



The First Part of King Henry the Fourth

William Shakespeare

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Henry IV, Part 1 is a history play by William Shakespeare, believed to have been written no later than 1597. It is the second play in Shakespeare's tetralogy dealing with the successive reigns of Richard II, Henry IV (two plays), and Henry V. Henry IV, Part 1 depicts a span of history that begins with Hotspur's battle at Homildon against the Douglas late in 1402 and ends with the defeat of the rebels at Shrewsbury in the middle of 1403. From the start it has been an extremely popular play both with the public and the critics. Henry Bolingbroke—now King Henry IV—is having an unquiet reign. His personal disquiet at the murder of his predecessor Richard II would be solved by a crusade to the Holy Land, but broils on his borders with Scotland and Wales prevent that. Moreover, he is increasingly at odds with the Percy family, which helped him to his throne, and Edmund Mortimer, the Earl of March, Richard II's chosen heir. Adding to King Henry's troubles is the behaviour of his son and heir, the Prince of Wales. Hal (the future Henry V) has forsaken the Royal Court to waste his time in taverns with low companions. This makes him an object of scorn to the nobles and calls into question his royal worthiness. Hal's chief friend and foil in living the low life is Sir John Falstaff. Fat, old, drunk, and corrupt as he is, he has a charisma and a zest for life that captivates the Prince. The play features three groups of characters that interact slightly at first, and then come together in the Battle of Shrewsbury, where the success of the rebellion will be decided. First there is King Henry himself and his immediate council. He is the engine of the play, but usually in the background. Next there is the group of rebels, energetically embodied in Henry Percy ("Hotspur") and including his father, the Earl of Northumberland and led by his uncle Thomas Percy, Earl of Worcester. The Scottish Earl of Douglas, Edmund Mortimer and the Welshman Owen Glendower also join. Finally, at the center of the play are the young Prince Hal and his companions Falstaff, Poins, Bardolph, and Peto. Streetwise and pound-foolish, these rogues manage to paint over this grim history in the colours of comedy. As the play opens, the king is angry with Hotspur for refusing him most of the prisoners taken in a recent action against the Scots at Holmedon. Hotspur, for his part, would have the king ransom Edmund Mortimer (his wife's brother) from Owen Glendower, the Welshman who holds him. Henry refuses, berates Mortimer's loyalty, and treats the Percys with threats and rudeness. Stung and alarmed by Henry's dangerous and peremptory way with them, they proceed to make common cause with the Welsh and Scots, intending to depose "this ingrate and cankered Bolingbroke." By Act II, rebellion is brewing. Meanwhile, Henry's son Hal is joking, drinking, and whoring with Falstaff and his associates. He likes Falstaff but makes no pretense at being like him. He enjoys insulting his dissolute friend and makes sport of him by joining in Poins' plot to disguise themselves and rob and terrify Falstaff and three friends of loot they have stolen in a highway robbery, purely for the fun of watching Falstaff lie about it later, after which Hal returns the stolen money. Rather early in the play, in fact, Hal informs us that his riotous time will soon come to a close, and he will re-assume his rightful high place in affairs by showing himself worthy to his father and others through some (unspecified) noble exploits. Hal believes that this sudden change of manner will amount to a greater reward and acknowledgment of prince-ship, and in turn earn him respect from the members of the court.

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