

## Elements of political and social protest writing: Text overview – *Henry IV Part 1*

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This overview shows how teachers can consider *Henry IV Part 1* in relation to the genre of political and social protest writing. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

### Overview

*Henry IV Part 1* begins and ends with political issues, and the play tells of various stories of men seeking to play or be the king. Rooted in historical fact, but veering from it for dramatic purposes, *Henry IV Part 1* also tells the story of Prince Hal who moves from the comic edge of the political world to his father's court at its centre.

### Being the king

In early 15th century Britain when this play is set, and in late 16th century Britain, when the play was written, kings had ultimate power, though they depended upon the support of the nobility if they wanted to retain that power. Wearing the crown, in many respects, was not easy.

*Henry IV Part 1* opens with an insight into the burdens of kingship, a kingship made more burdensome by Henry's usurpation; he is not king by divine right. Henry's opening speech is that of a man exhausted, worn down by the civil strife that resulted from his having taken the crown from his cousin, Richard II. His desire to seek atonement by going on a crusade to the Holy Land shows how heavily guilt lies upon him. But the unrest in his country – there is rebellion in Wales and Scotland – means that the crusade has to be postponed. The heavy weight of the crown is intensified when some of his former supporters, Northumberland, Hotspur and Worcester, now choose to oppose the king. Power seems to have been easier to take than to retain. Henry's problems are compounded by the apparent waywardness of his son, one who in comparison with the passionate Hotspur (the 'king of honour') is a grave disappointment, stained by 'riot and dishonour'. But Henry has a steely nerve and political acumen and he fights to save the crown that he wears. He uses his power to dismiss Worcester from court (Act 1 scene iii), to give his son a lesson in politics (Act 3 scene i), to publically offer reconciliation to his enemies (Act 4 scene iii), to buy himself time to prepare for battle (Act 5 scene i), to confuse his enemies at Shrewsbury by employing decoys (Act 5 scene iii) and to reward those who fight

loyally for him (Act 5 scene v). He is a king who can lead, be shrewd in his political manoeuvring and one who can be decisive in his actions.

## The King-makers

The Percys are an interesting group in that they were clearly instrumental in Henry's accession to the throne. For this reason, as events at the start of the play show, they believe they should receive privileges from the king and that their voices should be heard in the new government. Here Shakespeare is showing the political expectations and ambitions of king-makers in terms of their desire for personal advancement. When Henry refuses to pander to their demands, Worcester says, 'Our house, my sovereign liege, little deserves/ The scourge of greatness be us'd on it'.

However, after realising that Henry, though indebted to them is not to be manipulated now that he is king, they have another agenda. They want to be new king-makers. Hotspur wants to promote Mortimer, Richard's rightful heir ('I will lift the down-trod Mortimer/ As high in the air as this unthankful king'), though his father and uncle Worcester would clearly like to promote Hotspur – again to advance their own power. Owen Glendower also wants to topple the king, believing himself to be destined for greatness (cosmic portents, he claims, marked him 'extraordinary'). The king-makers are at the centre of the story, involved in plots and intrigue, ultimately amassing armies in their attempt to depose the king.

But Shakespeare shows that king-makers play a very dangerous game. Their actions and desires are borne of personal interest and they do not all have the same agenda. Dramatising their conflicts, Shakespeare shows that they are doomed to fail as trust and loyalty are seriously wanting. Worcester, for example, is clearly plotting against the king from the start though he repackages this to his brother and Hotspur as the need for self-preservation, and later when Henry offers a general pardon, Worcester insists that it is kept from Hotspur, because he fears that the king will forgive Hotspur whereas he, that is the spring of the rebellion, will pay for it. Northumberland and Glendower, meanwhile, fail to send armies to support Hotspur and thus the rebellion collapses. Hotspur pays with his life in battle and Worcester is executed. However, Northumberland and Glendower survive and are ready to rise again, bringing the promise of further bloodshed and instability to a troubled land.

## Playing at kings

In the play's comic sub-plot, Shakespeare offers another insight into what it means to be a king or to make kings. The comic plot offers a sharp parody of power politics. Falstaff is himself king of Eastcheap; The Boar's Head is his court and he is the king of lies and performance. His rule is governed by bullying, cheating and deceiving for his own ends. He also has plans for when his prodigy Hal becomes king of England. Under Hal's reign there will be no gallows and 'the rusty curb of old father Antic the law' will be abolished. Those that are 'squires

of the night's body' will not be called 'thieves', but 'men of good government, being governed, as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance [they] steal'. In his way, like the Percys, he wants power by association. Although he appears to have a genuine love for Hal, Falstaff uses him to bolster his own power amongst his comrades.

Shakespeare foregrounds the concept of playing at kings in the impromptu play Falstaff irreverently sets up to prepare Hal for the interview with Henry. Here the fat knight revels in using his chair as his state throne, his dagger as his sceptre and a cushion for his crown, debunking the ceremony and pomp of kingship. Hal plays the king differently. When he deposes Falstaff and impersonates his father, Hal is adept at reproducing the mannerisms, language and behaviour of a king. Clearly Shakespeare is preparing for Hal's later transformation.

## The king in waiting

For the first half of the play, Hal is a prince in name only. He is a man without a purpose. Shakespeare clearly creates Hal's change for dramatic impact: unlike Henry, Hotspur and Falstaff who do not develop, Hal moves physically and psychologically from the dissolute world of the tavern to the battle world of Shrewsbury. His development during the play, as he begins to cast off his surrogate father Falstaff to support his biological father Henry, is important in terms of the king that he is set to be, the king of Henry V who is 'full of grace and fair regard', the 'mirror of all Christian kings'.

Yet Hal's creation is complex. He is not a character who simply reforms. Even while seemingly enjoying the chaos of the tavern world, he shows an astute and perhaps disturbing political mind. In soliloquy he confesses to play acting, hiding behind the base contagious clouds only so that he can reveal himself more splendidly when his moment comes.

And when he plays the king in the extempore drama with Falstaff, he clinically sets out his future plan to cast off his fat friend. 'Banish poor Jack and banish all the world', Falstaff (as Hal) plaintively begs, to which Hal replies 'I do, I will'. In his interview with his father, where Henry accuses Hal of having lost his 'princely privilege/ With vile participation', Hal vows to change and hereafter to be more himself, and 'redeem all this on Percy's head'. Interestingly in promising this, he also sets himself up against the king pretender; Hotspur, the king of honour, will be made to exchange his 'glorious deeds' for Hal's 'indignities'. Hal's vow is realised in his defeat of Hotspur in the Battle of Shrewsbury where he wins all Percy's 'proud titles'.

## Power struggles

Political power, in the world of the play, is perhaps less about individuals and more about families, reflecting both Shakespeare's own world and the times about which he writes. While *Henry IV Part 1* dramatises a civil conflict, that conflict is specifically one of two powerful families. The Percys have helped

Henry to the throne and expect to be recompensed and honoured. At the start of the play there is evidence that since Richard's deposition, they have continued to work for him – Northumberland, Worcester and Hotspur sit in chamber and Hotspur has fought for him militarily. In return, they expect their opinions and interests to be privileged. Hotspur, for example, wants to keep the prisoners he took at the Battle of Holmedon. Their rebellion against Henry, therefore, is the rebellion of one aristocratic family against another. Although obedience to the king is expected there is also an understanding that rebellion is a way of negotiating, a way for the ruling classes to get themselves heard if the king thwarts them. Blunt is sent with a message from the king to the Percys to name their griefs and the king will support their 'desires with interest'. But the Percys' rebellion is, in real terms, an attempt to set up an alternative dynasty, to behave in the same way that Henry behaved in unseating Richard. Shakespeare is also keen to show that civil unrest has consequences beyond those of the leaders. The conflict between Henry and the Percys is not just a family squabble, it leads to war and death. Although dealt with comically, ordinary men are caught up in battle, men coerced into fighting, like Falstaff's rag bag of soldiers, of whom at the end 'not three of [the] hundred and fifty [are] left alive'.

## Honour and politics

Honour has clearly defined notions within the play and is inextricably linked with power. For Hal and Hotspur, honour means bravery in battle, especially in man to man combat. Honour is also linked to reputation and for Hotspur this is more important than anything, even life, an idea that Falstaff deflates in his catechism when he says it is a 'mere scutcheon'. Honour is central to Hotspur's identity and his very existence; it is certainly not just 'a word'. He believes that Henry is a liar and a murderer, a man who has cheated Mortimer and himself. While Hal, for the early part of the play, is dishonourable, he crops Hotspur's 'budding honours' and makes a 'garland' for his own head at Shrewsbury. But honour is also shown to be suspect. As Falstaff rhetorically asks of all who die or are wounded: 'Can honour set to a leg?...Will it live with the living?' Thus Shakespeare uses him to offer a sceptical perspective on the main political issues.

## Gender politics

Though women appear rarely in this play, their absence, and their presence when they do appear, says much about politics and power. There are no women in Henry's court, suggesting their lack of value in the minds of political men. When they are present – in Eastcheap or in the margins of the rebels' worlds – they do little that influences action (Mistress Quickly answers the door and hands out sack and Mortimer's wife sings). However, although they are marginalised, Lady Percy and Mortimer's wife show that the political world has far reaching consequences and that the private world of domesticity is darkened by the masculine concerns of politics. Kate suffers because her husband keeps alone. She wants to know of his plans because she fears for his safety and because she

loves him. He ignores her concerns, for though 'constant', she is 'yet a woman' and can only be trusted to not utter what she does not know. Both Kate and Mortimer's wife want to accompany their husbands to war but nothing comes of their attempts. The world of women is reduced to 'play[ing] with mammets' and 'tilt[ing] with lips.

## Resolution

The play ends with the defeat of the conspirators and the death of Hotspur. The rebels are defeated by the king's superior army but also by their inability to support each other. Northumberland fails to send an army and Glendower cannot 'draw his power for fourteen days'. However, although there is triumph for the king and his sons, there is no final celebration as another uprising is imminent, to be played out in *Henry IV Part 2*. Ultimately Shakespeare does not show politics in a very flattering light in this play. The king is tainted and the rebels who fight him are themselves stained by their complicity in Richard's death; they live 'scandalised and foully spoken of' 'in the world's wide mouth'. It might equally be said that all who are involved in power politics in *Henry IV Part 1* cannot be spoken of well.