

ENGLISH: *HENRY IV PART 1*

“Hal shows a readiness to use other people as a means to his own ends” – To what extent do you agree?

Scripted approximately 200 years after the exiled Henry Bolingbroke seized the throne of England to become King Henry IV, Shakespeare’s eponymous play seems to drive the audience to focus more on the thoughts and actions of his son, Hal, the Prince of Wales. The crown prince is subject to more change within the play than any other character and tantamount to this is the redemption from wayward son and drunkard to a “gallant” prince worthy of being heir apparent. Much of this change is fuelled by his own desire to reveal his “true self” and this surfaces frequently in his quest to rid his self-perceived “shame” by his readiness to use other people as tools for his goal.

Hal’s first and only soliloquy in Act I Scene 2 suggests that he has always been detached from the world of Eastcheap, and as a result, he is willing to use these people for his own entertainment. As a young man well acquainted with the Boar’s Head Tavern in Eastcheap, Hal uses this lower world (as emphasised by Shakespeare’s influence on Hal’s switching to prose) for fun and excitement. Putting Falstaff upon a pedestal, Hal passively follows this quasi-father figure amongst his adventures of indulgence and unbridled immorality. Fully willing to be involved in the fun and “go by the moon” Hal even goes as far as to spur on Falstaff to consider “where will we take purse?” Not only is Hal willing to be complicit in the “petty thievery” of Falstaff and co. but he is also willing to take the lead and actively use well intentioned people for his own amusement. The tavern’s waiter Francis went out of his way to give Hal a “small” gift. Hal however took this touching gesture to create a ruse catching Francis between the duties “of work” and of a sense of obligation to talk to the prince. The capacity to actively use Francis for his own entertainment while he was waiting for Falstaff to return from the “robbery at Gad’s Hill” highlights Hal’s darker nature of using other people for his own end.

Again, using the “good men” of Eastcheap, the “Prince of Wales” is able to support his role as a prince and leader and future king. Appearing to practise giving orders and commands, Shakespeare scripts Hal to urge using many imperatives and infinitives to highlight the urgency of the commands for Bardolph (“go bear this letter”) and Peto (“go Peto, to horse, to horse”) to undertake quests on his behalf and of the crown’s war effort. The fact that Hal seamlessly switches to verse for these commands causes the audience to realise that Hal is acting like a true princely leader. Nonetheless, the audience still observes Hal is using his friends for his own means – even if it does match the role he wishes to ascend to. The audience may alternatively view this delegation of tasks as an act of laziness, not uncommon to the pub dwelling Hal. Even as the character with the most lines within the play, Hal remains an enigmatic character, and the audience of 1 Henry IV is never able to truly pin down his real persona. It is perhaps for this reason that Hal’s actions appear to be mere calculations. Prophesising to “command all the good lads in Eastcheap”, the audience is likely to remember Hal’s soliloquy declaring he will be a just ruler for all, this statement could as equally be embodying those earlier careful thoughts or else just be the ravings of a drunkard returning from some “three or fourscore hogsheads” of ale. Such behaviour whilst appearing focused on the good of the country at present and into the future, nonetheless sees other people being used for Hal’s own personal good which is his primary objective rather than a by-product of any national benefit.

During Act III Scene 2 wherein Hal is chastised harshly by his father as being “a degenerate” and an “alien to the hearts of all the court”, Hal declares to clear his name, and “throw off” his loose behaviour. A “valiant” declaration to “pluck allegiance from men’s hearts”, this assertion is followed unsurprisingly by Hal’s intention to be “more (him)self” through the downfall of Hotspur. By using Hotspur’s “virtuous” and “courageous” name, known to all people in England for being “chivalrous” and “brave”, Hal intends to cover his “mistreadings” “on Percy’s head”. Intending to switch Hotspur’s “glorious deeds for (his) indignities” Hal purposefully expresses his willingness to use another for his own means – this case being his “glitt’ring” reformation from wayward youth to noble crown prince.

The entire notion of Hal using people purely for his own benefit is thrown into question when the audience considers Hal's defence of his friends. Following the Gad's Hill robbery a sheriff arrives at the Boar's Head Tavern at "two o'clock" one morning searching for a man meeting Falstaff's description. Surprisingly for the audience, Hal places his position at risk "engage(ing) (his) word" to the sheriff in defence of his friends, of who Hal knows they are guilty. Shakespeare's redirection of the prince's character is designed to entreat the audience to consider who Hal really is. Whilst his actions were certainly ignoble in terms of justice, they do also present Hal as an honest friend. Such interpretations by the audience can cause a decisive shift in their understanding of who is the "madcap Prince of Wales". Hal alone on stage with the sheriff could have earned himself some respect from the court the following morning during his meeting with his father should he have contributed to the arrest of thieves of the "king's exchequer". Perhaps Shakespeare tries to present Hal as a young man who is a man of contradictions as he tries to ascertain who he really is. Not unlike other *nostos* tales where Shakespeare's protagonists come of age, this could be a carefully placed scene before Hal meets with his father to emphasise that Hal's change is not swift or easy.

For the audience of Henry IV Part One, Shakespeare presents a youth who is troubled by matters of state who wishes to be able to remain having fun in Eastcheap but is also aware of the bigger role he must fill. While Hal certainly does use people, the question as to whether it is purely for his own end is certainly greyed by the fact that most outcomes are for the good of the state as well of his himself – and this outcome of his decisions occurs more frequently as the play progresses. Considering the Quattro as a whole, King Henry V's motivation when making his decisions seems to be to rule well, justly and in the best interests of England. In 1 Henry IV however, the audience only sees the Prince of Wales growing towards this role, and as a result, his decisions in this play do show a readiness to use other people as a method to present himself as a better person and an acceptable heir to the throne.