

# The transformation of hal



Arguably, Hal, Prince of Wales, underwent a gargantuan transformation throughout the course of 1 Henry IV. As an audience we are thrust into the middle of conflict concerning the prince. At the onset of the play, the Son of the King is portrayed as an immature wild-man, drinking and whoring his life away. The audience sees a man that is “truant to chivalry” (5. 1. 95).

However, it is more likely that Hal was ready for kingship long before the beginning of this story, and is simply waiting for his opportunity to right all the wrongs of his father’s reign with a perfectly timed return to glory and chivalry. The usurpation of the throne from Richard II did not leave much room for his father’s success, therefore Hal realizes he must create a way to win over the hearts and minds of the English people and create peace under one ruler. In his soliloquy, Hal states: So when this loose behavior I throw off  
And pay the debt I never promised, By how much better than my word I am, By so much shall I falsify men’s hopes; And, like bright metal on a sullen ground, My reformation, glittering o’er my fault, Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes  
Than that which hath no foil to set it off. (1. 2. 215-

222) Clearly, Hal has already thought through the transformation that he must pretend to undergo in order to win the favor of the people. By the end of the play, the Prince of Wales becomes the perfect Prince, having greater ability to speak than most because of his constant battling of wits with Falstaff, and the appreciation of honor in war, which he learns from Hotspur, the “theme of honor’s tongue” (1. 1. 80). In other words, Hal must achieve his greatness by doing two things: outwitting his enemies and showing his honor on the battlefield by reuniting England and putting a stop to the “civil butchery” causing the “intestine shock” that is tearing apart the country (1. 1. 13). During the Battle of Shrewsbury toward the end of Act 5, Hal achieves

one facet of his rise to greatness when he saves his father King Bolingbroke from Douglass. This stage of achievement is further solidified when Hal slays the formidable Hotspur in one-on-one combat. However, in his final statements to Hotspur and Falstaff, Hal displays the one thing that truly sets him apart from any of Shakespeare's characters: his ability to speak and understand the common man ["...I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life"] and also to speak so well as to rouse an army, unlike his foil Hotspur (2. 4. 18-19). Like his father in the opening scene of the play, Hal does not say all that he knows, a theme characterized by Falstaff when he states "discretion is the better part of valor" (5. 3. 115). Even when Falstaff lies "breathless and bleeding on the ground," Hal continues, even in his final speech to his supposedly dear friend, to remark upon his fatness, saying "I should have a heavy miss of thee" and so forth (5. 4. 108, 138). Thus the audience is forced to believe that Hal has established that Falstaff is not dead, and knows of his plan to steal his glory of the slaying of the great warrior Hotspur. When Falstaff returns, Hal says something that echoes York ["but is your Grace dead, my Lord of Somerset?" (1. 1. 17)] in 3 Henry V: ... Art thou alive? Or is it fantasy that plays upon our eyesight? I prithee, speak. We will not trust our eyes Without our ears. Thou art not what thou seems't. (5. 4. 137-41) The response on the part of Hal is an unnatural one, sounding fake and melodramatic, as if Hal already knew that Falstaff would enter alive and well. Although the prosody of the speech is regular, Hal's response still oozes sarcasm in tone. This forces the audience to take Hal's previously "final" speech to Falstaff as an opportunity to insult Falstaff on the greatest plateau. Again, the wisdom with which Hal operates, not saying too much of what he knows, echoes the

qualities of his father in the first act when he refuses to let Westmoreland know of his awareness of the rebellion and loss of Mortimer. Although no one can say for sure whether Hal knew Falstaff was in fact alive when he made his final speech, we must do so for arguments sake. Hal's final speech to Hotspur is something entirely different than the one to the fat nobleman. After mortally injuring Harry Percy, and allowing him to attempt a final speech, Hal must finish what Hotspur is trying to say; "... for worms, brave Percy" (5. 4. 86). This accents once again an all too common theme in the book: Percy's poor speaking skills and Hal's contrasting ability to speak and act like a great leader. Contrasting with the mockery of Hal's final speech to Falstaff, Hal's last words to Percy express respect more than any other trait. Hal explains that when Percy's " body did contain a spirit,/ A kingdom for it was too small a bound" (5. 4. 93-4). Hal also says " This earth that bears thee dead/ Bears not alive so stout a gentleman" (5. 4. 94-5). These words are far nicer than those words expressed to Falstaff, which in turn creates a balance that Hal finally achieves in order to be a perfect Prince who would then be able to reunite the people. Cunning like his father, great with words like John Falstaff, and of the stoutest honor, Hal is able to win his father's approval — " thou hast redeemed thy lost opinion" — and put to bed suspicions of his truancy to honor (5. 4. 46). By the conclusion of I Henry IV, Hal has not only become what he always promised he would, a prince of the people, but also a great leader. The final speeches to Falstaff and Hotspur echo the successful accomplishments — military honor, prowess, respect for the honor of others, cunning, and leadership — that were necessary to win over everyone, from his father to the rebellious Percy family. These final actions bring the play together by solidifying Hal's initial prediction from his soliloquy

in the first Act. Oddly, a play that seemed to be doomed from the beginning turns out to have a happy ending through the production of a great and worthy leader.