

Essay Sample – Shakespeare’s King Henry IV – Part 1

In response to late Elizabethan instability threatening embryonic national unity, William Shakespeare deploys the hybrid genre of his history play, King Henry IV – Part 1 to embrace the political paradigm shift from outdated medieval virtues of chivalry to the consequentialist ethics of Renaissance humanism whose end is the common weal. Accordingly, Shakespeare invites readers to embrace the political paradigm shift from outdated medieval virtues of chivalry to valorise consequentialist ethics of renaissance humanism through juxtaposing the symbolic hamartia of rage in the protagonist foil represented through the tragedy structure of Hotspur’s narrative with the prince’s coming of age narrative. Similarly, Shakespeare represents the relationship between noble bearing and commoners according to renaissance pragmatism through Falstaff’s comedic role to position audiences to the common weal as the end of political pragmatism.

Shakespeare utilises the hybrid genre of King Henry IV – Part 1 to position his audience to embrace the paradigm shift to the consequentialist ethics of Renaissance humanism symbolised by Prince Hal’s coming of age narrative, to justifying Queen Elizabeth’s legitimacy for stability achieved following the Spanish Armada’s defeat. Accordingly, Hal soliloquises his intention abandon his disreputable milieu, metaphorically juxtaposing their “base contagious clouds” with the celestial motif in the way he will “imitate the sun” in a symbol of legitimate power that unites his true legitimacy with a Machiavellian consequentialism that subverts honour for political ends. Correspondingly, Hal’s willingness to indulge in vice to assume the mantle of a legitimate king through the simile that symbolises Hal as “bright metal on a sullen ground” foreshadows his rehabilitation that will be achieved through warrior’s glory in conflict represented through his “reformation glitt’ring o’er my fault” that “shall sew more goodly,” something “that which hath no foil to set it off,” introducing situational irony through the authorial intrusion of claiming Hotspur is foil that contrasts to Hal’s vice, valorising the political paradigm shift from medieval virtue ethics to renaissance humanism that is grounded in consequentialist ethics.

Contrastingly, Shakespeare utilises the hybrid genre of King Henry IV-Part 1 to critique the political paradigm of outdated medieval virtues of chivalry through the symbolic hamartia of rage in the protagonist foil, reflecting Queen Elizabeth's post-chivalric reforms that separate military and aristocratic roles. As such, Hotspur's victory against the Scots provokes the king's epithet for him as the "theme of honour's tongue," personifying honour and fate to publicly praise Hotspur's medieval political paradigm. Accordingly, Hotspur's refusal to submit any captured surrenders to the King's envoy when juxtaposing his state after the battle as "breathless and faint, leaning upon my sword," with that of the envoy leads to his denunciation of the king within the dysphemistic epithet of the "vile politician Bullingbrook," demonstrating Hotspur's hamartia of rage as he rejects cunning manipulation in securing aristocratic support, evoking Hotspur's medieval virtues of chivalry that dismisses the new political paradigm of renaissance humanism. Contrastingly, Hotspur hyperbolically declares "if the devil come and roar," as he will not send the captured prisoners to the king revealing his hamartia of rage that prompts his support for Mortimer's claim to the throne in which he will "shed my dear blood, drop by drop in the dust" utilising the consonance of 'd' to produce sound imagery of dripping, to foreshadow his eventual tragedy due to his medieval virtue ethics of chivalry, contrasting to King Henry IV's prioritisation of manoeuvring and manipulation in achieving aristocratic support to gain legitimate political power.

Shakespeare utilises the hybrid genre of King Henry IV-Part 1 to represent the relationship between noble bearing and commoners according to renaissance pragmatism through Falstaff's comedic role of the common man to position audiences to perceive the common weal as the end of political pragmatism, resonating with the fears of popular revolt after the Reformation's elevation of individual conscience. Falstaff's soliloquy in prose lamenting the poor condition of his infantrymen through the metonymy of "food for powder" that directly references gun powder, cynically personifying cannons as beasts fed by conflict to suggest "mortal men" will "fill a pit" as commoners suffer under will politics that are unresolved before confronting the reality of open warfare, provoking Falstaff's poignant sympathy through prose to position the audience to accept a cunning and merciless politician that practices cold objectivity in securing the common weal. Similarly, Hal's response to Falstaff's slaying of Hotspur through metaphorically agreeing to "gild it with the happiest terms" symbolically represents his anagnorisis that pragmatically pursues securing the common weal above personal honour. Accordingly, Falstaff ends his parody of a "catechism" with his dismissal of

honour and virtue as “a mere scutcheon,” metonymically alluding to the reputation of a noble bearing and dignity, positioning the audience through the comedic form to see the common weal as the end of political pragmatism to maintain political stability.

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