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Transposition of Thieves: Henry IV Part I

Though I hadn't seen them before reading Mcevoy, the parallels between the highway robbery and the usurpation of kingship fascinate me. King Henry (as Bolingbroke) had no more right to the crown than Falstaff and company had to the goods they stole, yet both pose the situation heroically when they defend what they have stolen. Both men are subverted by their accomplices. Poins gives Falstaff the information for the theft in the first place, and both Poins and Prince Harry initially help with the theft, or at least pretend to help with it, but all the time they plot to steal from the thieves. These parallels, King Henry juxtaposed with Falstaff, Prince Harry and Poins juxtaposed with Northumberland and Worcester, bring more questions with them. Prince Harry and Poins never meant for Falstaff to stay in possession of the stolen goods for long, and only pretended to help him. Was this true of Northumberland and Worcester as well? Did they ever intend King Henry to stay king? If so, did they expect Henry to be a weak king, or one who favored them more? At the same time, it is evident that the two groups of traitors have different motives. Poins and Harry are not interested in the loot as much as they are in hearing Falstaff's tale and exposing him to humiliation. Northumberland and Worcester want power and goods, not mere entertainment.

Perhaps a third parallel to this stealing from the thief idea, is the prisoners who become a focal point in the conflict with the King. Hotspur has conquered these men, and therefore has a "right" to their goods... and perhaps this is fair under terms of war, but it can also be seen as theft. The King asks for them, and while he does not take them by force, he is fairly firm in the idea that Hotspur should relinquish them to him. Hotspur, at this, seems to feel something a kin to the indignation of someone requiring of him something which he has, to quote Princess Bride, "rightfully stolen."

Women and Culture in Henry IV

Henry IV's opening scene depicts a small congregation of lords in the ruler's palace. Here, Henry laments the political divisions and the spread of blood in his country, and confidently hopes for the unification of England and the consolidation of his power. He speaks as if attempting to convince himself, and the reader becomes more aware of Richard's toil once Westmorland speaks and bad news pour.

The first bit of news is that Glyndwr has captured Mortimer, and that his soldiers were mutilated and their corpses turned to vile insults to the English. What surprised about Westmorland's comment was the involvement of women in battle. Why were women particularly involved? Was it an isolated incident contingent upon unique circumstances? Or should we focus more on the spreading of the myth? Was it, as Greenblatt states, a nation's effort to define itself by what it is not?

It seems that the theme of otherness is weaved into *Henry IV* in the form of prejudices against the Welsh. Glyndwr is depicted first as a brutal war tactician, possible sorcerer, and ruler of a magical land. Later on, he becomes the effeminate leader who marries and decides not to fight. The Welsh language is also ridiculed. Via this character, if he could be called such, Shakespeare exposes a nation's conception of otherness, as well as its effort to define itself. The English, for example, held mythical beliefs about what prolonged exposure to Welsh culture could result in, and these myths were perhaps intricately tied with their political interests. After all, Henry IV could not afford soldiers who learned so called effeminate traits. Chivalry, undying faith to the King, and aggression were traditionally masculine traits which were needed to sustain the kingdom and perpetuate the King's power.

While Shakespeare drew much of his knowledge about society and culture from historians and cultural analysts, I wondered if his inclusion of the English's belief in the sorcery and magic of Wales was aimed to show the national naiveté regarding foreigners at that moment in history.

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Watch Out For Number One

Prince Hal is a living dichotomy, a prince with the power and social fluidity to pacify and stand up to his royal father, and to spend time honing his cunning and political acumen with his surrogate drunkard father, all the while having a generally good, debauched, time. Hal is clever in the extreme, especially when contrasted against his "foil," Hotspur, and even in confrontations with his father. Hal's personal power is great: he is intelligent, shrewd, an eminently convincing speaker/flatterer/liar, and a warrior. All these qualities, however admirable, are truly brought together to show Hal's strength by his loyalty, which is to say his ruthlessness. Hal is only loyal to himself. He humiliates and uses Falstaff to his advantage perfectly. Falstaff, while not a terribly admirable character by conventional morals, obviously truly loves Hal, which is taken advantage of. The King is pacified and soothed with minimal effort. Hal plays him like a fiddle. I would argue that Hal is a bit of a superman: he has every earthly advantage and great natural gifts, however, his fatal flaw is clearly outlined here: his disloyalty.

HYPOCRITE HENRY

This play centers on family ties, or lack thereof. In Greenblatt's introduction he writes that the monarch's central problem is how to maintain control over and enforce unity upon the territories over which he claims dominion (1149). This is in particular a concern to Henry who did not earn the throne through his lineage. Having fought for the throne, his reign rests on more unsettling ground than if he had inherited it from his father in the traditional way. It was interesting to find that Henry IV bemoans his own son and wishes to have Northumberland's son.

That some night-tripping fairy had exchanged
In cradle clothes our children where they lay (ln 86-87) (Scene 1, Act 1)

A bitterness is evident as Prince Hal prevents the king from going on his sought after holy crusades. Henry's fear of his country being taken over is rooted in his insecure feelings concerning his right to the throne^e. He watches his son fraternize and sees the kingdom he has built could easily be wiled away by his own blood—an ironic twist. Though the prince matures, the faith lost between father and son is felt and true good standing is elusive as the play ends unsettled.

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The Ideal vs. Reality: Henry IV, Part 1

Henry IV, Part 1, opens with the English king of the same name looking forward to involvement with the Crusades. He wishes to get involved with the fighting in Jerusalem, where Islamic forces are battling European forces for the "Holy Land." To Henry, the Crusades are glorified and much more noble and honorable than internal political strife and restlessness. In this ethnocentric context, the Crusades appear to Henry to be morally black and white: the forces of "good" Christianity fighting to protect the Holy Land from "evil" Islamic forces.

However, before the king is able to embark on such anticipated conquests, he receives reports of internal strife breaking out between Scottish and Welsh rebels and English forces. Thus the king's chivalric hopes of conquering the Holy Land as a united nation falter and he must address the much more pressing and much less glamorous struggle in his own country.

Henry's son, Prince Harry, practices the opposite of Henry's shattered idealism: rather than barricading himself behind the walls of his status, Henry, spends much of his time with the common people in a bar. He is not interested in "Holy Wars" or Crusades, but instead aligns himself much more closely with common citizens – even criminals – and therefore gains a better, more realistic perspective on issues than his father commands.

Henry IV, Part 1

This is a Mockery

I Henry IV is, I feel, quite the deviation from *Richard II*. Shakespeare seemed dry and uninteresting with the latter; the ongoing situation with Henry and those around him is much more entertaining and interesting (to me). This play is much more comedic about the issues it seems to address, and this is done quite well both through the way characters act and react within their given situations, as well as the way characters are in themselves. Shakespeare comically portrays how Kingship is a difficult position, and even the most capable and willing of Kings can still be inefficient and lacking. Shakespeare also seems to stress the inaccuracy of common misconceptions; the character of Prince Harry is seemingly loathed by his father and some other upper-class folk while he is adored and respected amongst the lower-class people. He is, however, a good young man, he is simply taking his time to express it. Another apparent trend in this play (again, to me), is the importance of acting and roles. It seems as though Shakespeare intentionally stressed how important it is at times to be able to act or to fill certain roles, and this becomes increasingly apparent as one progresses through the play. Shakespeare, in essence, combines the drama and reality of this play with comedy in order to bring a resounding realism and depth to the characters.

An example of the difficulties of being king arises right at the opening of the play. King Henry is wallowing in guilt from having deposed Richard, and he is worried about the increasing violence and absurdity of the current civil war within England. He is also fretting about his son, and whether or not he will ever be competent and

responsible enough to take the throne. This is exemplary of the conflicts within being king in that despite the fact that Henry took the throne with much support and capability, he now finds himself in a position where many oppose him and he feels powerless. He is struggling to be able to fill the role which he was designated to play, and his inability to do so is causing him that much more trouble. My reading of MEvoy supports this; he expresses that the roles which characters play seem to enchant us and draw us in. Despite actions that we may disagree with or condemn, we clearly feel sympathy for Henry, and dislike for the fact that his son is associating with "low-lives." I feel that this play has great potential to express what is still to this day a folly question: how is it that we can respect characters that act in ways we disagree with? Why are we so willing to secretly root for he whom appears to be the bad guy? The characterization and the subtle intensity of Shakespeare's work is fantastic. What roles do we need to fill as readers?
