

Prince hal's "act of becoming" in henry iv part 1



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One of the main themes in Shakespeare's King Henry IV, Part 1, is Prince Hal's "act of becoming" as he moves from Falstaff's "sweet wag" (I. ii. 23) to King Henry's "fair rescuer" (V. iii. 48). The significance of the scenes at Boar's-Head Tavern, Hal's role-playing with Falstaff, his parodies of battles and of Hotspur, and his slumming in low-level society is that they are time frames in the emergence of Prince Hal's personality, but they are calculated time frames of his own choosing. In shirking his princely duties, he has chosen to act the part of the prodigal son until his father's throne is threatened and it is time to answer duty's call. In his soliloquy at the end of Act 1, Hal reveals much of his nature. First, he is not confused, in a dilemma, or even feeling guilty about being a wayward son. Second, he is well aware that the environment he has chosen to move in, the tavern society, is a place of disorder and idleness. It is a world that has meaning for the prince, however. He is not wasting his time there, but is practicing for events that will occur later. When he speaks of his reformation, he is being ironic. He is rebellious, but he does not need to reform. Hal knows his true nature and he will give up the "perpetual holiday" when it pleases him (I. ii. 191-214). The prodigal son will return to King Henry's court, but all in his own good time. Meanwhile, he will have a good time idling with the king of the Boars-Head Tavern, Sir John Falstaff. It is with Falstaff that Hal can exercise his wit. Their verbal exchanges exemplify that Hal is intelligent and a man with a definite sense of order, particularly as it pertains to the law and to time. He is much younger than Falstaff, but can match him insult for insult and pun for pun (II. ii. 63-83). It is the contrast between the two men, furthermore, that gives rise to their best verbal repartee. Falstaff has a complete disregard for law and order; Hal knows thieves are hung (II. ii.66), and tells Falstaff that

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although he may be a madcap prince, he's definitely not a thief (II. ii. 142, 138). Hal always knows what time it is; Falstaff does not care. Berating Falstaff for his lack of time-ordered line, he says, "...unless hours were cups of sack, minutes, capons, clocks the tongue of bawds, dials the signs of leaping houses...the sun a fair hot wench... (I. ii. 7-10)". Hal says the purse was snatched on Monday and that he became a "man of all humours" at precisely twelve o'clock midnight (II. iv. 94). The Prince of Wales, furthermore, is a very prudent man, yet somewhat disingenuous. The robbery incident at Gadshall gives us an example of his imagination and his game playing. Although the trick on Falstaff was Roin's idea, it is a way for Hal to join in the fun without actually participating in the crime itself. He gets much pleasure and amusement in unmasking Falstaff, showing him as a coward and liar. Returning the stolen money with interest is a magnanimous gesture on Hal's part, but he is also upholding his princely reputation. It was, after all, the king's money that was snatched. After Hal plays his trick on poor Francis, he immediately goes into his parody of Hotspur, connecting the honorable Hotspur with a tavern servant. All Francis does is run up and down the stairs, unable to decide whether to take the prince's offer of money—a way to freedom—or to do his duty as an indentured servant. All Hotspur does is go back and forth from castle to horse to battle, incapable of focusing on anything but war. The implication is that Hal is not so narrow-minded, and that he has time for duty and honor and having fun. The quote "...I am not yet of Percy's mind..." indicates that, when the battle drums roll, the prince will be ready (II. iv. 103-109). The comical scenes that take place in the tavern are inverses of the serious scenes that occur later in King Henry's court and on the battlefield. Boar's-Head is a place where thieves gather and

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plan their robberies of unsuspecting travelers. Thieves have gathered around King Henry's court, also planning to rob him of his throne. It is in the tavern, fittingly, that Hal hears news of the rebellion. "Art thou not horribly afraid?" Falstaff asks, and Hal replies, "Not a whit..." (II. iv. 372-374). This reveals that Hal has used what time he has to formulate a plan: Hal kills Hotspur and prevents Douglas from killing the king. The role-playing Hal does with Falstaff, therefore, is a rehearsal of what he will do when he meets his father. Falstaff says, "Depose me?...banish plump Jack, and banish all the world!" The Prince, playing the role of his father, replies, "I do, I will" (II. iv. 440. 484-86). The heir apparent is being truthful, choosing the words from his soliloquy. He will reconcile with his father and sever ties with Falstaff and the tavern world. By the time Hal gets to the battlefield, he has played many parts. He has played the rogue. He has played at battle on Gadshill and in his witty parodies. He has walked among the lower classes and is well liked by them (II. iv. 9-14). In this respect, he is like his father, who, much to King Richard's chagrin, also endeared himself to the peasants (Richard II I. iv. 24-36). Yet, within his true environs, the prince acts maturely. "Rebellion lay in his way, and he found it," says Falstaff of Worcester (V. i. 27). However, now the serious Hal undercuts him. There is no place for Falstaff's wit in King Henry's court. Later on, in the midst of battle, the prince reaches into Falstaff's pocket to get a pistol, but finds a bottle of sack instead. "What is it a time to jest and dally now?" Hal says, and flings the bottle (V. iii. 57) The battlefield is no place for Falstaff's tavern. In sum, therefore, one can see how in Henry IV, Part II, the reader is given a preview of what Hal will be like when he becomes a king. At the play's end, Prince Hal's personality emerges as one larger than all those he has played at, and with, in his acting and

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joking. He has the wit of Falstaff, the courage and honor of Hotspur, and the leadership qualities of his father. He is a "man of all humours", a man with a superb sense of timing, and one who has rehearsed well for his next role when, all in good time, he will be King Henry V.