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Finding the True Hero

William Shakespeare's *I Henry IV* is a remarkably entertaining play that also maintains historical accuracy. Shakespeare delves into the mindset of his characters, bringing them to life and making them relatable, rather than just recounting the events of the past. Two of his most compelling characters are those of Prince Henry and Hotspur, two young men who have juxtaposing personalities and are frequently compared to each other by Prince Henry's father, the King. Arguably Prince Henry appears to be the underachiever in the play, shirking his princely responsibilities while Hotspur appears to be the hero, coming back triumphantly from battle and making a name for himself. As the story progresses, however, it is revealed that Prince Henry is not quite as unmotivated as he seems. Prince Henry is quite perceptive in his actions and the ultimate goals he intends to attain, while Hotspur does not reflect upon his actions as thoroughly. Prince Henry turns out to be the surprise hero, and Hotspur the villain.

Prince Henry commonly associated with the lower class because he frequently mingles with them, speaking in prose, as the lower class is known to speak in Shakespearean literature. His closest companions are Falstaff, a drunken knight, and Poins, a thief. These friends convince him to engage in activities not fit for a prince, such as robbing travellers on their way to Canterbury. Yet Prince Henry has other plans. After robbing these travellers, he plays the part of the hero, returning to them their stolen

goods with interest as well. His association with these people below his social class is strategic, however. Knowing he is the heir to the throne, Prince Henry is building relationships with the people he will one day rule. He is learning what his people want and think.

Up until this point in the play, Prince Henry and King Henry have had a tumultuous relationship. The King has even vocally acknowledged jealousy of Lord Northumberland being blessed with such a son as Hotspur: “Yea, thou mak’st me sad, and mak’st me sin / In envy that my Lord Northumberland / Should be the father to so blest a son, / A son who is the theme of Honor’s tongue... / ...Whilst I, by looking on the praise of him, / See riot and dishonor stain the brow / Of my young Harry...” (Act 1, scene 1, 78-81, 84-86). He follows these lines further, asserting his disappointment in Henry with wishing that his son were Hotspur rather than the Prince. The King’s comparison of Hotspur and Prince Henry continue throughout the play.

Prince Henry is aware of his father’s disappointment in him as a son, but fully intends to win back his respect. As Mark Van Doren, professor of literature at Columbia University, asserts, one must remember, “how conscious Shakespeare’s princes always are of their careers,” (Van Doren, 1939). In a soliloquy, Prince Henry explains, “I know you all, and will awhile uphold / The unyoked humor of your idleness. / Yet herein will I imitate the sun, / who doth permit the base contagious cloud / To smother up his beauty from the world, / That, when he please again to be himself, / Being wanted, he may be wondered at / By breaking through the foul and ugly mists / Of vapors that did seem to strangle him.” (Act I, scene ii, 168-176). He intends to surprise everyone with his sudden chivalry and gain more respect by impressing his father and the kingdom when it is

necessary. These thoughts expressed by Prince Henry illuminate a deeper level to his character; an understanding of life far greater than anyone else in the play gives him credit for.

This hidden chivalry in Prince Henry is confirmed in Act III when the King calls upon Prince Henry only to verbally berate him, even beginning to cry from frustration and disappointment. Prince Henry takes this speech in stride, reacting politely, saying “I shall hereafter, my thrice gracious lord, / Be more myself,” and taking a vow saying, “This in the name of God I promise here; / The which if He be pleased I shall perform, / I do beseech your majesty, may salve / the long-grown of my intemperance. / If not, the end of life cancels all bands, / And I will die a hundred thousand deaths / Ere break the smallest part of this vow.” (Act III, scene ii, 153-159).

Hotspur, in comparison, is ill tempered, hot-headed, lacks respect for formalities, and is described by his father as “a wasp-stung and impatient fool... / ...To break into this woman’s mood, / Tying thine ear to no tongue but thine own.” (Act I, scene i, 235-237). Frequently unpredictably spewing insulting rants about wrongs in the world, Hotspur listens to nobody when he is warned that his temper will cause him to “loseth men’s hearts.” (Act III, scene i, 185). His very nickname, Hotspur, is descriptive of these characteristics as well. Eloquently described by Harold C. Goddard, author of *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Hotspur also stood for the “outworn conception of honor” for which he literally gave his life (Goddard, 1951). Henry values honor as well, but not in the same regard as Hotspur. Prince Henry values honor only in as much as he needs to earn it.

The audience sees the shift in character between Hotspur and Prince Henry in Act III. Just after Hotspur verbally assaults the King, Prince Henry is gaining a second chance at proving his worth to the King. It is at this point that the audience's affections begin to shift from viewing Hotspur as the hero to Prince Henry. Juxtaposing Prince Henry with Hotspur, Van Doren points out that, while Prince Henry has no problem admitting his flaws not only to himself but also to his father, the King, Hotspur "did not understand himself – could not have named his virtues, would never have admitted his limitations." (Van Doren, 1939). This assertion leads to the idea that Hotspur's part in the play was in fact simply "pure tragedy" meant to highlight Prince Henry's true characteristics as a hero.

Hotspur is essentially driven to madness in his conquest for revenge for his family's rightful inheritance of the throne. Prince Henry proves himself the more honorable man while he says over Hotspur's body, "Adieu, and take thy praise with thee to heaven! / Thy ignominy sleep with thee in the grave, / But not remember'd in thy epitaph!" (Act V, scene iv, 98-100). His honorable actions do not stop here, however. Merely lines later, Falstaff claims to have been the one to slay Hotspur and Prince Henry simply allows him to take the credit for this feat. As the audience sees this, it knows that had Hotspur been the one to prevail, he would have been drunk on victory and would not have allowed Falstaff the glory of the winning kill.

Prince Henry appears to be a truly worthy heir to the throne; he is seemingly superior to the average man. Because he has come so far since the beginning of the play, his original plan of surprising the kingdom with his chivalry and maturity was successful. Even the audience, who knew of his plan from the beginning, is surprised. He has

regained his father's respect, honor, and confidence, securing his inheritance of the throne and his place in the court. The people no longer look down on him as an underachiever, but rather as royalty, a man to be treated with high regard. Playing the role of a hero, Prince Henry takes on the characteristics set forward in Beowulf, one of the oldest hero stories in history. The role of the hero is that of a person who will extend beyond what most people would do simply because it is the right and moral thing to do. Although Hotspur may have been physically stronger and more successful in battle, Prince Henry prevailed in the end because of the characteristics he possessed of a true king. Arrogance and a lifelong desire for honor were not enough for Hotspur's success. Prince Henry's quiet, determined disposition allowed him to always have a clear head and know what step he should next take. While one must recall that this play was a history lesson taught to audience members in the form of a play, William Shakespeare gave these historical figures a story to tell and relatable personalities with depth. He caused people to take interest in what happened to England's past and made education enjoyable, leaving a mark on history that cannot be forgotten.

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