

The Rise and Fall of Hotspur in *Henry IV Part One*

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In the fifth act of *Henry IV Part One*, the two young Henrys finally meet. Harry Percy, Hotspur, announces his own name and asks if the youth in front of him is Harry Monmouth, to which the young Prince replies:

Why then, I see
A very valiant rebel of the name.
I am the Prince of Wales; and think not, Percy,
To share with me in glory any more.
Two stars keep not their motion in one sphere,
Nor can one England brook a double reign
Of Harry Percy and the Prince of Wales.
(5.4.60-66)

The moment constitutes the climax of the play as the two Henrys face off against one another, one destined to fall and the other to rise. Ironically Shakespeare's scene foreshadowed the success of the characters in the play's afterlife – since the play's first performance, Hotspur has declined in importance and popularity next to the ever growing focus on Hal, a shift in focus that I believe can be directly attributed to the serialisation of the histories.

Hal vs. Hotspur within the play

It appears that Shakespeare had some purpose in mind for Hotspur in relation to Hal, as he altered history to make Hotspur the same age as Hal, even though the historical Harry Percy was twenty-three years older. The play's opening, after a brief summary of the current state of England, focuses upon the two young Henrys. King Henry contrasts Northumberland's noble son Harry Percy with his own riotous child, Harry Monmouth.

Yea, there thou makest me sad, and mak'st me sin
In envy that my Lord Northumberland
Should be the father to so blest a son –
A son who is the theme of honour's tongue,
Amongst a grove the very straightest plant,
Who is sweet Fortune's minion and her pride –
Whilst I by looking on the praise of him
See riot and dishonour stain the brow
Of my young Harry.
(1.1.77-85)

The common name of the two sons is pushed further by King Henry when he wishes that it could be proved that some night-tripping fairy had exchanged the infant Harrys in their beds, and that Harry Percy was in fact his son after all. After outlining the contrast of

the two characters in this speech, Shakespeare continues to suggest the duality of the two Henrys in the structure of his scenes (see Table 1).

Scene	Appearance	Talked about
1.1		Hal and Hotspur
1.2	Hal	
1.3		Hotspur Hal
2.1		
2.2	Hal	
2.3		Hotspur
2.4	Hal	Hotspur
3.1		Hotspur
3.2	Hal	Hal and Hotspur
3.3	Hal	
4.1		Hotspur Hal
4.2	Hal	
4.3		Hotspur
4.4		Hal and Hotspur
5.1	Hal	Hal and Hotspur
5.2		Hotspur Hal
5.3	Hal	Hotspur
5.4	Hal	Hotspur
5.5	Hal	

Table 1: Appearances of Hal and Hotspur in *Henry IV Part One*

Save for the brief interlude of Gadshill and the carriers in 2.1, the play takes us back and forth between each Harry, and when they do not appear, they are talked of and contrasted again. Shakespeare builds up anticipation for the final battle by teasing the audience, inferring the connection of Hal and Hotspur with references to the two Henrys. They both experience similar situations: in 1.3 Hotspur is brought to a reckoning in front of the King, and later, Hal too must account for himself before his father. It is a meeting by proxy, and again serves to contrast them in their differing reactions: the noble Hotspur responds with rebellion while the riotous Prince of Wales promises obedience. In 2.4 Shakespeare gives us a large, boisterous scene in the tavern, in which we see Hal at rest as he goads Falstaff. In the very next scene the focus falls on Hotspur, and again we have an equally large scene with the rebellious lords now at rest, and Hotspur goading Glendower just as Hal teased Falstaff. By putting them in similar situations Shakespeare both contrasts the characters and strengthens the link between them. Each one talks of the other: in 1.3 Hotspur vows to have ‘that same sword-and-buckler Prince of Wales [...] poisoned with a pot of ale.’ Hal retorts in 2.4 by announcing to Poins and the audience that:

I am not yet of Percy’s mind,
the Hotspur of the North – he that kills me some six or
seven dozen of Scots at a breakfast, washes his hands,
and says to his wife, ‘Fie upon this quiet life! I want
work.’ ‘O my sweet Harry,’ says she, ‘how many hast

thou killed today?’ ‘Give my roan horse a drench,’ says he, and answers, ‘Some fourteen,’ an hour after; ‘a trifle, a trifle’ (2.4.102-109).

The reference to Hotspur bears no relation to any preceding conversation in this scene; Poins merely asked the Prince why he had been teasing Francis. However, for the audience the reference is very apt as we have just seen Hotspur and his wife in the previous scene. Each Harry has an eerie knowledge of the play’s structure as they refer to the progress of one another. The conflict is confirmed in 3.2 when King Henry goads his son with the glory of Hotspur, and in retaliation Hal pinpoints Henry Percy as the culmination of his successful transformation that the audience has been promised since his soliloquy in 1.2. Hal’s promise to his father in 3.2 confirms Hotspur’s defeat as the conclusion of his transformation, and the drama.

I will redeem all this on Percy’s head,
 And in the closing of some glorious day
 Be bold to tell you that I am your son;
 When I will wear a garment all of blood,
 And stain my favours in a bloody mask,
 Which, washed away, shall scour my shame with it.
 And that shall be the day, whene’er it lights,
 That this same child of honour and renown,
 This gallant Hotspur, this all-praised knight,
 And your unthought-of Harry chance to meet.
 (3.2.132-141)

Note that the young Prince does not suggest that Falstaff’s banishment will scour his shame, nor does the King reproach him specifically about Falstaff. Derek Cohen recognises that ‘Hotspur’s death [...] is directly referable to Prince Hal’s vow of fealty to the King’.¹ The structure is quite clearly laid out and the audience clearly informed that when Hal defeats Hotspur, he will throw off his shame. At no point in the play does Hal or his father name Falstaff’s rejection as the moment of truth; only Hotspur’s defeat is nominated here as that moment when Hal will fulfil his prior aim to break through the ‘foul and ugly mists/Of vapours that did seem to strangle him’(1.2.199-200).

In the final battle, Hal’s retort to Hotspur specifically tries to differentiate the one Harry from the other. Hotspur calls him Harry Monmouth, but Hal identifies himself throughout the scene as the Prince of Wales. Hal’s attempt to distance himself from his own name gives a second meaning to his judgement that Harry Percy is ‘a very valiant rebel of the name.’ To be a Harry and to dishonour, as Hotspur does in his rebellion, goes against that honour in which Harry Percy hopes that his name be considered.

Hal vs. Hotspur Outside the Play

If we consider the early reception of the play, it appears that Hotspur was undoubtedly the more popular character. The first quarto’s title page announces that the play is:

¹ Derek Cohen, ‘The Rite of Violence in “1 Henry IV”’, *Shakespeare Survey*, 38 (1985), 77-84 (p. 77).

The /History of /Henrie the /Fourth; /With the battell at Shrewsburie,/ betweene the King and Lord/ Henry Percy, surnamed / Henrie Hotspur of /the North. With the humorous conceits of Sir /John Falstalffe.

What stands out in this title to a modern reader is the complete absence of Hal. In the nine quartos that appeared of the text, not one title mentioned Hal. In contrast Hotspur's name alone takes up nine words of a thirty-two word title: almost a third, which suggests that he was either an important part of the plot or else a distinctive feature of the play by which it might be recognised. Robert Barker agrees that 'Such foregrounding of Hotspur suggests that his presence was one of the play's major selling points in its own time.'² When both parts of *Henry IV* happened to be presented as part of the wedding celebrations for Princess Elizabeth in 1612, not only were they not presented together but they were not called *Parts One and Two*. The second play was called *The Falstaffe*, while the first play was entitled *The Hotspurre*. For a further indication of Hotspur's popularity, Francis Beaumont quotes the character in his parody *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. When the apprentice Rafe is hauled onto the stage and told to speak an 'uffish part', he does not quote, Hal, or Falstaff, or even Hamlet:

By heaven, methinks it were an easy leap
To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon,
Or dive into the bottom of the sea,
Where never fathom-line touched any ground,
And pluck up drowned honour from the lakes of hell.³

The speech is not an exact copy of Hotspurs; 'sea' in Beaumont is 'deep' in Shakespeare, and Hotspur proposes to pluck drowned honour up by the locks rather than from the lakes of hell. As the speech is not different enough to be a mockery, but not exact enough to be a copy, I would suggest it is a memorial reconstruction: Beaumont is citing a well-known speech. Certainly the joke relies on the audience recognising it, so Beaumont must have been confident that Hotspur's speech is one which a contemporary audience would immediately identify.

In subsequent years Hotspur maintained his popularity over Hal in the play, though both were under increasing threat from Falstaff. Roberta Barker notes how before the twentieth century 'Luminaries such as Thomas Betterton, David Garrick, William Macready and Edmund and Charles Kean all chose to wear Hotspur's sword, while Hal was most often played by supporting actors' (p. 291). The last such production was as recent as 1945, when Laurence Olivier took the role of Hotspur alongside Ralph Richardson's Falstaff at the Old Vic. As discussed in chapter two, the actor playing Hal, Michael Warre is barely remembered, having been put in a production alongside Olivier and Richardson, one critic damningly concluded that Warre 'inevitably remains in the junior school.'⁴

² Roberta Barker, 'Tragical-Comical-Historical Hotspur', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 288-307 (p. 288).

³ Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (London: Ernest Benn, 1969), Induction.76-80.

⁴ Ivor Brown, *The Observer*, 30 September 1945.

But Hal's fortunes were to forever alter with the 1951 cycle, that which McMillin felt changed the focus of the play from Falstaff and Hotspur to Hal. He argues that the growing critical focus on the prince prompted the cycle, remarking that 'the change of emphasis required a change of format.'⁵ However, I believe it is equally valid to suggest that the change of format required a change of emphasis. By presenting a story which spreads across four plays, the main characters of that story will become those who are present the longest: characters are ranked by endurance. Henry IV and Hal are both spread across three plays, however sparse their parts may be in *Henry IV Part 2*, and so became main parts of the cycle. In contrast, other characters that used to be star roles, such as Richard II and Hotspur, become brief interludes.

Consequently in 1951, *Part One* became a conflict not between Hal and Hotspur for the title of honour, but of Falstaff and Henry IV for the love and loyalty of Hal. Scenes became distorted, most notably the play extempore scene of 2.4, which now became of utmost significance, predicting the rejection of Falstaff. For a cycle this was essential; it developed links between each play, encouraging audiences to return to the theatre for the next thrilling instalment, and consequently extended the education of the prince beyond *Part One*, and even *Part Two*, and into the battlefields of Agincourt. One reviewer noted that 'an excellent feature of this production is the emphasis on Prince Hal's sense of destiny.'⁶

But these changes did not bode well for Hotspur. Quayle himself felt that 'In *Henry IV Part 1*, Hotspur's part is far more rewarding than Hal's, so Hotspur has always been the choice of the star, who naturally plays it for all the sympathy he can get. But in doing this he distorts the true dramatic value of the play'.⁷ Appearing as he does only at the beginning of Hal's story, he was no longer the culmination of the prince's transformation, but just another marker on the way. In his book commemorating the production, T. C. Worsley revealed how the treatment of Hotspur was a distinct difference brought about by a cycle, rather than an individual, production. 'It is customary when playing *Henry IV* singly for Harry Hotspur to assume the hero's role. But in this production a conception of Hotspur has to be found which will be congruent with all that we hear about him, but yet will be quite different from the usual admired romantic [...] He is a fighter and a little too much of the boaster. We can't help admiring his spirit and attack, but that over-plus of bragging is just what prevents us preferring him to Hal.'⁸ Michael Redgrave was admired for his generosity in stepping back from the glory of Hotspur's part to allow Hal to shine – in Worsley's words 'it is a great credit to his unselfishness that he refrained from spoiling the design by "stealing the play." That he should not do so was implicit, of course, in the conception' (p. 71). It's interesting to note that in a cycle which championed the continuity of characters between plays, especially Harry Andrew's Bolingbroke and Richard Burton's Hal, that Hotspur was played by two actors; for whilst Redgrave was playing Richard II, Robert Hardy played the small role of Harry Percy in the play.

Not only was Hotspur diminished in favour of Hal, but his impact upon Hal was also downplayed. Worsley remarked that in the 1951 production 'Prince Hal's development is traced principally in relation to two characters, to Falstaff and his father' (p. 48).

⁵ Scott McMillin, *Henry IV Part One*, Shakespeare in Performance (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 1.

⁶ Ivor Brown, cited in J. Dover Wilson and T. C. Worsley, *Shakespeare's Histories at Stratford 1951* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1952), p. 69.

⁷ Quayle in *Shakespeare's Histories at Stratford 1951*, p. viii.

⁸ Worsley in *Shakespeare's Histories at Stratford 1951*, pp. 44-5.

Subsequent productions following Quayle's 1951 cycle have focused upon the pull of Henry IV and Falstaff upon Hal, and it has been these three characters which now attract the leading actors. The posters for the recent production at the National Theatre depicts three characters: the main roles of David Bradfield as Henry IV, Mathew McFadden as Hal and Michael Gambon as Falstaff. Hotspur and Shallow appear on the fringes in the programme photo, an acknowledgement of two good roles that only last one play each; an unfortunate condition for a cyclical performance.

The emphasis on the nature of fathers and sons in the two plays has led to a focus upon the contrast of court and tavern, and it is this that productions tend to emphasise in their staging, rather than the contrast of the scenes of Hal and Hotspur. The continual emphasis upon the play extempore has elevated 2.4 to a scene of utmost importance in every production, while the following scene of 3.1, in which Hotspur has his moment of glory, is usually cut or diminished. Simon Callow, who had played Falstaff himself, in writing on the play spoke of 2.4 as a 'whole, vast scene' that 'covers extraordinary amounts of ground, narratively and in mood, action and relationships' whilst he denounced its counterpart 3.1 saying that 'it's hard not to feel impatient with it. We know that Hal is about to meet his father for the first time in the play, and it is a confrontation we are eager for.'⁹

Furthermore as a mere marker on the way to Hal's growth, Hotspur has become a caricature, an overblown portrayal of honour gone too far that only serves to highlight the virtues of Hal's understated honour, what Quayle described as 'that over-plus of bragging'.¹⁰ Whilst the court looks upon the glory of Hotspur, the audience is made to question whether this peculiar brand of honour is worthy of the name. Actors tend to strut the role, glorying in the absurdity of the character, and Hotspur became subjected to various acts of indignity, most notably the disposal of his corpse in a pig-trough in the 1964 production.

Sadly there is a growing predictability in recent productions of *Henry IV Part One* that continue to focus on Falstaff and the education of Hal. The recent National Theatre production by Nicholas Hytner once more presented the play extempore as a forecast of Falstaff's rejection, and ended the play with a focus on Falstaff, and a consequent sense of incompleteness. By focusing on the education of Hal, and suggesting that this is not completed in *Part One* but in Falstaff's rejection in the next part, the play becomes a study of an unruly prince who, in the boundaries of the text, does not change: it becomes a play with no clear conflict, development or interest. In contrast, by returning to an individual focus, the Hal and Hotspur conflict offers vitality to *Henry IV Part One*. Both roles offer the actor a chance to be the most sympathetic in the play; either part can be construed as the hero depending on the interpretation of director, actor and audience. In an ideal production, the audience, and indeed the actors themselves, should be unaware at the start of each night who the victor will be; the two actors playing Hal and Hotspur each vying for the audience's support in making the drama appear as either the triumph of Hal, or the tragedy of Hotspur.

⁹ Simon Callow, *Actors on Shakespeare: Henry IV Part I* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 62, p. 67.

¹⁰ Quayle in *Shakespeare's Histories at Stratford 1951*, p. viii.