

A Guide to
HENRY IV, PART 1

by William Shakespeare



Alistair McCallum

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *King Henry IV, Part 1* in or around 1596. He was in his early thirties, a successful actor and dramatist, and a member – and shareholder – of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, the most prestigious theatre company in London.

English history was a topic of intense interest at the time, providing the subject-matter for nine of Shakespeare’s plays during the 1590s. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 had kindled a powerful sense of national identity and unity; but hostilities continued for years to come, and England was also involved in expensive military adventures in Ireland, France and the Netherlands. At home, food shortages, unemployment and high inflation led to frequent social unrest: political disputes among the Queen’s ministers added to the sense of instability. The Queen herself – in her sixties at the time the play was written – was unmarried and childless, and the question of who should succeed her was fraught with speculation and anxiety.

Against this background, plays that chronicled England in states of crisis were extremely popular. Through the medium of history they addressed issues central to the Tudor dynasty: for example, should the basis of monarchy be purely hereditary, or was it more important to select an effective ruler in the interests of stability and unity? Was it ever right to rebel against an unjust monarch – or to depose a weak one?

History plays of the time were generally limited to the actions of kings and noblemen, and often drew heavy-handed moral lessons. *King Henry IV*, by contrast, presented history in a more realistic, balanced way, involving a wide range of vividly-drawn characters from different classes – including the inimitable Falstaff. The play was an immediate success, both on the stage and in print; it was reprinted more frequently than any other play by Shakespeare during his lifetime. It has remained a favourite throughout the centuries.

“Henry IV, Part 1 was a highly innovative work in 1596 for precisely the reasons that make it one of the greatest of Shakespeare’s history plays. It marks an advance both in Shakespeare’s development and in the growth of English drama, for, by repeatedly shifting its focus between affairs of state and bawdy irreverence, the play presents a composite image of a whole society, something that had never been attempted before ... Groundbreaking in its own day, Henry IV, Part 1 is still impressive in ours, due to the range of people, events, and language, from the most casual ribaldry to the boldest rhetoric, realistically presented on stage.”

Charles Boyce, *Shakespeare A to Z*

A heavy burden

A year has passed since the death of King Richard the Second.

His cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, taking advantage of the king's unpopularity, had executed Richard's prominent supporters, deposed Richard, and proclaimed himself King Henry the Fourth. One of the new king's followers, hoping for royal favour, had then murdered Richard.

The removal of Richard – who, if alive, could have become a figurehead for future rebellions – was clearly to King Henry's advantage. However, the new king, on seeing Richard's coffin, angrily denounced his murderer, promising to atone for his death with a pilgrimage to Jerusalem:

King: I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land,
To wash this blood off from my guilty hand.
March sadly after; grace my mournings here,
In weeping after this untimely bier.

Henry has succeeded in becoming king; but the vigour of the younger Bolingbroke has been overshadowed by weariness and anxiety now that he has achieved his ambition. There are those who question the new king's authority, and rebellion is already brewing in a number of places within the kingdom.

To make matters worse, it is common knowledge that the king's eldest son Harry is spending his time with disreputable companions in taverns and brothels, and neglecting his duties as Prince of Wales.

Curtain up

No peace for the new king

I, i

King Henry is in council with his noblemen. The deposition of his predecessor, King Richard the Second, was accompanied by widespread bloodshed and turmoil, and the first year of his reign has not been easy.

King: So shaken as we are, so wan with care,
Find we¹ a time for frightened peace to pant² ...

¹ *let us find*

² *catch its breath*

Civil conflict must never be allowed to afflict the country again, he declares:

King: The edge of war, like an ill-sheathed knife,
No more shall cut his master.

But warfare is still on the king's mind. England's military energies, he announces, are to be directed abroad, in the form of a Christian crusade to rid the Holy Lands of the infidels who now inhabit them. However, the king's pledge to march on Jerusalem is well known; it is now a year since the murder of King Richard, the event that prompted Henry to make his promise. He asks the Earl of Westmoreland what progress has been made in preparing for the expedition.

Westmoreland explains that a great deal of enthusiastic discussion and practical planning for the crusade has been taking place. However, preparations have been cut short by grave news from Wales, where the English are contending with a ferocious rebellion led by Owen Glendower. An English army led by Edmund Mortimer has been defeated and butchered, and Mortimer himself has been captured.

There may be further bad news, warns Westmoreland. A Scottish army, with the fearsome Earl of Douglas at its head, has invaded the north of England. English troops led by young Henry Percy, son of the Earl of Northumberland, have confronted the Scots at Holmedon. The result of the battle is not yet known, says Westmoreland.

Some critics have accused Shakespeare of propagating the 'Tudor myth' in his history plays. According to this version of history, the sacrilegious removal of the rightful king Richard II by Henry IV in 1399 led to divine punishment, in the form of decades of discord and civil strife, culminating in the carnage of the Wars of the Roses; and it was not until eighty years later, with the accession of the first Tudor monarch, Henry VII – grandfather of Elizabeth I – that peace and stability were restored.

While this view of history was encouraged by the Tudor establishment, it seems unlikely that Shakespeare accepted it unquestioningly.

"... Shakespeare approached his sources not as a spokesman of government orthodoxy but as a creative artist whose business was to explore, not expound; he invented characters and episodes which make that exploration more complex; the role of Providence in the plays is deeply ambiguous; he shows a sophisticated awareness of history as ironical, baffling, and frequently unfair."

Levi Fox, *The Shakespeare Handbook*, 1987

The king, however, has already been informed of the outcome by Sir Walter Blunt, who has ridden back from Holmedon with good news: Henry Percy has defeated Douglas, and many Scottish noblemen have been taken prisoner.

The king reflects sadly on the contrast between Percy (nicknamed 'Hotspur'), renowned for his courage and honour, and his own son, Prince Henry, heir to the throne, who is living a debauched and dishonourable life.

Whilst rejoicing at Percy's victory, the king is displeased with the young man's refusal to hand over his valuable prisoners to the king, as is customary. Hotspur has offered just one captive, a member of the Scottish royal family. Westmoreland warns him that this shows the influence of Hotspur's uncle – Thomas Percy, Earl of Worcester – who, he claims, is implacably hostile to the king.

The king replies that he has already sent for Henry Percy and will demand an explanation for his provocative action. He calls the council to a close, wishing to continue the discussion in private with Westmoreland, unwilling to say anything further in public in his state of displeasure.

King: ... more is to be said and to be done
Than out of anger can be uttered.

For the present, any plans for an expedition to Jerusalem must be set aside.

Bad company

I, ii

Prince Henry (also known as Harry or Hal) is spending time with Sir John Falstaff, one of his usual companions. Falstaff – in all likelihood suffering from over-indulgence in alcohol – asks Hal what time of day it is.

The prince teases the older man relentlessly. Why should a corrupt, obese, lazy drunkard like him need to know the time?

Prince: What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day?
Unless hours were cups of sack,¹ and minutes
capons,² and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials
the signs of leaping-houses,³ 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 *heavy, rich white wine*

² *chickens*

³ *brothels*

“Thirty-six big plays in five blank verse acts, and not a single hero! Only one man in them all who believes in life, enjoys life, thinks life worth living ... and that man – Falstaff!”

George Bernard Shaw, *Better than Shakespear?*,
preface to *Three Plays for Puritans*, 1901

Falstaff replies that the day is indeed of little interest to him; as a thief, he is proud to be governed by the moon and stars. He appeals to Hal to be tolerant, when he inherits the throne, of thieves like himself:

Falstaff: 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's¹ foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon ...

¹ *goddess of the moon and of hunting*

Hal agrees that Falstaff's fortunes, governed by the moon like the tides of the ocean, will fall and rise – from the foot of the ladder at the bottom of the gallows, for example, to the beam at the top. The two continue to banter about their favorite subjects: women, taverns, and the risks and rewards of crime.

Falstaff claims, unconvincingly, that the prince has been a bad influence on him, and declares his intention give up his life of crime. However, he agrees without hesitation to take part in a robbery planned for the next day.

At this point their acquaintance Ned Poins, a seasoned thief and Falstaff's regular accomplice, joins them. He outlines his plans for a highway robbery. The target is a group of wealthy traders and pilgrims, travelling to Canterbury; they will be passing through Gad's Hill, an ideal spot for waylaying travellers, early tomorrow morning.

Falstaff is keen to take advantage of this lucrative opportunity, but Hal declines. Poins assures Falstaff that his young friend can be persuaded, and the knight sets off for Eastcheap, the site of his favourite tavern.

Poins now explains to the prince that his plan is not simply to rob the travellers, but to play a trick on Falstaff. He and Hal will keep their distance from the scene of the robbery: Falstaff and his other accomplices will go ahead with the crime, but Poins and Hal, in disguise, will then rob them in turn.

Falstaff is a notorious coward and braggart. Poins is certain that he will not put up a fight, and robbing him will be child's play. However, the real entertainment will be in hearing Falstaff's version of events at the tavern in the evening, not realising the identity of his assailants.

Poins: The virtue of this jest will be the incomprehensible lies that this same fat rogue will tell us when we meet at supper, how thirty at least he fought with, what wards,¹ what blows, what extremities he endured ...

¹ *defensive strategies*

Hal cannot resist the idea, and he agrees to go along with the plan.

A bright future

Poins leaves, and the prince, now alone, reflects on the company he is keeping. He is well aware that his current way of life is dissolute and disreputable, but he assures himself that it will not last much longer. Soon he will turn his back on this depravity, and become the upright, honourable man he was meant to be. The contrast with his old life will make him all the more respected:

Prince: ... 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 ...

After all, he reasons, it is unexpected and infrequent events that capture our attention and give us the greatest pleasure:

Prince: If all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as to work ...

He looks forward to the time when, casting his old ways aside, he will dazzle those around him like the royal heir that he is.

Hotspur explains himself

I, iii

Henry Percy, summoned by the king, has come to Windsor castle. With him are his father, Earl of Northumberland, and his uncle, Earl of Worcester. The king is angrily reprimanding young Percy, who has not handed over the Scottish prisoners captured at Holmedon. He will no longer endure the young man's arrogance, and blames himself for allowing his tolerant disposition to override the authority required of a king.

King: ... You tread upon my patience: but be sure
I will from henceforth rather be myself,¹
Mighty, and to be fear'd, than my condition,²
Which hath been smooth as oil, soft as young down ...

¹ *what I am as a king*

² *what I am by nature*

Worcester interjects, reminding the king that the Percy family played a significant role in helping the king to overthrow Richard the Second and to achieve the power that he now enjoys. This infuriates the king even more, and he dismisses Worcester from his presence.

Northumberland now addresses the king, taking a more conciliatory tone. His son is not guilty of the arrogant disobedience of which he is accused, claims Northumberland: the message delivered to the king after the battle was distorted, either through malice or misunderstanding.

At this point Hotspur launches into a vigorous, colourful account of the events following the battle of Holmedon. He recalls the arrival of the king's messenger:

Hotspur: ... I remember, when the fight was done,
When I was dry with rage, and extreme toil,
Breathless and faint, leaning upon my sword,
Came there a certain lord, neat and trimly dress'd,
Fresh as a bridegroom, and his chin new reap'd
Show'd like a stubble-land at harvest-home.
He was perfumed like a milliner ...

The man clearly found the whole business of war distasteful, complaining about the sight and smell of the corpses and the noise of the guns, and he prattled foolishly about the best cure for wounds and his own ambition to be a soldier.

At some point, Hotspur recalls, the man mentioned the prisoners, but by this time Hotspur was so infuriated by his ridiculous, fastidious manner that he could barely bring himself to speak to him. He no doubt gave the man an awkward, unhelpful answer, Hotspur admits, but this was surely understandable in the aftermath of the battle, and should not be taken for disobedience to the king.

The king issues an ultimatum

The king's trusted adviser Sir Walter Blunt urges him to accept Hotspur's explanation. But the king is far from satisfied, for Hotspur, whatever excuses he may make, is still refusing to hand over the prisoners. His wife's brother is Edmund Mortimer, who led the campaign against Owen Glendower, and who is now a prisoner of the Welsh. Hotspur has demanded that the king pay the ransom required to free his brother-in-law Mortimer before he will release the prisoners captured at Holmedon.

The king is furious. Not only is Mortimer a coward who led hundreds of Englishmen to their deaths; he has, since his capture, married Glendower's daughter. As far as the king is concerned, Mortimer is a traitor, and it is unthinkable that his ransom should be paid.

Hotspur angrily defends his brother-in-law. Far from being a coward, Mortimer actually tackled the fearsome Glendower in single combat, claims Hotspur, receiving severe wounds in the process. The king is scornful of this claim. Growing ever more impatient, he makes a final demand to Hotspur for the captured prisoners; there will be serious consequences if he disobeys. The king takes his leave without giving Hotspur any further opportunity for dissent.

Hotspur is on the verge of pursuing the king and risking his life by giving a direct refusal to the king's demand, but his father Northumberland urges him to pause. The young man remains where he is, but the dispute over Mortimer has infuriated him. His brother-in-law is a far better man than the king, who has shown no gratitude to the Percy family for their support when, as Henry Bolingbroke, he seized the crown from King Richard:

Hotspur: ... I will lift the down-trod Mortimer
As high in the air as this unthankful King,
As this ingrate and canker'd¹ Bolingbroke.

¹ *corrupt, diseased*

... this ingrate and canker'd Bolingbroke.

Henry IV is known to have suffered from a disfiguring skin disease and other health problems, particularly towards the end of his life. Many regarded this as divine retribution for usurping his cousin, Richard II:

“For the whole of his time as king, Henry was forced to beat off rivals and rebels. Troubles of one sort or another worried him till he died: arguments in parliament, fighting along the Welsh and Scottish borders; plots and skirmishes. Executions were constantly necessary, simply to keep himself in power ... The strain of events seriously undermined his health. He contracted a troublesome skin disease, eczema or perhaps leprosy. Rumour had it that this illness was the revenge of God ...”

David Hilliam, *Kings, Queens, Bones and Bastards*, 1998

A shock for Hotspur

In the meantime the Earl of Worcester, Hotspur's uncle, has returned. He asks his brother Northumberland what has caused the young man's fury. When he learns of the king's refusal to ransom Mortimer, he is not surprised:

Worcester: I cannot blame him: was he not proclaim'd,
By Richard that dead is, the next of blood?
Northumberland: He was, I heard the proclamation ...

Overhearing their conversation, Hotspur is stunned. He had not realised that the previous king, Richard the Second, had named Mortimer – who indeed had a valid claim to the throne – as his successor. This explains why King Henry, who deposed Richard, is refusing to liberate Mortimer, preferring to let him live as a virtual exile in Wales.

Hotspur's resentment towards the king grows stronger and stronger as he considers the implications of what he has just heard. His family, the Percys, played a major part in Richard's downfall, and many despise them for it; yet all their efforts were for a man who was undeserving of the crown, and who is utterly ungrateful and even hostile towards those who supported him. The family's honour has been lost in an unworthy cause.

Hotspur: Shall it for shame be spoken in these days,
Or fill up chronicles in time to come,
That men of your nobility and power
Did gage them both¹ in an unjust behalf
(As both of you, God pardon it, have done)
To put down Richard, that sweet lovely rose,
And plant this thorn, this canker² Bolingbroke?

¹ *pledge both your nobility and your power*

² *dog-rose; also a disease affecting roses, or an ulcer*

Their honour must be regained at all costs, insists Hotspur, by now in a state of furious agitation: they must take revenge on the king, who holds them in contempt, and who in any case is planning their deaths.

“In the opening scenes two issues make their way into the foreground. One is the fact that medieval warfare was in large part a ransom racket: you took noblemen prisoner in battle, and then their tenants had to put up enough money to buy them back ... The other is the fact that Edmund Mortimer, Earl of March, has in some respects a better claim to the throne than Henry IV has ...”

Northrop Frye, *On Shakespeare*, 1986

Worcester tries to interrupt the young man's tirade. He has a very serious proposition to put to him, he explains, but Hotspur, caught up in his passionate outburst on the theme of injustice, revenge and honour, refuses to listen. Neither his father nor his uncle can communicate with him in this state:

Northumberland: Imagination of some great exploit
Drives him beyond the bounds of patience.

Hotspur: By heaven, methinks it were an easy leap
To pluck bright honour from the pale-fac'd moon,
Or dive into the bottom of the deep,
Where fathom-line could never touch the ground,
And pluck up drowned honour by the locks ...

Worcester: He apprehends a world of figures¹ here,
But not the form of what he should attend ...

¹ *he is grasping at imaginary notions*

Northumberland and Worcester start to lose patience with the young man. Meanwhile, in Hotspur's imagination he sees himself tormenting the king and even poisoning his son Hal. Then his mind moves on restlessly to the time when, as a youth, he first met Bolingbroke, who flattered him and promised him a bright future. Eventually he returns to the present, and allows Worcester to set out his proposal.

A rebellion is planned

Hotspur must release his Scottish prisoners without ransom, explains Worcester, and ally himself with the defeated Scottish army led by the Earl of Douglas. Meanwhile, Northumberland is to gain the confidence of the Archbishop of York, whose brother was executed by King Henry, and who is prepared to take up arms against the king. Worcester himself will go to Wales and make contact with Mortimer and Glendower.

Worcester is adamant that the Percy family is in imminent danger from the king, who knows he is in their debt and resents them for it. For their own safety they must confront him: and this triple alliance of armies from Scotland, York and Wales will surely prove invincible. Hotspur is eager to return to the battlefield:

Hotspur: ... O, let the hours be short,
Till fields, and blows, and groans applaud our sport!

The play's restless movement from one group of characters to another highlights the differences between their worlds. But sometimes we cannot help noticing parallels too, even if they are unstated: for example, the king's ambition to go on a crusade to Jerusalem; Falstaff's ambition to carry out the perfect robbery; and Hotspur's ambition to overthrow the king and regain his family's honour.

"The play brings before us three contrasting environments at once, each with a commanding personality. The court is Henry's domain; the tavern is Falstaff's; the feudal countryside is Hotspur's ... within this simple framework, Shakespeare accomplishes an articulation of complementary images, cross-references, and ironic contrasts that is without parallel in the history of English stage comedy."

Maynard Mack, Introduction to the Signet Classic edition of *Henry IV, Part 1*, 1986

An early start

II, i

Outside an inn in Rochester, two carriers are preparing to set out for London with their assorted goods. It is nearly four in the morning, and they are anxious to load their pack-horses and leave. They shout impatiently to the stableman to get their horses ready. The two of them agree on the standard of their accommodation:

Second Carrier: I think this be the most villainous house in all London road for fleas, I am stung like a tench.¹

First Carrier: Like a tench! By the mass, there is ne'er a king christen could be better bit than I have been since the first cock.²

Second Carrier: Why, they will allow us ne'er a jordan,³ and then we leak in your⁴ chimney, and your chamber-lye⁵ breeds fleas like a loach.⁶

¹ *a fish with scaly, speckled skin*

² *midnight*

³ *chamber-pot*

⁴ *the*

⁵ *urine*

⁶ *fish reputed to produce numerous parasites*

Gadshill, the highwayman who has planned the robbery in which Falstaff, Hal and Poins are to take part, now comes into the inn-yard. He casually asks the carriers when they are leaving for London, but they are suspicious of him and answer evasively. However, as the carriers leave, Gadshill overhears as one of them mentions that some gentlemen with valuable property will be travelling with them. He calls for the chamberlain, a servant at the inn who also works as Gadshill's informer. The chamberlain confirms the carrier's overheard remark:

Chamberlain: It holds current¹ that I told you yesternight: there's a franklin² in the Wild of Kent hath brought three hundred marks with him in gold ...

¹ *is still true*

² *wealthy farmer, landowner*

The franklin, along with some other prosperous travellers, will be leaving shortly. Gadshill is pleased with the information, and promises the chamberlain a share of the loot. He boasts that he will be joined in his enterprise by men of high status, higher than the chamberlain can imagine; even if things go wrong, he and his accomplices will escape justice.

Gadshill needs to hurry to the agreed location ahead of the travellers, and he calls for his horse.

Danger on the highway

II, ii

Near the road from Rochester to London, the robbers are gathering in the darkness. Falstaff, Hal and Poins have arrived; two further accomplices, Peto and Bardolph, are in the vicinity, as is Gadshill, who has travelled from the inn in Rochester.

Prince Hal and Poins watch as Falstaff struggles to the site of the robbery on foot; Poins has taken his horse and hidden it. The corpulent old knight hates walking, and Poins' trick has put him in a bad temper.

Falstaff: I am accursed to rob in that thief's company ...
eight yards of uneven ground is threescore and
ten miles afoot with me, and the stony-hearted
villains know it well enough. A plague upon it
when thieves cannot be true one to another!

Hal approaches, and tells Falstaff to be quiet and put his ear to the ground. Falstaff refuses, claiming that he is so exhausted that he would not be able to haul himself up again.

While Falstaff is complaining about his ill-treatment, Gadshill and Bardolph emerge from the darkness. They report that there are at least eight travellers on their way, with plenty of money between them. They tell their companions to put on their masks; the travellers are coming down the hill towards them.

Hal suggests that four of them – Falstaff, Gadshill, Bardolph and Peto – confront the travellers, while he and Poins wait further down the hill in case they escape. Poins does Falstaff the favour of telling him where his horse is hidden, and then he and Hal slip away into the night.

Meanwhile, the travellers from Rochester have dismounted at the top of the hill and are making their way down on foot. As they pass, the thieves jump out into the road and order them to stop. While the thieves busy themselves robbing the terrified men and tying them up so they cannot escape, Falstaff hurls a stream of insults at them, accusing them of being overfed parasites who bully younger men like himself:

Travellers: Jesus bless us!

Falstaff: Strike, down with them, cut the villains' throats!

Ah, whoreson caterpillars, bacon-fed knaves, they hate us youth! Down with them, fleece them!

When they have made their getaway, the four robbers find a secluded spot, lay out the spoils, and proceed to share them between themselves. Falstaff remarks on the cowardice of the other two men, who were not present at the robbery, unaware that Poins and Hal, in disguise, are observing them.

The two spectators now draw their weapons and threaten the robbers, demanding their money. Falstaff makes a brief attempt to fight back, but the four of them soon scatter into the night. Poins and Hal collect the loot, delighted with the outcome. Hal is particularly amused by the thought of Falstaff as he retreats, exhausted and demoralised:

Prince: ... Falstaff sweats to death,
And lards the lean earth as he walks along.
Were't not for laughing I should pity him.