

# Prince hal and his box-office performance



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

As William Shakespeare wrote *As You Like It*, “ All the world’s a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players./ They have their exits and their entrances;/ And one man in his time plays many parts.” Shakespeare further adds to this philosophy upon introducing young Prince Hal in his play *Henry IV Part One*. Hal adopts several personas ranging from the “ noble” to the “ degenerate” (Barber 54). He is able to wittingly run this gamut of personalities on his way to inheriting the throne through manipulation of what he learns from observing King Richard II, his father King Henry IV, and his own political stratagem. His ultimate wisdom-the realization that “ makes” Hal-is that the role of king is little more than a performance for the public, thereby implying that the king himself is little more than an actor. Through King Henry IV’s assessment of Hal’s actions in light of both Richard’s and his own rule, Hal discovers that a king is a performer that must decide what type of persona he wants to reveal to the public. Furthermore, in light of his early associations with John Falstaff, Hal embodies the role of the “ traditional prodigal son,” complete with degenerate and bibulous cronies to tempt him into wrongdoings (Barber 54). Although both King Henry and Hal recognize that this current life of carelessness and ill-repute do little to prepare him for the throne, Hal is a crafty young man, worldly in his perception of a leader’s role before his public. An actor must not be too intimate with his audience in order to establish himself and his actions as somehow separate from the commonplace, the banal. According to King Henry IV, Richard II’s tragic flaw was that he “ grew a companion to the common streets, enfeoffed himself to popularity” (HIV1. III. ii. 68-69). He too often appeared in the public eye, thereby stripping himself of that mystery and respect that a king must demand from his audience. A king must be

seen just enough to make the public intrigued, yet allow enough enigma to yield a sense of wonder. Furthermore, an actor's performance is a marriage between speech and action. Therefore, the "pathos of the loss of meaning" and position as king is emphasized in moments when "word and gesture, name and body, no longer go together," such as when the ousted Richard looks in a mirror at his reflection to find the "meaning the face has lost" by losing his kingship (Barber 68). While Richard performed his role as king to the best of his ability with flair and ostentation, he neglected to earn the respect of his audience, thereby leading to his downfall. In contrast, an actor must also establish a certain level of familiarity with the audience to win over their affections and establish a sense of connectedness. After having witnessed the mistakes of Richard's reign, Henry was cautious to make his reign "seldom but sumptuous" (HIV1. III. ii. 58). Because of this concern, Henry never truly establishes a recognizable persona with his audience, being thus enshrouded in mystery. His anonymity is represented during the Battle of Shrewsbury wherein he "survives because he has many marching in his coats, and throughout a political career where...he manipulates the symbols of majesty" (Barber 63). Even Shakespeare's audience has little respect for Henry because he takes so little notice of his son, save to admonish him for his wrongdoings. Falstaff, the foolish alcoholic yet confidante, rather than Henry often gains more of a father-like billing to Hal. Hal feels as though a wiser ruler would be one who is both aloof and connected to the public so that there is a separation between the king's role and the audience's role but there remains a real relationship and communication between the two. Although Hal has studied the scripts provided by Richard II and Henry IV, he must experiment with his own

character development and learn from his own mistakes. Hal occupies his time at the local pub with common thieves and prostitutes, losing his “ princely privilege with vile participation” (HIV1. III. ii. 86). His plan is to establish a reputation of folly and immorality in order to lower the expectations of those around him-only to later impress them with his seemingly overnight adoption of reliability. Essentially, Falstaff, symbol of Hal’s adolescent irresponsibility, is “ merely a pastime to be dismissed in due course” (Barber 54). Because Hal manipulates Falstaff in order to create a persona, it becomes apparent that the young prince is aware that he must play a part for the public. “ The prince is making a fresh start as the new king” by casting off his old friend Falstaff (Barber 64). Upon conquering Hotspur at the Battle of Shrewsbury, Hal finally gains the part of the noble king. As he stands over the slain bodies of both Hotspur, representative of self-sacrifice and nobility, and Falstaff, representative of Hal’s former life, there exists a sense of role-change. He is recast from fool to prince. Knowing that a king is nothing more than an actor is Hal’s ultimate wisdom because the attainment and performance of that role is his motivation throughout the entire play. As he observes the shortcomings of both Richard II’s and Henry IV’s performances, he begins with a general concept of the type of king he wants to be. Although he has his shortcomings throughout his youth, they serve only to establish him as human, a sort of “ everyman.” However, his ability to rise above these mistakes is the characteristic that earns his public’s respect. In the end, his performance renders him both familiar and astounding and, judging from his reception in Shakespeare’s time, earned him rave reviews.