherent paragraph, explain Shakespeare's use of time as a motif in Henry IV Part 1.

3. Critic and scholar E. M. W. Tillyard once described Hal as ‘the abstract Renaissance conception of the perfect ruler’. Explain what he might have meant by this, drawing on evidence from the play in support.

4. It is possible to read Hal as both ‘a cynical, manipulative Machiavel’ and ‘an earnest young man coming to terms with the responsibilities he will face as king’.
   a. Research the philosopher Machiavelli and explain what is meant by the term ‘machiavellian’.
   b. Create a two-column table and compile evidence under each interpretation outlined above.
   Then, write a paragraph to justify your preferred reading.

5. Using King Henry IV and Hal as your examples, explain the different conceptions of leadership offered up by Shakespeare in this play.

6. Summarise the different conceptions of honour that Shakespeare establishes in his characterisation of King Henry IV, Hal, Hotspur and Falstaff.

7. It is often suggested that this play consists of four distinct ‘worlds’, or world views, characterised by different values and behaviours. Identify these worlds and explain what differentiates them.

8. How does Shakespeare use the idea of language to explore some of this play's concerns? Draw on evidence from the play in support.


10. List the similarities and differences between Hal and Hotspur. What ideas does Shakespeare raise through this dramatic pairing?

11. How does Shakespeare use imagery and symbolism to convey some of the play's central concerns? Draw on evidence from the play in support.

12. How does Shakespeare draw on the conventions of theatre to achieve particular dramatic impacts in the play? Use specific detail from the play in support.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. ‘Despite Shakespeare’s attempts to establish Hal's heroism, the prince remains first and foremost a dishonest exploiter of others.’ Do you agree?

2. ‘Despite being pitted in dramatic opposition to one another, Hal and Hotspur have little in common.’ Do you agree?

3. ‘Despite his obvious faults, Falstaff's audience appeal is undeniable.’ Discuss.

4. ‘Shakespeare’s Falstaff is loved by audiences because he conveys the wealth and complexity of human experience.’ Discuss.

5. ‘Shakespeare’s Henry IV Part 1 shows that leadership demands great personal sacrifice.’ Discuss.

6. ‘The world of Henry IV Part 1 is plagued by disorder and self-interest.’ Discuss.

7. ‘There is no room for honour in the expedient political realm of King Henry IV.’ Do you agree?

8. How does Shakespeare highlight the disparity between reality and appearances in Henry IV Part 1?
Acknowledgements

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