

*HENRY IV, PARTS ONE AND TWO***Comment**

Taken together these two history plays are as rich as anything Shakespeare ever gave us. Here is a two-part play with everything: a little romance, a little magic, a big battle scene, a 16th-century version of the gunfight in *High Noon*, plenty of larceny, some treachery, great gobs of politics, some tragedy, and the greatest comic figure in the history of the stage, and yet the two plays are challenging to teach.

For one thing, the very variety of Part One foils readers looking for a single strong narrative thread. Instead of one story, they get four: the story of King Henry IV trying to hold onto his kingdom against the claims of former friends, the story of Hotspur trying to defend his honor, the story of Prince Hal trying to grow up, and the story of Falstaff trying to enjoy life. For another thing, the language of the play shifts back and forth from the formality of the King's English to the inventiveness of the language in the Boar's Head Tavern. The challenge of colloquialisms is compounded in *Henry IV* by the speed and whimsy of John Falstaff. And that's main obstacle between my students and the play(s): they have a hard time seeing what's so funny about Falstaff on the page, and it's hard to sell *1 and 2 Henry IV* without the charm of Falstaff. The ploys you will find below wrestle with these three difficulties.

The first problem in teaching *Henry IV*, however, is that it is one work but two plays. Like Coppola's *Godfather*, Part One is something of a joy ride, and though we don't like losing Hotspur, well, it's a matter of turf; but Part Two is, despite the emergence of a powerful leader, about disintegration. You can teach *1 Henry IV* by itself (and it is frequently anthologized in that way), but to do so is to finish only the story of Hotspur and to leave the stories of the King, the Prince, and the fat knight in mid-stream. And even if students can grasp the fun of Falstaff in Part One; the story of the King and the Prince do not crystallize until Part Two, where Shakespeare resolves the conflict between them.

Nor can anyone see Falstaff clearly until Hal turns him away at the end of Part Two. Not until then do we see fully—despite the hints that Shakespeare has given us—the vulnerable man who has always been there. So I urge you to show your students the full scope of the story of Hal and his father, and of Hal and his fat, old friend.

I must add that no other work in the canon is so relevant to the concerns of your students as *1 Henry IV*. I agree with Stephen Booth that English teachers should not “lie” to our students about why we love the plays by teaching them as sociology, political theory, or moral philosophy. Nonetheless, without any fudging you will be teaching a work about big things in your students' lives, the same things that mattered to you and will matter to their children: loving and hating parents, becoming someone separate from them, juggling the demands of friendship and position, winning success and respect, learning to be a good person. No play in the canon has a better right to be in a college curriculum.

From the first scene of the play, *1 Henry IV* is a struggle between father and son. Without coaching, many of my students bridle at the King's wish

...that it could be proved
 that some night-tripping fairy had exchanged
 in cradle clothes our children where they lay,
 and called mine Percy, his Plantaganet! (1.1.85-88)

As one of my students said, “That’s harsh. What parent wants to trade children?” Henry himself recognizes that he sins “in envy,” and the pain he feels about his son Hal is clear in the way that he suddenly brings up the subject and just as abruptly leaves it: “but let him from my thoughts” (90). What is also clear is that no matter what sort of face Henry puts on it, his son is always on his mind. This central situation in the play resonates throughout the play and Shakespeare makes a scene between the father and the son central to each of the two parts of *Henry IV*. In Part One, Shakespeare underscores that scene by having a mock rehearsal in preparation for it; and in Part Two, Shakespeare sees to it that the big father and son scene is no less than the passing of the crown from King Henry IV to King Henry V.

How many of your students have worried about an encounter with an angry father? In Act Two, scene 4, of Part One Hal, knowing he must face his angry father, takes Falstaff’s advice to “practice an answer,” and the two of them put on an impromptu play for the denizens of the Boar’s Head Tavern. Falstaff plays the King (apparently quite well, because Mistress Quickly applauds how “he holds [the King’s] countenance”), and Hal pretends to answer to him for his whereabouts. Although Falstaff’s improvised speech to Hal is in the form of a stern fatherly lecture, Falstaff adds two surprising touches. First, he appears to weep (“for Harry, I do not speak to thee in drink, but in tears” [410-411]), and then, having dispensed with business (telling his son to banish everyone but Falstaff), he turns affectionate and says, “tell me now, thou naughty varlet, tell me where hast thou been this month?” (2.4.425-426). At this point, the Prince objects to Falstaff’s performance, “dost thou speak like a king?” and takes the part of his father himself.

Falstaff has to play the Prince, and Hal, as Henry IV, in this alternative staging, deals much more harshly with his son: “Henceforth ne’er look on me” (2.4.439-440). Thus Shakespeare gives us two previews of the scolding that Hal is going to get from his father—in Falstaff’s version father’s love wins out over king’s law, but in Hal’s version the reverse is true. When, two scenes later, the real interview takes place, imagine Hal’s surprise when his father behaves exactly as Falstaff predicted:

Not an eye
 but is weary of thy common sight,
 save mine, which hath desired to see thee more,
 which now doth that I would not have it do --
 make blind itself with foolish tenderness. (3.2.87-91)

What King Henry says here is that he is so happy to see his son that he is crying. Little wonder that the Prince is astonished into a one-sentence reply: “I shall hereafter, my thrice-gracious lord, be more myself” (92-93). You are by no means pushing too hard for

connections when you ask your students to consider in light of this scene their own assumptions about their parents' feelings for them.

The ultimate scene between father and son in Part Two draws together and resolves the conflict between these two characters by putting the worst suspicion of the parent—that he is unloved by the child—in the context of the parent's death. In effect, Henry gets to come back from the dead and see how his son has responded to his death. What he sees, or thinks he sees, is his worst nightmare: his son departed from his sickbed and already wearing his crown. When Hal, re-entering the chamber sees his father living, he says, "I never thought to hear you speak again" (4.5.91) and the bitter father replies, "Thy wish was father, Harry, to that thought" (92). He tells Hal,

thy life did manifest thou lovedst me not,
and thou will have me die assured of it...
What! canst thou not forbear me half an hour?
Then get thee gone and dig my grave thyself,
and bid the merry bells ring to thine ear
that thou are crownèd, not that I am dead.... (4.5.104-114)

And in this extreme bitterness Henry links the kind of king his son will be to his apparent scorn for his father: "Pluck down my officers, break my decrees, for now a time is come to mock at form" (117-118).

Shakespeare has conflated the two issues of sonship and kingship. If Hal puts to rest his father's fear that he does not love him, he will also put to rest his father's fear over Hal's career as King. We, of course, know the truth because we saw how Hal took the crown, but the Prince must replay the scene for his father. Now it is his turn to prove his love with his tears. He he gives back the crown. And then he too links the issue of his being a good son to that of his being a good king:

God witness with me, when I here came in,
and found no course of breath within your majesty,
how cold it struck my heart. If I do feign,
o, let me in my present wildness die
and never live to show the incredulous world
the noble change that I have purposed. (149-154)

The Prince's explanation wins King Henry completely: "God put it in thy mind to take [the crown] hence, that thou mightst win the more thy father's love" (178). Surely one point of these two powerful scenes is that father and son—parent and child—love each other more than they have communicated, and just as surely your students will recognize and understand the deep needs and fears underlying these scenes.

Beyond the matter of fathers and sons, parents and children, the two parts of *Henry IV* thoroughly explore another concern of new and pre-adults: the competing claims of friendship and responsibility, fun and work. Falstaff is the weeknight party that stands

between your students and their homework; he is a Grateful Dead concert; he is a Mallorca Beach; he is cutting school to get high, get wasted, or get laid. But, being those things, he is also the sweetness in life, that part of life when we are most alive. The homework, the attendance, the job may get us success, but we don't reminisce about the work we did in study hall. But Falstaff is more than expressed libido or the joy of inertia; he is the pleasures of friendship and the savoring of life, and we must wonder if such pleasures are ever a waste of time. In some fundamental way, Falstaff's playacting plea to Hall—"Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world!" (*IH4* 2.4.473-474)—is more than boastful hyperbole: it is the truth. *Henry IV* is about the choice young people must make between enjoying where they are and getting where they want to go.

Finally, in teaching *Henry IV* you will be teaching a play that asks two related questions: "what does it mean to grow up?" and "what does it mean to be a good man?" In part, the character of Hotspur—obsessed with "honor"—and, to some degree, the characters of Hal and Henry teach us that in order for a man to be good, he has to realize that the pursuit of "manliness" can be at odds with the pursuit of goodness. In Latin the distinction I am getting at is clearer in the words *virtus*—courage, strength, honesty, patriotism—and *humanitas*—generosity, love, patience, community. Shakespeare, in comparing different types of men, shows ambitiousness at the expense of the home, honor at the expense of sense, competition at the expense of life. In the *Henry IV* plays, women—and the values of *humanitas* they represent—are the silent reproof that view. Shakespeare makes them important by their absence, and when they *do* appear, they are there to represent the values of love (Lady Percy to her husband), generosity (Mistress Quickly to Falstaff), and harmonious community (Lady Mortimer singing to her husband).

Who are the grown-ups in this play and who are the good men? We see these questions through the character of the Prince, who must choose between the models before him. King Henry IV is careworn and well intentioned, but he is certainly not at peace with himself, and all his good intentions come in second to his ambitions. Hotspur is brave and may be at peace with himself, but in his combativeness with the world (even with his wife) he is no grown-up, nor is he good. And then there is Falstaff—lying, thieving, cheating, rutting Falstaff. Falstaff, of course, is bad and has never grown-up. Of course.

Why then do we feel so much wisdom in him? We know somehow that if we combed both plays with a "mettle" detector, if we had an instrument to measure spirit and tenderness, if we could calibrate the fullness of the living, then the needle would jump farthest when Falstaff comes on stage. When Hal rejects Falstaff, he does so in order to turn away his "former self" as part of "the noble change [he] has purposed," and we are to understand that he is putting away the "courses of his youth" and growing up. Yet with that understanding comes the unmistakable sense that the banishment of Falstaff is not just a loss, it is an emptying. Somehow the good king, the grown-up who defines himself by turning away Falstaff diminishes the meaning of goodness and of growing up.

PLOYS

A. The Falstaff Contest

Prep: Auditions in prior class; finding props
In class: 30-40 minutes
“Volunteers”: 4 Falstaffs (2 men, 2 women)
Scripts: Each Falstaff brings 2-3 min speech from 1 or 2 Henry IV
Props: Mugs, gallon of cider or other beverage, mop; students each bring a quarter, dime, nickel, and penny

As my comments suggest, Sir John Falstaff is the heart of the two plays, but he is hard for students to grasp on the page. That may be because the essence of Falstaff is improvisation, not just of what he says but of how he

says it. Like athleticism, comic greatness is partly a matter of timing, and enjoying Falstaff on the page is like trying to learn tennis from an instruction book. To help students get the fun of this character, I suggest a Falstaff Contest, to use before you begin discussion of the play.

- (1) Hold “auditions” for the contest by calling all the boys to the front of the class.
- (2) Have them walk across the “stage” one by one, and, as they go by, have the girls applaud to indicate their choices. You become a human “applausometer.”
- (3) Important: To mute the tendency of students to applaud for their heavier classmates, stress at the beginning of “auditions” that the main requirement for being a good Falstaff is to be the life of the party.
- (4) Choose the six or seven boys who evoke the loudest response, and have them go through a run-off from which you choose two.
- (5) Then, while the girls in your classroom are in mid-giggle about what’s happening to the boys, announce that your casting is gender blind, send the boys back to their seats, and put the girls through the same process.
- (6) Now tell your four Falstaffs that they are to choose any speech of Falstaff—not to exceed two minutes—and prepare to read it in the next class. Tell them that they need not memorize the speech nor wear a costume nor bring a prop, but that they can do any or all of those things if they wish.
- (7) Tell the class that they are required to bring four coins—a quarter, a dime, a nickel, and a penny—and that 41¢ is the price of admission to the class show.
- (8) On the day of the contest, clear as large an area as you can in front of the class and have your contestants come forward.
- (9) Surprise them by explaining that to get into the spirit of the thing (and to decide the order of the presentations) you think a chugging contest is in order, for the which you have brought the requisite number of mugs and the appropriate beverage to chug (cider works fine). Ask for two volunteer timers, and instruct the class to pull for their favorites. The point here is to lower inhibitions, so you should create as much spillage as possible by rushing your chuggers. Whatever the outcome, pretend you can’t be sure of the results, *and have them do it again.*
- (10) The winner of the chugging contest then gets to name the order of the presentation.

- (11) Let each student give his or her two-minute performance (stop them if they go over the limit).
- (12) When they have all finished, have them spread out in front of the class with at least an arm's length between them. Your students are to vote by tossing coins to—not at—their favorite Falstaffs—a quarter for the best, a dime for second place, and so on. Your Falstaffs will have to scramble to gather up their money. (In a class of 30, a good Falstaff can pick up a quick five dollars and there will always be the odd nickel underneath the desk for the deserving teacher.)

Clearly, this exercise has the seeds of chaos in it. Good. You want to put your students in a Falstaffian frame of mind, to make them forget that they are in a class. When the exercise is over, they will have had a crash course in Falstaff by laughing at and with a handful of Falstaffs whom they know—whom they chose. Meanwhile, you can, if you wish, use the rest of the class period or the next class for discussion with your four Falstaffs as panelists. Why did they choose their particular passage? What did they think was their best line? What did the students think was the best line? Was there a common theme linking the speeches of the four Falstaff contestants?

Instead of discussing a section of text, your students will be discussing—with your new “experts”—speeches they have heard in the flesh.

B. The Front Page of the *Shrewsbury News*

Prep: Prior class intro

Homework: writing

In class: 50 min -- 20 group work, 30 reading/discussion

As a way of clarifying the various strands of plot in *1 Henry IV*, have the class compose page one of an imaginary *Shrewsbury News* for the morning after the Battle of Shrewsbury.

- (1) Begin by deciding how many stories there are to tell. Your class may decide, for example, that these are the stories to tell:
 - a) Hotspur killed; Lady Percy disconsolate
 - b) Worcester causes unnecessary battle
 - c) John Falstaff claims heroic action
 - d) Prince Hal fights valiantly
 - e) Prince John participates in battle
 - f) King Henry's forces prevail
 - g) Northumberland doesn't show for battle
 - h) Worcester and Vernon executed
 - i) Douglas captured and set free
- (2) Now assign a group to each of these stories. Each member of the group is to go home to write up his or her assigned story in three to four paragraphs of journalese—about 100 words—with a headline (they'll eventually hand these in to you).
- (3) At the next class, allow twenty minutes for the group to meet and collaborate on their final story.

- (4) Read each of the finished stories aloud.
- (5) Then turn the class into an “editorial” meeting in which, using the board, you compose the front page of the Shrewsbury News.

This exercise will force the students to decide on the importance of each story and on its relationship to the other stories. The main headline, for example, might read: KING’S FORCES TRIUMPH with a subheading like REBEL FORCES SMASHED AT SHREWSBURY. Below that perhaps would appear WORCESTER TREACHERY REVEALED, where they combine story (b) and story (h); and in another story with an equal positioning, HENRY “HOTSPUR” PERCY KILLED with two sub-headed stories: NOTORIOUS KNIGHT DISPUTES DETAILS and LADY PERCY BLAMES FATHER-IN-LAW, which combines story (a) and story (c).

SCENES FOR ALTERNATIVE READINGS

A. Lord and Lady Percy at Home. PART ONE, Act Two, scene three, 35 (“How now, Kate”) to 117 (“must of force”). Three speaking parts, and a letter Hotspur is holding.

Although this play overstuffeds with male preening and machismo that there is (as in Julius Caesar) little room for women, Shakespeare inserts one of the most engaging glimpses of marital life in all of his plays. In it, Hotspur is angrily reacting to a letter, when Lady Percy enters and questions him about his preoccupation with some business that has “banished” her from his bed and made him talk in his sleep of military matters. She ends her long opening speech to him (28 lines) by saying that if he does not tell her what business he’s obsessed with, he does not love her. Instead of answering her, he calls for a servant, gives him instructions about his horse, and when his wife presses him with, “hear you, my lord,” he asks, “what say’st thou, my lady?” as if she’d never spoken a word. She wants to be included in his life, and he objects that this is not the time.

This scene requires two strong actors; you can play the part of the servant. In your *first version* of this scene, have your Kate urgent and your Hotspur truly pre-occupied and oblivious to what she is saying. Let her be getting angry and him impatient. In this version it is hard to tell if he loves her, and she is clearly worried about it.

In your *second version*, have Kate in a humorous and teasing mood, and have Hotspur make it clear to the audience that he hears her but is pretending not to. To emphasize this idea you might have her pulling at his sleeve and him constantly turning away, but somewhere in the scene he embraces her warmly and tenderly. In this version it is easy to tell that he loves her, and that she is not really worried about it.

In a *third version*, let both be truly angry with, even threatening one another.

Discuss the impact of these three versions on the play. If Hotspur’s marriage is bad, how does that reflect on his other activities? on Hal? If Hotspur’s marriage is good, how does that reflect on his character and his activities? on Hal? What does this family scene have to do with the play in general?

B. Falstaff and Doll Tearsheet Alone and with Voyeurs. PART TWO, Act Two, scene four, 208 (“Ah, you whoreson little”) to 282 (“anon, anon, sir”). Four speaking parts.

In this scene, Falstaff, concerned about being loved and about getting old, is at his most vulnerable. He thinks he is alone with Doll Tearsheet, but Hal and Poins eavesdrop on the scene and ridicule the fat, old knight with a series of “asides.”

Explain to your actors that they are not “types”: Doll may be a prostitute and have a funny name, but she’s a smart woman who loves Falstaff. Start the scene by playing some romantic music you have on tape for the occasion (that choice will be fun to discuss later) and by saying the page’s line, “the music is come, sir” (225). In *the first version*, take out the Prince and Poins and do the scene as if Falstaff and Doll are indeed alone. Have your actors play the scene as warmly as possible, and have Doll take seriously and tenderly Falstaff’s fears of getting old.

Play *the second version* just like the first, but re-admit Hal and Poins to the scene, and have them play their asides contemptuously.

Now discuss with your students the different impact of the two scenes. Does the presence of Hal and Poins diminish or increase our sympathy for Falstaff? Are Hal and Poins funny? Does the scene diminish or increase our admiration for Hal? How does this prank compare with the Gadshill trick? Does Doll really love Falstaff? What influence does music have on the scene?

C. Taking Daddy’s Crown. PART TWO, Act Four, scene five, 19 (“I will sit”) to 46 (“left to me”), 138 (“O pardon me”) to 144 (“long guard it yours”). One speaking part, one reclining part, and one crown.

To give your students a sense of how important a prop can be, stage at least two variations of Hal taking and returning the crown. You will need a Henry on a bed (your desk will do nicely), a Hal who can act, and a crown. Begin the scene with Hal’s line, “I will sit and watch here by the King” (4.5.19) and then (omitting Hal’s exit) jump to line 138—“O, pardon me, my liege!”—as if the King wakes and Hal realizes he’s still alive and cut to 142 so that the scene ends with

There is your crown,
and He that wears the crown immortally
long guard it yours.

In *the first version* Hal does not even touch the crown until he says “Lo, where it sits” and puts it on his head. In this version, as soon as Hal sees that Henry is alive, he yanks the crown from his head and gives it back to his father—“O, Pardon me, my liege!” (138)—and when he says, “There is your crown” (142), it is already back in the king’s possession.

In *the second version* have Hal take the crown as he asks, “why doth the crown lie there upon his pillow?” (20). In this version, Hal faces the audience and speaks to the crown. When he examines his father’s breath—“by his gates of breath” (30)—he does so for fear his father might wake up and see him with the crown, and when he thinks his father is dead—“this sleep is sound indeed” (34)—he immediately returns his attention to the crown

and away from the King. Finally, he gives back the crown when he begins the line, “there is your crown,” (142) but doesn’t take his hand from it until the line is finished.

Ask your students what other things might be done with the crown during those lines and try a *third version*. Discuss the implications of these all the versions. Ask the actor playing Hal which of the versions was more comfortable to play.

D. The Banishment of Falstaff. PART TWO, Act Five, scene five, 41 (“God save thy grace”) to 72 (“Set on”). Three speaking parts, including you as Chief Justice.

Your students must encounter this final scene in some form, and presenting it in class is the best way to offer it to them. This scene deserves reworking and discussing for an entire class, and I recommend that if you have the time, the space, and the patience, you do it from Falstaff’s entrance at line 5 all the way to his exit and put all the characters in. In this stripped down version, cut Pistol’s line, you play the Chief Justice, and have two good actors do Falstaff and King Harry. End the scene with the new King’s exit.

In *the first version*, Hal speaks softly to Falstaff and has trouble controlling his emotions. His words are harsh; his tone is hushed and even consoling.

In *the second version*, Hal never really looks at Falstaff. He speaks instead to the audience, and his tone is imperious and unyielding.

Open the floor to discussion or to alternative readings.

ON SCREEN

 ***1/2 Though I love Olivier’s *Henry V*, Orson Welles’s **1967** *Chimes at Midnight* is my favorite English language adaptation of Shakespeare because it succeeds more as movie. Welles has compressed the entire Falstaff and Hal story into one feature-length movie. To do that, he has chopped the text radically and rebuilt the story completely. Filmed in black and white near Avila, Spain, the movie has a stark un-English beauty, superb camerawork, and terrific acting in all the parts and particularly in Welles’s Falstaff, Keith Baxter’s Hal, and Maragaret Rutherford’s Mistress Quickly. The single most illuminating performance is Jeanne Moreau’s brilliant Dol Tearsheet. A re-mastered version that fixes the film’s terrible original soundtrack is now available on DVD, but you would do better to show this film to your students *after* they have read the play (always good policy).

 ☆ David Giles directed both parts of *Henry IV* in **1979** as part of the BBC series. He does a serviceable job of telling the story, and Anthony Quayle is clear—if a little lugubrious—with Falstaff’s language. Though he keeps the famous speeches, his excessive cutting elsewhere (necessary because of the excessive pauses) finally bleeds the life out of the two great plays—especially out of Part Two. Keep kids away from this one except to look at comparative clips.

 ☆☆ Ironically, Richard Eyre’s two *Henry IV* entries in the **2012** Hollow Crown series make us feel the weight of that crown, but do not sufficiently get at the joyous life force of the heavy man against which Hal must weight that crown. Simon Russell Beale brilliantly suggests the age of Falstaff—“I am old. I am old”—but not his agelessness or his dauntless

mirth, and Eyre's realistic depiction of a night in a flame-lit Boars Head aids and abets a dark portrait of fat Jack that will not endear him to your students. Like the rest of the series, these installments get high marks for the pacing and the look of film.