

## The Modern Relevance of William Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*

William Shakespeare's historic play, *Henry IV, Part 1*, tells the story of the tense battle that Henry IV and those close to him go through in order to maintain his grip on the crown. The play is the second in a series of four history plays written by Shakespeare that center on the successive reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V. Written between the years 1596 and 1597, the play examines the tense psychological struggles the stressed King Henry experiences, both in relation to the uncertain state of his kingdom, as well as his testy relation with his rambunctious son, Hal. (Bevington 370) The well of Shakespeare's literary mind extends far deeper than that, however.

As is the case with most, if not all of Shakespeare's plays, there are myriad different levels and perspectives in which the viewer/reader can examine the story. *Henry IV, 1* is no different. Characters in this play are extremely multi-faceted, as Shakespeare utilizes his vast mastery of displaying the ups and downs of the human condition. For this reason, several aspects of *Henry IV, 1* remain relevant in modern art and culture, surviving through the flattery of imitation.

There are three character archetypes in particular that echo far past the time Shakespeare wrote *Henry IV, 1*. The first is that of Prince Henry V, son of King Henry IV, who is referred to as Hal throughout the play. Hal is talented, immature, reckless, and rebellious; all traits his father vehemently disapproves of. He has become everything his father does not want him to be, choosing to spend time in brothels and taverns with low-lives instead of performing princely acts of valiance and honor.

The youth who is performing these feats of greatness is Harry Hotspur, who belongs to the Percy family. The members of this family were once Henry IV's strongest allies, helping him

in his rise to the throne. However, when the king begins disrespecting them, largely through unfulfilled promises, they become the largest threat of usurpation. While they provide the most serious conflict of the play, one of Hal's closest companions is responsible for most of the comedic relief.

Hal spends a great amount of time with Falstaff; the portly, drunk, cowardly, lying, hilarious patron of the Boar's Head Tavern. Falstaff is a foil character to practically everyone he interacts with in the play, particularly Hal. Falstaff is without any moral fiber to speak of, and will go to any lengths for personal gain (which generally involves acquiring money or alcohol). He reflects all of the bad traits that Hal chooses to adopt as his own, as he is his main influence and father-type figure throughout the a good portion of the play.

These three characters have all been influential in one way or another. The troubled but talented youth (Hal) that resists his destiny until he finally realizes his potential, is a tried and true character mold. The ally-turned-enemy (Hotspur/Percy family) can also be seen in modern pop culture. It is also comparable to several real-life examples, for the struggles of the Percy family has been mirrored by other prominent political figures. Finally, the hilarious bad influence and foil character that is Hotspur has generated myriad characters with similar functions, usually in the comedy genre. The following analysis will delve into how these three character archetypes have stood the test of time.

I would like to preface the rest of this report by acknowledging the inevitable futility one finds when attempting to label and typecast Shakespeare's characters. Part of what puts him on the Mount Rushmore of English literature is his ability to produce rounded characters, who gradually reveal various aspects of their psyche that the reader did not initially anticipate. With

that in mind, this paper will attempt to grasp the slippery, protean characters of Shakespeare, and compare them to similar, but far from identical, modern examples.

The story of Hal, or Prince Henry, is indicative of a bildungsroman. According to *The Tormont Webster's Illustrated Encyclopedic Dictionary*, the definition of bildungsroman is "A story concerning the hero's early life and development." Hal's development throughout *Henry IV, I* matches this description.

One of the trademark characteristics of a "coming-of-age" tale is the disapproval the hero receives in the beginning of the story. Hal's relationship with his father fits this billing. From the very first scene, Shakespeare lets us know how much Henry IV disdains the life his son has led thus far. He does so in the cruelest of ways, lamenting that the brave Hotspur was not his son instead of Hal. ". . .thou mak'st me sad, and mak'st me sin in envy that my lord Northumberland should be the father to so blest a son. . . whilst I, by looking on the praise of him, see riot and dishonor stain the brow of my young Harry."(1.1.77-85) Harry is Hal in this scene, and the lord Northumberland is the father of the valiant Hotspur.

Another necessary trait to a bildungsroman involves having the hero make a significant change between the beginning and the end of the story. Hal is a far different young man at the beginning of the play than he is at the end of it. In the beginning, he spends much of his nights at the Boar's Head Tavern, the stomping ground of Falstaff and a cesspool of sin and human filth. He helps plan a highway robbery, as well as a subsequent plan to steal it back so as to playfully catch the thieves, namely Falstaff, lying about how it was lost. As Poins, another of the Boar's Head regulars, says to Hal, "The virtue of this jest will be the incomprehensible lies that this same fat rogue will tell us when we meet at supper."(1.2.180-182) Clearly, Hal is not associating himself with a high quality of people, instead choosing to befriend thieves and scoundrels.

Though audience's first experience with Hal highlights what his father is talking about, the scene ends with some foreshadowing, done by the prince as he delivers a monologue. Hal mentions how, given the kind of life he currently leads, the extreme contrast will make his meteoric rise to power all the more impressive. He says, "So when this loose behavior I throw off and pay the debt I never promised. . . 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."(1.2.202-209) According to him, he is simply setting up his glorious comeback.

To some, this may affirm that Hal is not actually immature, but is merely pretending to be by associating with Falstaff and the like, in order to augment his ascension to the throne. However, I believe him revealing his ultimate plan confirms his immaturity. This is simply a security blanket he is applying to himself, so as to not feel guilty about his despicable actions. There is no need to anger his father and his father's people during an extremely tense time of impending war, just so that he can develop some contrast for people to appreciate once he chooses to abandon his sinful habits. His closing monologue does not disprove, but *proves* his immaturity, as no one fit to rule a kingdom would ever think to devise such a plan. Thus, the first scene involving Hal perfectly sets up the bildungsroman.

In every coming of age tale there is a defining moment for the hero, in which he or she reaches a turning point that ultimately sets the hero down the path to his or her true destiny. For Hal, it is a very subtle, but monumentally important turn. It springs out of what appears to be more shenanigans involving Falstaff, obviously taking place at the Boar's Head Tavern. It occurs in the fourth and final scene of the second act, as the fat jokester and Hal decide to engage in a game of role playing after he receives news that requires him meeting with his father. They decide to rehearse appropriate answers and reactions, so Hal can be prepared when his father

inevitably berates him. In the game, Falstaff impersonates Henry IV, who is displeased with his son's lifestyle, and then vice-versa, with Hal now playing his father and Falstaff playing him. Though it begins humorously, with Falstaff using makeshift objects to represent a throne, crown, etc., the tone switches rapidly when they switch, and Hal now becomes his father. It is here that Hal finally acknowledges the fact that, though he has clearly developed a rapport with Falstaff and the rest of the regulars at the Boar's Head Tavern, he will one day have to move past them, for his destiny lies on the throne. Falstaff, as Hal, pleads with Hal, as Henry IV, to not banish him. His pleading ends with, ". . . banish not him thy Harry's company-banish plump Jack, and banish all the world." (2.4.472-475) Hal replies simply by saying, "I do, I will," (2.4.476). Regardless of the relationship he has built with Falstaff, he can not take him with him to the throne, and now the plump man knows it.

From this point on, Hal's motivation is not to live amongst low-lives in order to anger his father or create his comeback tale. He now wishes to finally live up to his potential as Henry V, heir to the throne. He confidently speaks to his father, who is obviously angered with him, saying that he will indeed become the valiant and noble leader he wishes him to be, much like Hotspur. He finally proves his worth on the battlefield, eventually killing Hotspur, and garnering the praise of his father. Hal has come of age, beginning with his acknowledgment of the life he was born to lead.

This bildungsroman archetype remains incredibly popular today. Throughout the arts, there are myriad tales of troubled and under-achieving youths who are able to overcome their faults and become successful in some way. In film, examples such as *Good Will Hunting* (1997), *Star Wars IV: A New Hope* (1977), and *The Way, Way Back*, all feature a similar struggle to the one Hal goes through. In literature, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

(1916), J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) all feature young, flawed main characters who develop that develop tremendously throughout the course of the story.

Characters like Hal will always speak to audiences. We enjoy seeing the hero triumph over his or her flaws, as that is largely what we would like to be able to do ourselves. The bildungsroman genre will live on as long as people continue to self-analyze, for we see much of our issues reflected in the early versions of the man or woman who is to come of age. He or she is not perfect, as many heroes are. Their flaws are fully on display from the beginning of the story, making us feel comfortable with our own shortcomings. Then, as we would all like to do, the hero learns from his or her mistakes and lives life to a far greater potential than in the beginning of the story. Hal was able to do this is in *Henry IV, I*, and for that reason, he remains a relatable and imitated character today. He overcame the obstacle of the Hotspur, and by extension, the Percy family, who also draw similarities to modern examples, both real and fictional.

Throughout *Henry IV, I*, the Percy family presents a very real threat to Henry IV's kingdom. Though they helped him militarily in his quest to overthrow Richard II, the king who preceded him, they have since felt slighted by the king they helped onto the throne. Henry IV refuses to turn over the prisoners that the Percy gained after winning a military battle, as they requested. They also dispute the fact that he should be on the throne at all, given that Lord Mortimer, a member of the Percy family, is of closer lineage to the fallen Richard II, and therefore has more right to be king than does Henry. This boils the blood of Hotspur, who resents the tactics of the king, and is largely responsible for leading the battle to usurp him. He acknowledges the two-faced nature of the methods he used to reach the crown, when he says,

“The King is kind; and well we know the King knows when to promise, when to pay,”(4.3.56-57) Henry is a politician, which is a sharp contrast to the brash and swashbuckling nature of Hotspur’s demeanor. These transgressions alienate Hotspur and the once-allied Percy family, as they represent another common character archetype, both in the actual world and throughout the arts.

The idea of ally-turned-enemy is as old as any character mold. The common denominator is usually fact that the character believes the hero has disrespected him or her in some way, as the person has likely done a great deal for the protagonist to that point. Characters such as Anakin in *Star Wars 1-3* show how a powerful, yet undermined hero/ally can quickly become the worst nightmare to the ones who have underappreciated him or her. Obi Wan Kenobi, Anakin’s master, continually tries to put him at peace, for though he has established himself as one of the more formidable warriors in the galaxy, winning many battles for his cause, the Jedi council steadfastly refuses to properly acknowledge his achievements. Anakin wishes to be placed on the level of Obi Wan and the other Jedi masters, yet is denied time and time again. Many of them pay the ultimate price, as this is one of the main factors that lead Anakin to turn against the Jedi, leaving nothing but death and destruction in his wake. There are clearly parallels between this character and Hotspur and Percy family, as they too have felt slighted, and wish to rectify the inequities by any means necessary. While this is a fictional example of this mold, there are also examples of this sort of issue in real life.

Benedict Arnold, who has become synonymous with the word traitor, particularly in the United States, experienced many of the things that Hotspur and the Percy family went through, leading them to revolt against Henry IV. Arnold was a celebrated general from Connecticut during the Revolutionary War. As Barry Wilson writes in his book, *Benedict Arnold: A Traitor*

*in our Midst*, “. . . Arnold became the premier soldier in the Revolution and one of the key military players in its triumphs.”(Wilson 16) Much like the Percy family, Arnold was one of the more pivotal pieces in an aim to overthrow a government, in this case the British monarchy in the United States. Without him, it is possible that the colonials would not have won the war, as he won several decisive battles that helped turn the tide in the United States’ favor. However, despite his success on the battlefield, he never received the recognition he believed he deserved. As noted by *The Tormont Webster’s Illustrated Encyclopedic Dictionary*, Arnold was “. . . embittered by what he considered unfair treatment by the Continental Congress.” He was seeking a promotion by the Continental Congress for his accomplishments, but was not granted one, as many other officers took credit for some of his heroics on the battlefield. All of this culminated in Arnold’s switching allegiances, joining the British and becoming one of the most notorious traitors in American history.

The Percy family, Anakin, and Benedict Arnold all accomplished many great things while fighting for a greater cause. Unfortunately, that cause denied them many of the things they felt they had earned through their acts of bravery and valor. As a result, these three parties decided to turn against the forces they had previously fought for, showing how ally-turned-enemy archetype Shakespeare uses to depict the Percy family lives on well beyond his time, both in the arts and in reality.

There is still one character in *Henry IV, 1* that truly “stands the test of time.” Falstaff, the immoral, gluttonous clown that Hal chooses to associate with, is a classic source of comic relief, providing a foil to mostly every character who is not as wild as he is, particularly the prince. He has become one of Shakespeare’s most popular and influential characters. As David Ellis writes, “The only way to talk about comedy is through particular instances. Of all the instances in our



own culture, Falstaff bulks largest.”(Ellis 95) Throughout the play, Falstaff provides memorable line after memorable line, as his wit, nerve, and tall tales grow with each passing scene. Falstaff is also one of the smarter characters, particularly in terms of survival. As Maria Eppich-Harris writes, “Shakespeare's repeated attempts at killing Falstaff or simulating his death delight the audience because they make us believe that Falstaff is invulnerable.”(Eppich-Harris) Falstaff acknowledges some of the futility of living with valor and honor, as it likely to get a man killed. He ponders these concepts on the battlefield, when he says, “What is honor? 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.” (5.1.133-139). In this sense, Shakespeare’s character distinguishes himself from most other comedic relief/foil characters. As stated previously, his characters are extremely rounded and multi-faceted. Characters that are similar to Falstaff in terms of his practices and his general function in the play usually do not rattle off deep philosophical thought. But it’s Shakespeare. As Jill Levenson writes, “Towards the end of *Henry IV: Part 1*, Shakespeare’s Falstaff conducts himself in ways apparently designed to unsettle the audience’s responses.”(Levenson 722) However, there remain dozens of characters who resemble Falstaff’s other characteristics, and they usually fall under the comedy genre.

The character of Seth in the 2007 high school comedy film, *Superbad*, resembles some very Falstaff-ish traits. The most obvious is that Seth is overweight. Portly, comedic foils are seen throughout pop culture, thanks in no small part to the rounded Falstaff. Seth largely holds back Evan, the hero, from realizing his potential, as he continuously gives him a hard time for choosing to attend Dartmouth the following fall, thus leaving Seth behind, while also influencing him through alcohol, excessive partying, etc. Evan remains a close friend of Seth regardless of

his laundry list of flaws, much like Hal is to Falstaff. Seth also provides many of the punch lines, another distinctly Falstaff-esque trait. This character mold is arguably the most popular of the three mentioned in this report, as audiences are naturally drawn to the character that provides the laughs, while also tending to humanize the main character. There is no room for a true hero with characters like Falstaff around, making the audience able to relate to everyone in the story more, and making this archetype one that will continue to stand the test of time.

The characters of Hal, Hotspur and the Percy family, and Falstaff, all represent character molds that remain relevant today. Shakespeare's plays have managed to remain just as relatable to audiences in the present day as they were in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. Characters that coincide with these three archetypes are a big reason why Shakespeare is still a hot topic. The young, troubled hero who gradually finds his or her way can still be seen in modern pop culture, as can the ally-turned-enemy and the comedic foil. Shakespeare truly was the master of developing multi-faceted, relatable character, who allow you to understand more and more about their inner working as you continue to watch them. For this reason, *Henry IV, Part I* will continue to stand the test of time.

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