This essay examines Shakespeare’s history plays as an exploration of the place of theatricality in politics. Over the course of two tetralogies, Shakespeare enters into the Early Modern theatrical discourse by presenting his audience with a series of monarchs who rise and fall according to their histrionic skill and interpretation of the role of King. Prince Hal easily emerges as the playwright’s champion, destined for success by the strength of his theatrical drive and his innate understanding that to succeed within the realm of political theatre, one must become a Player.
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For my family, especially my mother

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Image on title page from the engraving by Claes Van Visscher, London 1616
Introduction

In an analysis of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Lionel Abel remarked in the seminal *Metatheatre*, “All of the characters in the play can be distinguished as follows: some are fundamentally dramatists or would-be dramatists, the others are fundamentally actors.” (49) This striking insight into the nature of Shakespeare’s most famous tragedy resonates across the canon, and some of its most powerful implications reside within the complex political theatre of his two historical tetralogies. If one enters into a reading of the histories with this dramaturgical discourse in mind, a profound inquiry into the place of theatricality within the political sphere is revealed, dramatized over the course of the eight plays and culminating in the complex figure of King Henry V, whose progress from the young Prince Hal is charted in the *Henriad*. While the term “Player King” has long been bandied about by scholars of the tetralogies (most often to describe King Richard II), it is Hal who most successfully embodies the many nuances within such an epithet to become both playwright and player. Possessed by his directorial drive, from the outset Hal emerges as the rightful Master of his Play.

Over the course of this essay, I will demonstrate the depth of Hal’s innate theatrical understanding as manifested in numerous ways throughout the *Henriad*. To illuminate the multifaceted implications of the Prince’s histrionic capabilities, it will be necessary to engage the forces that shaped the tempestuous theatrical discourse of the Early Modern age; having done so, Shakespeare’s history plays can be seen to engage the contemporary debate on theatricality through the contested medium of the theatre itself, consummating in the figure of the future Henry V. It is perhaps a heavy weight to put upon the shoulders of a young Prince, but Hal’s fiercely theatrical drive demands no less of any audience.
I. ‘A kingdom for a stage, princes to act, and monarchs to behold the swelling scene’: The Theatricality of a Prince

Before the audience is granted their first glimpse of Prince Hal, they are witness to several judgments made upon his character. The first is offered by the newly made King Henry IV in the final Act of Richard II, who describes him as an overhanging plague, “As dissolute as des’prate” (V.iii.20). The King continues to distance himself bitterly from his son in 1 Henry IV, comparing him to Hotspur and wishing aloud:

…O that it could be proved
That some night-tripping fairy had exchanged
In cradle-clothes our children where they lay,
And call'd mine Percy, his Plantagenet!
Then would I have his Harry, and he mine. (I.i.86-90)

More than the personal complaints of a disappointed parent, these remarks are critical appraisals of Hal’s portrayal of the Prince of Wales; Henry has a clear vision for the role in his own mind, and given the chance, he would gladly cast Hotspur in his son’s stead. When Hal at last makes his entrance in 1 Henry IV, there is little reason to doubt the King’s seemingly justifiable disappointment in his heir; the audience watches Hal associate with disreputables like Sir John Falstaff and a gang of highwaymen, and then make plans to participate in a robbery the following night. No audience, either onstage or off, has cause to question this interpretation of Hal, for it is plainly the only face that he presents to those around him.¹ When the stage at last empties of all save the Prince, however, he makes a startling revelation to the audience in soliloquy:

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 clouds

¹ Indeed, despite the successes of the Prince at Shrewsbury, the fears of the Lord Chief Justice are echoed in the faces of Hal’s own brothers upon his ascension to the throne in 2 Henry IV, and Hal must struggle to convince them of his supposedly reformed self.
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted he may be more wondered at
By breaking thorough the foul and ugly mists
Of vapors that did seem to strangle him. (I.ii.148-156)

Not only does Hal have a full understanding of the life he leads amongst the denizens of Eastcheap, he has taken up their company as part of a grand scheme to promote his own future popularity with his subjects. He will mimic the habits of these men, join in their actions and immerse himself in the character of the Prodigal Prince for the sole purpose of some day dramatically throwing the guise aside for the full splendor of nobility. The depth of the Prince’s near-Machiavellian calculation is unsettling, as he casually alludes to the time when he will “please again to be himself” (153), placing a firm barrier between his current appearance and his true self.

While his father has ardently wished for a son who could accumulate honors and glory rather the stain of “riot and dishonor” (I.ii.84), the Prince seeks to break free from the confines of such a comparison. Instead, Hal will convert himself into his own foil, creating a narrative independent of all others through a self-contrived fall and subsequent reparation. He concludes his soliloquy with this remark: “I’ll so offend as to make offence a skill,/ Redeeming time when men think least I will” (169-170). Within a space of twenty-odd lines, the Prince has entirely rewritten his character in the eyes of the audience, transfiguring himself from a dissolute youth into an actor skilled enough to fool both a nation and his father. Every subsequent move he makes upon the stage must be evaluated through the new lens he has offered, making the audience constantly second-guess his true motives and seek out the true self he claims to possess behind the façade.² The Prince has thus transformed

² Hal’s assurances regarding his “real” self raise many questions: where might this self be found, and when does it ever emerge? If all the audience knows is the role, how may they discern the Prince’s true character and trust that it exists behind the intricate façade? The Prince’s confidence in the distinction between self and role is
his life into a stage and the men and women that surround him into players and audiences, all participating in this drama of his own invention, one so subtly created that none have any realization of their involvement. Hal and the audience alone know that he plays a role more complicated than merely “Prince of Wales,” and that the harsh critiques of his father and the trust of the men of Eastcheap are tributes to the believability of his performance.

By casting himself into the role he has created, Hal demonstrates his inherently theatrical nature, one that extends beyond the specifics of his scheme and will ultimately influence his entire run upon Shakespeare’s stage. His histrionic tendencies reach their most obvious apex in the great tavern scene of *1Henry IV*, Act Two, scene four; here, the Prince exhibits his remarkable ability to exert mastery over his world by transforming it into his own stage, where he is playwright, actor, director and stage manager all in the same moment, manipulating the people and events of his life to follow his own scripts. Before he begins to play-act scenes with Falstaff, he first turns to Francis, pulling the much-beleaguered drawer into a miniature drama of his own creation. Hal lays out the plot with his companion, Poins, handing out places and lines according to his design, and the joke plays out exactly according to his careful orchestrations.

The baiting of Francis is a precursor to later role-playing between the Prince and Falstaff,3 where each will in turn take on a role to act out the impending confrontation between King and Prince, although each enters into the scene with a different conception of how it is meant to play, as suited to his own style of theatricality. The two conceive the idea genuine, but given the nature of the soliloquy, the audience cannot take Hal’s firm self-assessment as immutable, objective truth, and must rather form their own judgment. These questions become ever more urgent as the *Henriad* progresses, and first lend themselves to more complex questions before any answers may be reached.

3 One must note the aborted attempt to play a scene of Hotspur and Dame Mortimer as well, which would have allowed Hal to portray his rival. Such an episode would have potentially foreshadowed the latter’s death scene as a moment of theatrical struggle for supremacy to a greater degree; nevertheless, the brief mention granted by the author serves to suggest the possibility of such a comparison.
together, but it is Hal who leaps to command, “Do thou stand for my father, and examine me upon the particulars of my life” (299-300). As the Prince watches, Falstaff takes on the role of the King, primarily using the opportunity to praise himself before the tavern-mongers, wild with invention and good humored histrionics: “Shall I? Content. This chair shall be my state, this dagger my sceptre, and this cushion my crown” (301-302). Falstaff announces his intention to speak in the grand style of Thomas Preston’s Cambyses, thereby assuming a specifically theatrical (and woefully outdated) discourse rather than a mimetic interpretation of the King.

Both his conception and execution seem to sit uneasily with the Prince, however, who criticizes his companion’s brand of stagecraft and finds fault in its poor imitation of reality, for he sees little use in any particulars other than the strong and convincing portrayals of King and Prince. After observing Falstaff’s flourishes in his part long enough to grow impatient, Hal interjects, “Dost thou speak like a king? Do thou stand for me, and I’ll play my father” (343-344). The Prince has likely tired of his own role as well, for he knows it intimately and needs no further practice to perfect it. Furthermore, Prince Hal sees the necessity of taking on the role of his father, which he rightly realizes must one day be assumed in truth as well as in fiction. When the opportunity for rehearsal presents itself, he

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4 Preston’s play has been dated to 1569, almost thirty full years before 1 Henry IV’s first performance. This form of now-unfashionable histrionics referenced by Falstaff was to be parodied once more in the character of Ancient Pistol in 2 Henry IV, who mangles the speeches of the hero of Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine (1587), among other contemporary references.

5 One must note, however, the basic difference displayed in the contrasting theatricalities of Hal and Falstaff. Falstaff takes joy in the pleasures to be had in role-playing, leaping from part to part with aplomb in an exaggerated, histrionic style that amuses himself as much as his audiences. Lionel Abel describes in his Metatheatre how Falstaff’s theatricality is “of the most imaginative kind,” and sets it in contrast to the more “historical drama” (67) of his companion. Falstaff proves himself a mercurial performer and playwright extempore; Hal’s playacting by contrast, displayed in the tavern and still more in the greater world, is more often an exercise in subtlety; unlike his companion, the Prince seeks out a mimetic representation that succeeds so wholly that the audience is unaware of the performance at all.
can do no less than to seize it and learn to portray the stylings and manners of kingship by
imitating his father.

He must learn to “speak as a king” while he has the chance, for he has hitherto spent
his time learning all the other languages spoken in the realm. As he has previously explained
to Poins:

I have sounded the very bass string of humility. Sirrah, I am sworn brother to a
leash of drawers, and can call them all by their Christian names…when I am King of
England I shall command all the good lads in Eastcheap. They call drinking deep
“dyeing scarlet”; and when you breathe in your watering they cry “hem!” and bid you
“play it off.” To conclude, I am so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour that I
can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life. (4-7, 11-15)

By his own system of reckoning, this mastery is one of Hal’s highest achievements, despite
the opposing opinion held by his father. What the King takes as “offence”, Hal has
transformed into a “skill” that he will draw upon in later years. He learns the mannerisms
and language of the common people of England as he wallows in the Boar’s Head Tavern,
“redeeming time” according to his own, most unlikely of designs. As Warwick will explain
to the king in 2 Henry IV, the Prince learns not only the words, but rather the entire manner
of the men:

The Prince but studies his companions
Like a strange tongue, wherein, to gain the language,
’Tis needful that the most immodest word
Be look’d upon and learnt... (IV.iv.68-71, 78)

Retaining the idea of the vocabulary lesson, Warwick rightly expands Hal’s studies to include
the whole man. Hal can drink with the tinker because he can shake off the trappings of the
Prince and assume the appearance of any “lad of mettle” (IHIIV, II.iv.10) with ease, just as
he will one day transform himself and successfully fool his former companion Pistol merely
by donning a cloak and shrouding his face in the shadows of a campfire.
It is one of the marks of the theatrical character to delight in displays of rhetorical skill and in this respect, Falstaff and the Prince each shine brightly. For the knight’s part, he is the great chameleon of the stage and flourishes in whatever role is assigned to him (once he has the freedom to adjust it to his own fashion). Hal has already demonstrated his personal prowess in language through his soliloquy, as he creates his own vision of the future through the sustained imagery of the sun; he has mastered the speech of peasant and prince, and will soon assume that of King. After their exchange of characters, the Prince seize the stage first and lets fly his barrage of invectives against Falstaff, relishing every unsavory metaphor: “that trunk of humors, that bolting-hutch of beastliness, that swollen parcel of dropsies, that huge bombard of sack, that stuffed cloak-bag of guts…” (358-360). Caught in the rush of his own skill, he follows the tide of his words and leaves no room for any other voice to break into the stream of questions that he alone will answer.

PRINCE: Wherein crafty but in villainy? Wherein villainous but in all things? Wherein worthy but in nothing?
FALSTAFF: I would Your Grace would take me with you. Whom means Your Grace?
PRINCE: That villainous abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan. (364-369)

Word builds upon word, until it reaches the limits of description with the sounding of “nothing”; following such a performance, Falstaff can only feign his own innocence by feeding Hal the line he demands. Each character exists in a strange communion with himself, his fellow actor, and the other characters upon the crowded stage, forcing his own interpretation through, seizing control of the script in turn, and playing at once to each other and their rapt audiences.

In performance, the constant question of the scene becomes, to whom is each moment directed? As Falstaff reclains the power to make his own speech, any production must carefully consider how to stage his words, which move along a spectrum from
melodramatic sermonizing to direct pleas meant for Hal alone. Despite Falstaff’s grand words and habitual monopolization of the stage, however, it is Hal who sits on the makeshift throne above him, silently watching and judging his performance, ready to greet him with the resoundingly simple answer to Falstaff’s entreaties.

FALSTAFF: ...but for sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff, and therefore more valiant being as he is old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry’s company, banish not him thy Harry’s company- banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.
PRINCE: I do, I will. (377-383)

Falstaff might command the ears of the audience, but even he must turn to supplication, for the Prince continues to hold the true power over the scene and gives the answer that proves unexpected to all present but himself. The Prince’s directorial vision ultimately has the final say, as the proceedings are interrupted by the knock of the Sheriff, come to apprehend Falstaff.

The end of the scene marks Hal’s last appearance before he must confront his father in person, and offers him one final chance to perform the power of the Prince in a setting where he wields absolute authority. He reasserts control of the stage, ordering characters on and off at will, demanding and receiving their obedience. Hal assumes once more the verse of his soliloquy, hitherto absent, as he acts and speaks with the casual authority of one who expects to be obeyed, despite his compromising surroundings. He responds to the Sheriff’s bidding of a good night, subtly affirming the power he holds with the seemingly careless words, “I think it is good morrow, is it not?” (421). The Sheriff senses that he has no chance of wresting the power of the scene away from the Prince, and therefore has no choice but to relinquish the stage to him.

Within the text of 1 Henry IV, Hal continually finds himself battling for the supremacy of his directorial vision against those which others want to impose upon him.
King Henry longs for his son to be more like the valiant Hotspur, while Hal would rather continue in his iniquity until his chosen moment to reveal his grand metamorphosis. Henry subverts the Prince’s own imagery of the sun as he proselytizes, comparing Hal to the late King Richard II:

He was but as the cuckoo is in June,
Heard, not regarded- seen, but with such eyes
As, sick and blunted with community,
Afford no extraordinary gaze,
Such as is bent on sunlike majesty
When it shines seldom in admiring eyes;
But rather drowsed and hung their eyelids down,
Slept in his face, and rendered such aspect
As cloudy men use to their adversaries… (75-84)

Summoned before his father and subjected thus to his long tirade, the Prince capitulates with the outburst, “I shall hereafter, my thrice gracious lord,/ Be more myself” (92-93). When he speaks again, his new words are of stripping Hotspur of the trappings of his honor so that Hal will assume them all into his own person. The Prince swears to his father,

Percy is but my factor, good my lord,
To engross up glorious deeds on my behalf;
And I will call him to so strict account,
That he shall render every glory up…(147-150)

By thus objectifying his opponent into a physical reckoning that the Prince can appropriate, Hal can thereby step into Hotspur’s role himself. The world becomes a theatre in which the players are identified by the costumes they wear, and by trading wardrobes and lines, any actor can assume any part. If Hal captures the honors accumulated by Hotspur, he has all that is necessary to replace him upon the political stage.

At the death of Hotspur, Hal’s need to maintain control of his stage joins with this ability to assume another’s role. The Prince mortally wounds his rival during the Battle of Shrewsbury and observes his death; Hal then appropriates his dying words and claims the right to complete Hotspur’s final sentence. That he seems to do so without opposition
reveals his momentary lapse, for while the Prince assumes that he has sole command of the stage as well as over the direction of the denouement of the play, Falstaff lies in wait, feigning death as he waits to rob Hal of his prize of honor. Hal disarmingly grants him leave to do so, a move that allows him to fall back into the tavern life of his original plan, although the sense that Falstaff has upstaged him remains dominant. The image of Falstaff rising from a seeming death is a metatheatrical spectacle not easily forgotten by any audience, and Hal will not allow his stage to be so effortlessly stolen again.

The role-playing involved in the fall of Hotspur is hardly unique; indeed, the Prince’s ability to adapt to the role that best suits his purposes is one of his most prominent features. Just as Hal is able to see Hotspur less as a man than as an accumulation of honor, he has the ability to interpret his father, himself, and the inhabitants of the world at large as literal characters within the drama of his life. With this understanding, it is a simple thing for him to take the logical next step and to portray as many different roles as his own life seems to demand.

Sometimes Hal does this quite literally by assuming not only the mannerisms but also the physical guise of another. In 2 Henry IV, the Prince seizes the idea of returning to the Boar’s Head with Poins dressed as tavern drawers, so that they might spy upon Falstaff unnoticed. Despite the implausibility of the scenario, they succeed and pass amongst the denizens of the tavern unnoticed until they reveal themselves. In this space of theatrical possibility, the Prince is granted the chance to observe Falstaff and listen to his unguarded (and unflattering) descriptions of Hal to Doll Tearsheet; it is a moment that directly corresponds to the scene of Henry V’s “Harry le Roy,” walking amidst the common soldiers on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt. In the borrowed cloak of Sir Thomas Erpingham, Hal comes face to face with Pistol and other common soldiers, and is able to sound their
opinions on the King with an ease not granted to royalty. In these instances, role-playing becomes a means for Hal to achieve what he cannot do as himself, just as by directing scenes in the tavern, he is granted a perspective on the events of his own life.

More often than not, however, Hal slips so subtly into a role that it becomes difficult for the audience (as well as for the Prince himself) to distinguish between his performances and his natural self. To all appearances, Hal appears entirely as himself each time he comes before his father, where there are no disguises or props to hide behind. When the scenes are examined with role-playing in mind, however, they may be interpreted quite differently. Returning to the dramatic confrontation and struggles for directorial control between King Henry and the Prince in Act III, scene two of *1Henry IV*, when Hal swears to his father that he will defeat Hotspur, take over the heroic role, and “be more [him]self,” he in fact has taken on a new part in the drama: the Repenting Prodigal determined to prove himself. Before any challenge is issued to Hotspur, Hal’s performance has won the admiration of his father, who roundly proclaims, “A hundred thousand rebels die in this!/ Thou shalt have charge and sovereign trust herein” (160-161).

After his success in this instance, it is a role he will return to again when next he is summoned before his father to explain himself in *2 Henry IV*. The Prince comes to sit at the bedside of the ailing King, watching him as he sleeps until he becomes convinced of his father’s death. Having done so, he lifts the crown that his father has placed upon his pillow, and places it upon his own head, exclaiming,

...Lo where it sits,
Which God shall guard; and put the world’s whole strength
Into one giant arm, it shall not force
This lineal honour from me. This from thee
Will I to mine leave, as ‘tis left to me. (IV.v.42-46)
He exits, leaving the King to awaken alone and, angered by the Prince’s actions, to demand his return. Hal re-enters as the epitome of honest remorse with tears in his eyes, ready to make his excuses and to beg forgiveness. While he may appear sincere in his repentance, he also performs the role that he feels it is his duty to play, one that he has already described before his exit:

…Thy due from me
Is tears and heavy sorrows of the blood,
Which nature, love, and filial tenderness
Shall, O dear father, pay thee plenteously. (36-39)

It falls to the discretion of the individual how far he or she will credit Hal’s performance and how much sincerity he exudes over the course of the scene, for the text can lend itself to a number of interpretations; nevertheless, certain elements are indisputable. The Prince’s protestations to his awakened father are not in accord with what the audience has just witnessed; rather than attempting a true explanation of his eagerness to assume the crown, he proclaims that he took it only “To try with it, as with an enemy/ That had murder’d my father” (166-167). Despite his prior grand words of assuming the divine right of kingship, he tells the king:

…if it did infect my blood with joy,
Or swell my thoughts to any strain of pride,
If any rebel or vain spirit of mine
Did with the least affection of a welcome
Give entertainment to the might of it,
Let God forever keep it from my head… (169-174)

His performance is convincing enough to win over his father, who responds even more warmly than to his earlier vows against Hotspur.

Just as Hal once confronted the Sheriff in the tavern by playing the role of the Prince, so too has he begun to preemptively cast himself into the new role of King by taking the crown of his father, the ultimate symbol and property of the office. After the King’s
death, the new Henry V comes forward to play his first scene before a difficult audience: his brothers, the attending lords, and the Chief Justice of the realm (with whom he has previously been involved in many altercations). For all of his practicing in the tavern, Hal admits to his audience, “This new and gorgeous garment, majesty,/ Sits not so easy on me as you think” (V.ii.44-45). Despite whatever qualms he might have, he proceeds in his usual manner⁶ and grants himself still more roles to play in the future, declaring to his brothers, “I bid you be assur’d,/ I’ll be your father and your brother too” (56-57). He will not be the only actor, for he also casts the Chief Justice in a new role:

You shall be as a father to my youth,
My voice shall sound as you do prompt mine ear,
And I will stoop and humble my intents
To your well-practis’d wise directions. (118-121)

For the rest of the play, Hal speaks in the voice of the Chief Justice, just as he vows here, for the words with which he banishes Falstaff are like quite unlike those which he has spoken before. Indeed, Hal confronts his former companion with blank verse, a discourse into which Falstaff is unable to enter and marks the space of the court as one into which he cannot follow. Reflecting his innate talent, the new King’s performance is already so refined that he surpasses the skills of the true Chief Justice, whose initial attempt to silence Falstaff is wholly ineffective, whereas Hal’s instantly strikes him dumb.

By the opening of Henry V, Hal⁷ has mastered his own particular rhetoric of kingship, and no longer relies upon the words of others. Once more, he is able to assert his

⁶ Quite interestingly, Hal in this moment reveals once more his habit of viewing the world as made up of individuals going through a series of performances. He remarks upon his brothers’ sadness as something external, a garment to cast on and off as it suits the moment: “Yet be sad, good brothers,/ For by my faith it very well becomes you./ Sorrow so royally in you appears/ That I will deeply put the fashion on,/ And wear it in my heart” (49-53). Hal does not see them as brothers mourning the loss of a father, but rather as Mourners, a role that he, too, will assume.

⁷ I will continue to reference King Henry V as Hal throughout this essay, for the text presents evidence (to be cited at a later point within this essay) that the Prince of Henry IV is not lost within the newly crowned King. Other critics have believed the opposite, as in Kathryn Kunke’s “The Crown That Ate Prince Hal” or Una
own directorial vision upon events even as he performs them. Greeted with the offending tribute of the Dauphin, the King responds with a resounding affirmation of his authority before which the Ambassadors can only remain silent. The self-consciousness of the performance is confirmed, like many that will follow it, by the concluding lines of dialogue:

EXETER: This was a merry message.  
KING: We hope to make the sender blush at it. (I.ii.300-301)

A similar moment occurs at the gates of Harfleur, where Hal issues a horrible ultimatum to the governor of the city. His speech rises to a terrible intensity of promised retaliations if the city does not immediately surrender, building to its final couplet: “What say you? Will you yield and this avoid?/ Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroyed?” (III.iii.42-43) Once the humbled governor acquiesces, Hal’s words collapse into the simple sentences and pragmatic concerns of the coming winter and the growing sickness of the men. Once the immediate need has passed, the performance ends perforce.

Hal is well aware, however, of the necessity of constant performance for a King, playing whatever role the situation calls for, be it inspiring speech-maker or lover. Indeed, in his wooing of Princess Katherine, he demonstrates his hyper-awareness of his duty to role-play as required, whether or not the particular part sits easily upon him. He proclaims:

Marry, if you would put me to verses or to dance for your sake, Kate, why you undid me: for the one, I have neither words nor measure, and for the other, I have no strength in measure, yet a reasonable measure in strength. If I could win a lady at leap-frog, or by vaulting into my saddle with my armour on my back, under the correction of bragging be it spoken. I should quickly leap into a wife…. But, before God, Kate, I cannot look greenly nor gasp out my eloquence, nor I have no cunning in protestation; only downright oaths, which I never use till urged, nor never break for urging. (V.ii.138-146, 148-152)

Ellis-Fermor’s discussion of King Henry V in The Frontiers of Drama, who goes so far as to say that “It is in vain that we look for the personality of Henry behind the king; there is nothing else there…the individual entirely eliminated, sublimated, if you will. There is no Henry, only a king.”(45-46)
Hal confesses his ineptitude at the traditional art of courtship, understanding very well the script meant to be played just as he recognizes his inability to stage it as such. Instead, the King rewrites the role to suit himself, inventing a new brand of lover who woos with artful unsophistication. However he might craft his role, it is his performance on the battlefield that has secured Katherine’s hand, regardless of personal inclinations on either side, and the two approach their courtship with the mutual recognition of each other’s obligatory role.

II. The Perils of a Protean Prince: the Intersection of Early Modern Theatricality and Prince Hal

Hal has great skill at playing the King, composing extemporaneous speeches whenever the need arises, but it remains a performance from which he gratefully retires when given the chance, still clinging to the remnants of a former self. This constant playing takes a toll upon the King (as witnessed after Harfleur), which first manifests in the days of Prince Hal and 2 Henry IV. There, the Prince makes his first entrance within the second Act, once more alongside his companion Poins. His attitude seems to have shifted in the time since his grand pledges to his father and the Battle of Shrewsbury, and he has taken up once more with the “irregular humourists” of the tavern. Hal’s first line gives voice to his aggrieved mental and physical state with deceptive simplicity: “Before God, I am exceeding

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8 Although Agincourt seems to decide the fate of the English campaign in France, the careful construction of the play seems to indicate its inevitability after Harfleur, as the audience watches Katherine’s lesson in the English language directly following the opening of Harfleur’s gates: a reciprocal symbolic opening of Katherine’s own gate.

9 It is of course each director’s prerogative how to stage the wooing scene. In Kenneth Branagh’s 1989 film version of Henry V, the English King charmed a willing Princess with wit, humour, and affability. In stark contrast was Michael Bogdanov’s production of 1986 with the English Shakespeare Company, which featured Michael Pennington as a cold, disinterested Henry partnered by a passive Katherine dressed in mourning.
The question of what wearies him is of the greatest importance, for it seems that he has been worn down by his own duality, as if the constant theatricals required by his great scheme have proved more exhausting than he ever imagined.

Hal has tired of pretending to be that which he is not, but most troubling of all, he senses that the firm distinctions between The Act and Himself have blurred with the passing of time. Rather than instantly arising and throwing off his former “loose behaviour,” Hal finds that becoming the noble prince poses its own challenges. “The good lads of Eastcheap” have left their mark upon him, try as he might to distance himself from them, and his former delight in their novelty has begun to shift into disgust. His initial efforts to “redeem the time” have backfired upon him, and he is drifting between his two worlds, unsure of his place.

The Prince has trouble understanding why his directorial objectivity has left him, but the answer appears to lie within his next exchange:

POINS: Is’t come to that? I had thought weariness durst not have attached one of so high blood.
PRINCE: Faith, it does me; though it discolours the complexion of my greatness to acknowledge it. Doth it not show vilely in me to desire small beer? (II.ii.2-6)

Hal harbors heavily ambivalent feelings regarding the tavern, for he detests his own craving for its pleasures. His time in Eastcheap was meant to be at best instructive, or at the least merely a step in the narrative of his triumph, but to his surprise, that prized self-command has faltered. Poins notes as well that “a Prince should not be so loosely studied as to remember so weak a composition,” (7-8) and confronts Hal with the mutual understanding that to be the Prince is to play a role. Ned Poins is, of course, a biased and critical spectator

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10 This moment invites examination for its striking resonance with the entrances of Antonio and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, a play written within a three-year span of *2 Henry IV*. All three characters voice similar complaints of melancholy and weariness that perhaps speak to parallels between them; the most pertinent of these as between Portia and Hal, two characters who delight in creating narratives to play out within their lives, a courtroom no less a scene for theatrical performance than a tavern’s impromptu role-playing.
of Hal as the Prince (as well as an unsophisticated one) for his knowledge of Hal is limited to the hijinks of Eastcheap; his opinion, however, is one that is likely shared by many.\textsuperscript{11}

Hal continues to speak of these concerns, “humble considerations that make [him] out of love with [his] greatness,” (11-12) as he lists the details of Poins’ life and laundry. It pains him to realize that he knows the life of such a layabout as Poins quite so well, but what preys upon his mind most of all, he soon reveals:

\begin{center}
PRINCE: Marry, I tell thee it is not meet that I should be sad now my father is sick; albeit I could tell to thee as to one it pleases me for fault of a better to call my friend, I could be sad, and very sad indeed too.
POINS: Very hardly, upon such a subject…
PRINCE: What wouldst thou think of me if I should weep?
POINS: I would think thee a most princely hypocrite.
PRINCE: It would be every man’s thought… (38-42, 50-52)
\end{center}

The Prince must confront the very nature of his dissembling scheme, for either way, he exposes himself to censure for hypocrisy, either by his own hand or others’. He has given himself a decidedly awkward surfeit of roles to choose from and can no longer clearly see how the scene should be played. Should the Prince properly be sad (as would befit a sober and dutiful heir to the throne) or pleased with his imminent ascendancy (as Poins expects)?  His primary audiences at court and in the tavern each demand a different interpretation, added to which he must also consider which Prince to display for the English people. The news of his father’s illness is the catalyst for a crisis of selfhood and the time to question the purpose and effect of the Prince’s playing. What has become of the self-assured Hal, so sure in his schemes and sun-like future?  He has reached a state of bodily exhaustion, mental

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{11}Indeed, the King’s faith in his son is all too soon shattered by the news of Hal’s continued friendship with Poins. He remarks to his other sons,
For when his headstrong riot hath no curb,  
When rage and hot blood are his counsellors,  
When means and lavish manners meet together,  
O, with what wings shall his affections fly  
Towards peril and oppos’d decay!” (IV.iv.62-66)
\end{quote}
anguish, and self-loathing for his unanticipated metamorphosis and “heavy descension.” (166) What makes his transformation quite so troubling? For adequate explanation, it is illuminating to turn to the prevalent thought surrounding such role-playing as the Prince performs in the Early Modern era.

Theatre historian Joseph Roach emphasizes the progression of performance theory from the Classical Greeks to the Renaissance and the continuity of its most basic principles. Rhetorical theory, which guided much of the seventeenth century debate on acting, rested not upon our current notions of the theatrical, but was rather founded on the movements of the ancient physiological system of the humors. (The Player's Passion, 30) Its vocabulary governed medical discourse for centuries and its principles were the basis of the understanding of both the physical and mental properties of mankind. In the words of Thomas Wright’s treatise of 1604, The Passions of the minde in generall, “the Passions likewise augment or diminish the deformitie of actuall sinnes, they blinde reason, they seduce the will, and therefore are speciall causes of sinne.” (2) The mind and body were thus believed to be volatile and subject to alteration by the excesses of the passions, for “there is no Passion very vehement but that it alters extremly some of the foure humors of the bodie.” (4) The humors were meant to have such an effect upon the body as to subvert its natural state if ever they fell out of balance.12

From the time of the ancient Greeks, it was thought that to convey emotion effectively, the orator must first summon up the corresponding passions within himself.13 Wright offers the example of an Italian Preacher to his readers:

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12 Shakespeare offers just such an example in his Othello, a man held in the thrall of his potent and yet previously unknown jealousy. Once the passion is roused within him, it wreaks such havoc upon his body that he emerges profoundly altered and acts in entirely uncharacteristic ways.
13 A concept still present in the modern theatre, most notably in the Method school of acting, which takes its inspiration from the Russian director Constantin Stanislavski.
who had such power over his Auditors affections, that when it pleased him he could cause them shead aboundance of teares, yea and with teares dropping downe their cheeks, presently turne their sorrow into laughter; and the reason was, because he himselfe being extremely passionate, knowing moreover, the Arte of mooving the affections of those Auditors. (3)

In theory, performance united mind and body, inner passion and outward expression, “thereby transforming invisible impulse into spectacle and unspoken feeling into eloquence.” (Roach, 33) This process was not without its risks, however, for the player stirred up his passions to perform and in so doing, upset the natural balance of his humors. As Roach relates:

the actor possessed the power to act on his own body… His expressions could transform his physical identity, inwardly and outwardly and so thoroughly that at his best he was known as Proteus. (27)

When players were commended for their ability to metamorphose on stage, the transformation was believed to be more than show; to a certain extent, the actor literally became his character, as the changes he affected would entirely pervade the actor's body and soul.\(^\text{14}\)

Following this logic, an actor thus ran the risk of permanently adopting the vices and mannerisms of his character. Edmund Gayton’s 1654 *Pleasant Notes upon Don Quixot* includes many discursive sidenotes, amongst which can be found an anecdote of an unfortunate victim of too many years counterfeiting passions upon the stage:

I have known my selfe, a Tyrant comming from the Scene, not able to reduce himselfe, into the knowledge of himselfe, till Sack made him (which was his present physick) forget he was an Emperour, and renew’d all his old acquaintance to him; and it is not out of most mens observation, that one most admirable Mimicke in our late Stage, so lively and corporally presented a Changeling, that he could never compose his Face to the figure it had, before he undertook that part. (qtd. in Roach, 48-49)

\(^{14}\) A dangerous proposition in an age that held, as Jonas Barish describes in his *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*, “a conservative ethical emphasis in which the key terms are those of order, stability, constancy, and integrity.” (117)
Writers from the time of Pliny have recounted tales of actors who acquire the ailments and failings of the characters they portray. The noted anti-theatricalist William Prynne describes, in the gloriously pleonastic style of his vast *Histrio-Mastix*, the effect of continual playing as one that makes actors “mimical, histrionical, lascivious, apish, amorous, and womanly, both in their habits, gestures, speeches, complements, and their whole deportment.” (546)

A cause for worry, the effects of actors’ self-conscious workings upon their passions were not limited only to their own bodies, but rather, “his motions could transform the air through which he moved, animating it in waves of force rippling outward from a center in his soul. His passions, irradiating the bodies of spectators through their eyes and ears, could literally transfer the contents of his heart to theirs, altering their moral natures.” (Roach, 27)

If proponents of the theatre argued for its pedagogical values on behalf of the uneducated masses,\(^{15}\) it was this same power of the playhouses that frightened the anti-theatricalists. William Prynne states in his dedication that he was compelled to write his treatise after observing the transformation of several play-going companions, “who though civil and chaste at first, became so vicious, prodigal, incontinent… (yea, so far past hopes of all amendment) in half a years space or less.” (3)

From this perspective, all playgoers were thus subjected to frightening effects from the forces of the theatricals they witnessed: Philip Stubbes’ *Anatomie of Abuses* urges readers to forego the theatres as places that instilled only the deadliest vices of falsehood, blasphemy, effeminacy, treason, and whoremongering. He subscribes to a widely held belief as he writes that within an audience departing the playhouse, “Every mate sorts to his mate, 

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\(^{15}\) Notably so in Thomas Heywood’s 1612 *An Apology for Actors*, which offered a pro-theatrical response to the abundant oppositional arguments of his day, directing nay-sayers, “To turn to our domestic histories- what English blood seeing the person of any bold Englishman presented and doth not hug his frame, and honey at his valor, pursuing him in his enterprises with his best wishes…”(7) He notes further that the Playhouse is an ornament to the city and serves to beautify the English language; sadly, this was the best of his argument. In face of the blistering attacks of the anti-theatricalists, most writings in favour of the theatres sounded similarly weak.
every one brings another homeward of their way very friendly, and in their secret conclaves (covertly) they play Sodomites, or worse.” In 1625, *A Short Treatise Against Stage-Players* was sent to Parliament, requesting the permanent eradication of theatre within England. Among its reasons for doing so, its anonymous author makes similar charges against the profession of actors, claiming “they teach their hearers and beholders much sinne in the acting of their Playes, as to sweare, curse, lye, flatter, cosen, steale, to play the bawde and the harlot, with very many such other lewde lessons.”16 (18)

The advocates of the theatre countered with what might be described as *The Mousetrap* Effect, after Hamlet’s scheme to “catch the conscience of the King.” (II.ii.613)

Just as the Player King might be able to

> Cleave the general ear with horrid speech,  
> Make mad the guilty, and appall the free,  
> Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed  
> The very faculties of eyes and ears (II.ii.563-566)

with his histrionics, so too does the Prince of Denmark believe that the performance of the players will drive his uncle to display signs of his guilt. Likewise, Thomas Heywood’s *Apology for Actors* notes several instances where audience members confessed to crimes that they had witnessed on stages, supposedly unable to withstand the power of the performance before their eyes.

This atmosphere surrounds Prince Hal and his dangerous dependency on role-playing, one where the actor was believed to possess an awe-inspiring power over the bodies and minds of his audiences and of himself, but at great risk. By spending too much time in

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16 The attacks against the supposed effeminising powers of the theatre were a common refrain amongst all the anti-theatricalists of the time, as they considered the practise of men playing female parts blasphemous and that the practise of theatricals was a frivolous pursuit in general. Hal largely escapes this charge, although it should be noted that twice his father speaks in such terms of the Prince’s behaviour. By and large, however, Hal’s masculinity does not come into question during the *Henriad*, and thus these aspects of the anti-theatricalist argument do not have a large place within this essay.
Eastcheap, learning the ways of its tavern-dwellers and assuming their habits, Hal has placed himself in peril of affecting these changes upon himself permanently. The successful actor was believed to be marked by his ability not only to summon passions, but to control them: “For in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.” (Hamlet III.ii.6-8) Perhaps Hal has proved less of a skilled actor than he believed himself to be before he set his plan into action, and the Prince has thus made himself vulnerable to the forces he thought to command without fear.

His taste for small beer provides the strongest sign that Hal is suffering from the effects of acting in the Early Modern era. The physical desire he currently possesses for that which would otherwise repulse him is perhaps due to his ongoing fraternization with the denizens of the Boar’s Head tavern and initiation into their ranks; this acknowledgement disheartens him and causes him to lash out unkindly against Poins. By so constantly acting the part, Hal has unwittingly incorporated it into his own identity and its influence has weakened him to the point that he returns to his old games at the tavern. It is small wonder that the Prince’s formerly firm sense of self and vision has become clouded with the passage of time, a conclusion stemming from the physical changes within his mind and body. By learning to “drink with any tinker in his own language” (1HIV II.iv.18), Hal has become something of the tinker as well. He learns not merely the language but the habits of the men themselves and has let these seep into his own character.

Hal is not the only character of the early modern stage to be affected by his own tendency to self-dramatize. For example, in Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, its titular

17 The influence of Marlowe’s work upon Shakespeare is a long-standing truism within Early Modern scholarship. Within the scope of the histories, the ties between Edward II and Richard II are among the most notable, both in the plays’ thematic matter and textual parallels.
hero has a similar flair for disguises and play-acting, most evident in his careful wooing of Zenocrate. Upon first meeting the princess, the warlord launches into an elaborate profession of love and praise for Zenocrate, which ends with the exchange:

TAMBURLAINE: My martial prizes, with five hundred men,
Won on the fifty-headed Volga’s waves,
Shall all we offer to Zenocrate,
And then myself to fair Zenocrate.
TECHELLES: [To Tamburlaine] What now? In love?
TAM: Techelles, women must be flattered.
But this is she with whom I am in love. (I.ii.102-108)

In thus performing the act of love through speech and gesture, Tamburlaine has quickly excited the true feelings within himself. Likewise, while Zenocrate is initially horrified at the thought of remaining with Tamburlaine, after hearing this type of speech often enough she is moved to reciprocate his love. Both actor and spectator become infected with genuine feelings of love that stem from performance, affecting them each permanently; ultimately, a model quite similar to Prince Hal in the tavern.

It is perhaps easiest to study and remark upon the effects of playing when directly associated with the theatre (hence my focus on the anti-theatricalists), but the era likewise acknowledged that playing was not necessarily bound to the stage. Performance was readily recognized as a part of everyday life, and as such has received much scholarly attention as part of the courtly lives of the upper and noble classes.

III. Player King: The Playing of Power in Political Theatre

As reflected within the *Henriad*, the royal courts of England had long been the seat of some of the most elaborate pageantry and spectacle to be found in London or elsewhere, both in the intricate entertainments that would attain their pinnacle in the courts of James I, and in the presentation of royal power itself. Elizabeth I is particularly notable within this
latter context for her keen understanding and manipulation of the theatrical to augment her public character and image, following and expanding upon the model set by her father. Richard Mulcaster, a contemporary of the Queen and an educator of some note, writes of her famous entry into London, “If a man should say well, he could not better tearme the citie of London that time, than a stage wherein was shewed the most wonderfull spectacle, of a noble hearted princess toward her most louing people.” (qtd. in Kipling, 153) This description of the spectacle of royal power resonates strongly with King Henry IV’s tale of his own skill in such matters, for as he relates to his son:

Thus did I keep my person fresh and new,  
My presence, like a robe pontifical,  
Ne’er seen but wondered at, and so my state,  
Seldom but sumptuous, show’d like a feast,  
And won by rareness such solemnity. (*1HIV* III.ii.55-59)

Henry’s canny powers of self-display enable him to outshine the king’s own presence and to “seize the crown” (*RII* IV.i.181) with relatively little effort, simply by creating a more kingly public image than Richard assumes while in power.

In an analysis of Queen Elizabeth’s similar talents, Stephen Greenblatt comments, “everything was calculated to enhance her transformation into an almost magical being, a creature of infinite beauty, wisdom, and power… even her ordinary public appearances were theatrically impressive.” (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 167) Each performance was tailored to elicit a certain response from her subjects and even those spectators aware of the manipulative nature of these events were often affected just the same.18 Visible, self-conscious theatricality was crucial in an age whose Queen could insightfully acknowledge, “We Princes are set on stages, in the sight and view of all the world duly observed.” (qtd. in *Self-Fashioning*, 167)

18 Greenblatt offers several examples of this phenomenon, notably remarks by Bishop Goodman in 1588, and the Queen’s godson, Sir John Harrington.
Indeed, such was the way of life not only for the Queen but for all those who inhabited her court. It was well understood that theatricality was not exclusively bound to the stage, but rather had the potential to extend into the everyday lives of men and women. Greenblatt’s study of several Renaissance figures demonstrates the extent to which role-playing figured in the everyday life and language of those such as Sir Thomas More and Thomas Wyatt, forming an inescapable aspect of courtly life. He writes:

Theatricality, in the sense of both disguise and histrionic self-presentation, arose from conditions common to almost all Renaissance courts: a group of men and women alienated from the customary roles and revolving uneasily around a center of power, a constant struggle for recognition and attention, and a virtually fetishistic emphasis upon manner. The manuals of court behavior which became popular in the sixteenth century are essentially handbooks for actor, practical guides for a society whose members were nearly always on stage. (162)

Guides and courtesy books, such as Castiglione’s well-known *Book of the Courtier* (as translated from the original Italian), held a surprising amount in common with the popular rhetorical studies that guided the principles of acting. The language of dissimulation and feigning was found throughout these works, notably drawing upon the same terms the anti-theatricalists utilized to rail against the play-houses.

Such is Greenblatt’s example of William Tyndale, for whom “the righteous individual… has no scope for feigning, indirection, or hidden judgment; he seizes directly, as it were rapaciously, upon the truth… To take delight in social performance as distinct from inward reality is unthinkable or rather thinkable only as a characteristic mode of the followers of Satan.” (158) For all that the courtiers might aspire to the Protean mutability of the actor if they hoped to advance their standing, the era could not move past its extreme ambivalence regarding these talents. When Richard of Gloucester proclaims his ability to
“add colours to the chameleon” (*3 Henry VI* III.i.191), even as audiences might enjoy his fiendish plots, he likewise revels in his ability to

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\text{...smile, and murder whiles I smile,} \\
\text{And cry 'Content' to that which grieves my heart,} \\
\text{And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,} \\
\text{And frame my face to all occasions...} \\
\text{Change shape with Proteus for advantages.} \\
\text{And set the murderous Machiavel to school.} \ (182-185, 192-193)
\]

Richard excels at these theatrics, rising to ever more audacious performances and generally finding success, slyly applying his talent to “prove a villain” (*Richard III* I.i.30) with the complicity of his audience. The popularity of Richard III likely has a dual nature; he fascinates because while he captivates and charms his audience (those upon the stage as well as the theatre patrons), it is just as natural to rejoice in his eventual, righteous downfall.

This quality, personified by Gloucester, was the same that ignited the debates on theatricality and its troublesome ability both to entertain and to corrupt, and that led courtiers to find success and sin in one stroke. Theatricality had a pervasive hold upon the Early Modern era and could hardly stray far from the foreground of its social consciousness. In this taut, paradoxical atmosphere, William Shakespeare’s history plays were written and first performed. It is thus nearly impossible to separate the political sphere from the theatrical discourse that it both compels and explicitly invites time and again in Shakespeare’s texts. If role-playing was indeed as important in the life of an Elizabethan courtier as Greenblatt implies, then it can be a small wonder that the principle players in the political dramas of Shakespeare’s histories are often weighed according to their level of histrionic skill.

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19 Indeed, Lothar Fietz finds much significance in the metaphor of the chameleon in the Renaissance, specifically in its conjuration of vice and iniquity in England, and its celebratory humanist optimism on the Continent. The attraction of the chameleon was its ability to figure simultaneously as both a symbol of “temporal multiplicity and of divine oneness.” (98)
In the First Tetralogy, set against the overtly wicked (if highly skilled) theatricality of Gloucester, is the unfortunate King Henry VI, weathering three plays before his final defeat and death at the hands of the future Richard III. Henry VI is in many ways the antithesis of his famous father, doomed by the inevitable comparison between the two. In the areas where Henry V reveled in displaying his strengths, his son continually falters, losing France, his throne, and ultimately his life. Henry VI was a king essentially without any dramaturgical skill, lacking both the vision and directorial drive that guided his father and the earlier canonical figures as well as the ability to play the role of King adequately to convince anyone of his right to rule.

Shakespeare’s second historical tetralogy first sought to treat another fallen king: Richard II. While often called the Player King of the histories (as previously observed), it is precisely this aspect in which Richard ultimately fails, although in a notably distinct way from either of his theatrical predecessors. Indeed, there is a striking parallel moment between Richard II and Henry VI contrived in the construction of the individual plays, which brings their fundamental differences as players to light. When each ruler reaches a moment of particularly intense vulnerability and feels his inevitable mortality most heavily, Shakespeare twice creates an arresting tableau of a king taking the chance to rest upon the ground and assess his situation aloud. When juxtaposed for comparison, the scenes resonate powerfully with each other and even a cursory examination reveals how markedly distinct are the two kings.

Both use the moment to meditate on their position as king in the face of mortality, but where Richard II creates one of the finest displays of his skill in rhetorical self-dramatization, Henry’s soliloquy looks feeble in comparison as he weeps and muses on the simple pleasures of the shepherd’s life (3HVI, II.v). He fails not because the Henry VI plays
are inherently weaker as earlier works, but rather because of his own theatrical inadequacies. In contrast, Richard instantly takes advantage of his companions to capitalize upon their potential as an audience, artfully collapsing onto his “dear earth” (Richard II, III.ii.6) and crying out, “For God’s sake, let us sit upon the ground/ And tell sad stories of the death of kings.” (155-156) He proceeds to speak of the hollowness of his crown and title, and of “the little scene” (164) allowed Kings by Death.

These rhetorical performances are where Richard displays his finest talents, and yet are also the key to his failure as a Player King, for they encompass the extent of his limited theatrical abilities. Richard’s powerful address to Northumberland on the subject of his divine right of kingship is a prime example of his skill with language and the external markers of a king, for even the onlookers are awed enough by the appearance of Richard to remark,

BOILINGBROKE: See, see, King Richard doth himself appear,  
As doth the blushing discontented sun  
From out the fiery portal of the east…  
YORK: Yet looks he like a king. Behold, his eye,  
As bright as is the eagle’s, lightens forth  
Controlling his majesty. Alack, alack for woe  
That any harm should stain so fair a show! (III.iii.62-64, 68-71)

Such a display echoes the previously mentioned staging of Queen Elizabeth’s political power in carefully calculated spectacles, and simultaneously reveals Richard’s inability to unite rhetorical performance with king-like action as he soon wilts under pressure and initiates his own deposition.

20 Richard’s skill with words could itself been seen as suspect, as in the opinion of William Tyndale and echoed in many of the anti-theatricalist writers. In this view, the skilled manipulation of words was an insidious talent that reeked of hypocrisy and dissimulation. This attitude may even be found within characters created by Shakespeare; in his comedy Twelfth Night occurs the following exchange:

VIOLA: I will on with my speech in your praise, and then show you the heart of my message.  
OLIVIA: Come to what is important in't. I forgive you the praise.  
VIOLA: Alas, I took great pains to study it, and 'tis poetical.  
OLIVIA: It is the more like to be feign'd, I pray you, keep it in. (I.v.189-193)
Following the King’s earlier meditation on mortality, the Bishop of Carlisle’s attempt to spur Richard into action becomes a damning appraisal of Richard’s great fault: “My lord, wise men ne’er sit and wail their woes,/ But presently prevent the ways to wail.” (III.ii.178-179) For indeed, as James Winny remarks of Richard: “He has the power of using words creatively, to produce impressions of reality strong enough to overpower his perception of material actuality. His misfortune is that he alone is deluded by these shadows of reality.” (54) He is a king who loves the external show of kingship, delighting in its language, costume, and spectacle, but is utterly unable to fulfill its other requirements properly. While shown capable of decisive action by seizing the lands of John of Gaunt, such a deed is not in keeping with the role of King and its duty to perform nobly.

It is only when Richard reaches his deposition that he begins to appreciate the true nature of the king’s role and the need to unite action with performance. His own process of awakening understanding leads him to move away from static self-display in order to appropriate a less passive repertoire of gesture and dramatic action. Despite the stony silence of the onstage spectators to Richard’s grief, the King’s theatricality asserts itself in dramatic success by creating striking moments that depend upon movement, as when he smashes a mirror to create one of the play’s most powerful images.21

This process reaches its pinnacle during Richard’s captivity within the walls of Pomfret Castle. In his only soliloquy, the fallen king reconciles himself to his conception of the parts that he has played, king and beggar alike, so that at last when Exton and his servants arrive in arms, Richard is galvanized to action and leaps to his feet to fend them off. As ever in the realm of political theatre, the performance depends on its success before an

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21 Directors have sometimes capitalized upon other potential moments within the deposition scene to portray a more active Richard; for instance, in Tim Carroll’s 2003 production for London’s reconstructed Globe Theatre, the King (played with a poignant sense of humor by Artistic Director Mark Rylance) seized upon the chance to engage in a brief tug-of-war with Bolingbroke over the crown.
audience, and thus Richard’s success is confirmed by the impression it leaves upon Exton. When his former sovereign is at last struck down, Exton cannot deny that Richard was “As full of valour as of royal blood” (113), acknowledging the king’s too-late actualization of the role.

Until the moments just before his death, Richard II fails to portray successfully kingship in all of its nuances and forms. While he possesses a great talent for self-dramatization and histrionics, Richard has a limited repertoire of parts to play, and largely remains a hollow kingly presence whose only triumphs are in his outward shows of spectacle and grief. In so static a role, it is no wonder that Richard was doomed to fall, for true kingship seems to lie in a certain type of Protean dynamism. Henry IV is able to seize the throne because he seeks new roles, not content to remain an exiled noble at the mercy of his king’s whims. Instead, he returns after Gaunt’s death, and fashions himself anew to attract the love of the people, for as he explains:

… then I stole all courtesy from heaven  
And dressed myself in such humility  
That I did pluck allegiance from men’s hearts  
Loud shouts and salutations from their mouths,  
Even in the presence of the crownèd King. (1HIV III.ii.50-54)

Although Henry Bolingbroke plays the role of King better than Richard, he falls short of complete success. Despite the seeming legality of the proceedings of Richard’s deposition, Bolingbroke’s acquisition of the crown (and subsequent involvement in regicide) still carries in the eyes of many the taint of the usurper. On his deathbed, Henry admits at last to the “by-paths and indirect crook’d ways” (2HIV IV.v.184) he used to gain the crown, confirming his desert of the unsavory title. He fails to escape this role, for while it is one that he plays quite skillfully, he lacks the vision to see the necessity of creating a worthy reinterpretation of events. Prince Hal later invents his own reprehensible reputation, but has
the strength of his directorial vision to redeem himself handily in the eyes of his people upon his ascension to the throne. Without his son’s keen understanding of the rules of the stage, Henry is doomed to a reign of bitter rebellions and to a crown that never sits easily upon his head.

How is it, then, that Hal succeeds where all other monarchs of the history plays have failed? Why is he able ultimately to redeem the idea of the Player King? The answer one might well anticipate: Hal’s masterful understanding and utilization of theatricality enables him to prevail. As the Richards demonstrate, however, not just any brand of histrionics will do; rather, it is Hal’s own unique blend of directorial power and Protean role-playing that allow him to triumph.

Hal possesses the same understanding of the proper spectacle of kingship that his father and Richard II employ, their example serving as a guidebook in the value of calculated display and gesture to the young Prince. Their connection in this aspect is echoed in the returning metaphor of the sun to describe the display of power presented in the figure of the king, emerging from the onlookers at Flint Castle, in King Henry’s lecture to his son, and in Hal’s first soliloquy. While still a Prince, spending most of his time in the Eastcheap taverns, once he takes on the role of the reformed heir, even his enemies (who one might assume would be the most critical audience of all) must acknowledge the power of the image he presents. Before the Battle of Shrewsbury, Sir Richard Vernon tells the assembled rebels of his sighting of the Prince:

I saw young Harry with his beaver on,
His cuisses on his thighs, gallantly armed,
Rise from the ground like feathered Mercury,
And vaulted with such ease into his seat
As if an angel dropped down from the clouds
To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus
And witch the world with noble horsemanship. (1HIV IV.ii.104-110)
In addition to kingly spectacle, Hal can instantly summon the rhetoric of power when needed, whether in the tavern or before his father, which he demonstrates long before the Archbishop of Canterbury has cause to remark:

… that when he speaks,
The air, a chartered libertine, is still,
And the mute wonder lurketh in men’s ears
To steal his sweet and honeyed sentences. (Henry V.Li.47-50)

As Prince and later as King, Hal possesses the dynamism that Richard II lacks. Far from resting content within his title, the Prince seeks out new roles to play and avenues to pursue. Henry VI longs in vain for the sweetness of a life spent entirely subjected to time, while Richard realizes in Pomfret castle, “I wasted time, and now doth Time waste me.” (V.v.49) It is Hal, however, who proudly vows to the assembled audience his intention to redeem time; rather than subjecting himself and his years as Prince of Wales to the expectations of others or spending that period as frivolously as appearances suggest, Hal has rather transformed time into a commodity to hoard for his own purposes. When his chosen moment arrives, his early years will then be liberated to serve his own purposes; the words of Hal’s soliloquy become a promise that is ultimately fulfilled over the course of the Henriad.

The Hal of the two Henry IV plays demonstrates his remarkable talent for Protean transformation time and again, switching roles at a dizzying pace from scoundrel to schemer,

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22 Richard II in particular seems to identify his sense of self entirely within the realm of his title and the kingly ceremony that he prizes, the loss of which undoes him. As he proclaims in the scene of his deposition:

…I have no name, no title-
No, not that name was given me at the font-
But ’tis usurped. Alack the heavy day,
That I have worn so many winters out
And know not what name to call myself (IV.i.255-259)

Without the title of King, Richard is nothing but “a mockery king of snow.” (260) James Winny elaborates on this attribute of Richard’s court, and its sense that names and titles alone possess identity; nothing else is required or even exists (48-49).

23 This rhetorical move is later echoed in Macbeth’s final scene, as Macduff announces that “the time is free” (V.ix.21): with the death of Macbeth, time and the crown are equally liberated from their usurpation and restored to their rightful states.
from valiant warrior to tavern drawer to repenting prodigal son. This fantastic quality of mutability is ultimately channeled into Hal’s portrayal of kingship. It has already been demonstrated by Richard II that the flat idea of King as impressive spectacle and powerful speech is not sufficient. Only in his final moments does Richard comprehend that to be king rightly means that “Thus play I in one person many people/ And none contented.” (V.v.31-32) Hal sees that kingship requires more than the one-sided figure of Richard; rather, the King must be the ultimate role-player and never at ease unless he is finding new roles to play. The king must be statesman, warrior, bestower of justice, inspirational figurehead, canny lover, and an honorable man. Just as Prince Hal learned to perform the role that best suited each moment, as King Henry V, he exercises these same skills, leaping from tent to tent on the eve of Agincourt, presenting a different face to each witness.²⁴

Hal’s theatricality allows each performance to convince its intended audience, whether it be Hal’s low companions or the most powerful men in England. Playing does not occur within a vacuum, especially within the political stage, and one of Hal’s most important skills is the ability to play to audiences both onstage and off, selecting the proper face to display to each. The moments where Richard II most captures the hearts of theatre patrons often tend to fall upon the ears of the most unrelenting onstage spectators, as witnessed in heartrending and entirely ineffectual lamentations of the deposition scene. Hal’s innate understanding of playing enables him to constantly engage every audience he encounters, culminating in the united admiration incited by his speech on St. Crispin’s Day from all spectators.

²⁴ It is significant that while Hal does not fall prey to the weaknesses of Richard II, neither does he drift into the other extreme as presented by Richard III. While each can be accused of manipulating those around them, because Hal stands as a legitimate successor to the throne, there is no need to playact in the same villainous manner. As Thomas Van Laan remarks in his *Role-playing in Shakespeare*, at the opening of Richard III, Gloucester proclaims his intention to “play the villain,” overwriting his earlier vows of dissembling as a means of achieving the crown; thus, once successfully cast into the coveted role, Richard is unable to play the part and instead remains the villain, rather than successfully adapting his talents to the proper pursuits of kingship. (138)
There are many types of roles that characters assume, and the parts available within the political drama are diverse; thus it is that Bolingbroke’s part as Usurper has an impact on his role as King. One of the most important aspects of the playing of power is the necessity of incorporating all the disparate parts into one overarching Role, a task which can only be achieved by the creation of a cohesive narrative. While Henry IV failed in this endeavor, his son knew better than to fall prey to the same trap. From his first scene, Hal is established as already having written his own script to play out over the years, a clear path charted from dissolute youth to beloved king, rather than running the risk that rebellious lords will create a damaging alternative interpretation of events, such as that which beset his father’s reign. As King, Henry IV hoped to clear his reputation with a visit to the Holy Land, a venture doomed to never take place; upon his ascension to the throne, Hal finds an ideal narrative in the French campaign that fulfills this purpose spectacularly. As a dramatist, he knows the type of story to appeal to the masses, and even when the threads of his narrative seem at times to be on the verge of slipping from his control, Hal is able to improvise within that framework until he regains his directorial role. Unlike his father, he understands the vital task of the king to stand as the chief narrator of the dominant fiction, rather than to let other interpretations rise to threatening prominence.

The dialogue at the beginning of Henry V demonstrates the success his performance meets with, but from the moment Hal assumes the throne, he ensures the effectiveness of his self-dramatization. As painful as it may or may not be to the characters and audience, the rejection of Falstaff must be turned into a public spectacle, an absolute manifestation of the

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25 Indeed, Van Laan prefaces his work by identifying four separate variations of role-playing within Shakespeare’s plays: literal performance (as in a play-within-a-play), assumed identities that help the player to control or cope with the world, roles which serve a dramatic function (characters who play the villain or the romantic lead), and finally, roles within a social structure. (9-16)
new king’s transformation from his former self. Despite his successes at Shrewsbury, after the battle Hal is found once more with his former companions; without such a theatricalized break between his two worlds, Hal would likely have difficulty in effecting the separation (especially given the trouble he experiences as the lines between his self and role seem to blur, as seen in 2 Henry IV). This moment of dramatized rejection of his past as a despised dream legitimizes his worthiness to rule in the eyes of the English people, and also grants Hal the ability to commit himself fully to his new role. The offstage audience, though potentially heartbroken, is satisfied as well, for the threat of rejection introduced in 1 Henry IV has come to dramatic resolution: a loaded gun that, once brought onstage, has finally been discharged.26

The Early Modern anti-theatricalist feared for the well-being of actors, as they put their selves and souls in jeopardy with each performance. Time and again, the themes of potential self-negation were raised in the ongoing pamphlet wars of the period, and stories such as Edmund Gayton’s lamentable actor, forever altered by his role, were often traded. Yet Shakespeare presents his audience with Hal, an unabashed player from his first entrance who somehow manages to retain his sense of self throughout the Henriad. Although during the small beer scene of 2 Henry IV, Hal seems to be in danger of losing that self within his many roles, when he enters into the most demanding role of all, he seems to have reached the best self-understanding. In his passionate soliloquy on the eve of Agincourt, Hal confirms his earlier statement that “the King is but a man” (IV.i.102) and rejects the identification of self with ceremony that doomed Richard II, thus separating himself firmly

26 Shakespeare’s reasons for writing a second play that stages scenes effectively prefigured in 1 Henry IV have long been an area of debate for scholars. While sometimes classified as an attempt to cash in on the success of the first play (and Falstaff’s popularity in particular), 2 Henry IV achieves much more than the mere redundancy some would claim. A suggested apology for the play proposes that with Part 2, Shakespeare offers a refiguring of certain events with a thematic shift from Honor to Justice, two equally necessary steps in the didactic path of the Prince.
from the political role which he plays. Even more revealing than this, however, are the implications of the glove jest played upon Fluellen and Williams; even as the pressures of kingship weigh most heavily upon him, the King proves that he is still Hal of the tavern, always on the lookout for a chance to play a practical joke upon an unsuspecting bystander. It is the surest sign that Hal has not been lost, transformed into a debilitated casualty of the constant role-playing that he has performed for years.

Through his history plays, Shakespeare seems to enter into the debate on theatricality waged during the era. One must acknowledge that characters such as Richard of Gloucester, his first to embrace the theatricality of the political sphere, can hardly be trumpeted as an example of the practical benefits of dissembling. Likewise within Henry V, Shakespeare offers the example of the three traitors, equally perfidious in their hypocrisy. At the scene of their denunciation, all four players put on smiling, guileless faces until the fateful letters are distributed, just as they each play roles from day to day, the one as King, the others as loyal subjects. The difference between their daily acts of playing seems to lie in their political significance, however, for when Hal acts, it is to put on one of the many aspects of the King, while the traitors have busied themselves portraying innocence while consigning their King to death. Such examples as are on display within this one scene make it apparent that theatricality itself can be put to many uses, both for good and ill; the quality in and of itself seems to be morally neutral and not significantly harmful to any of the players. Despite all

27 This scene likewise furthers the argument for the retention of Hal’s former self within the role of King, for his condemnation of Lord Scroop is particularly harsh due to their personal attachment, centering on the betrayal of a friend as much as the act of political treason. Amidst his tirade, he accuses Scroop thus:

> What shall I say to thee, Lord Scroop, thou cruel, Ingrateful, savage, and inhuman creature? Thou that did’st bear the key of all my counsels, That knew’st the very bottom of my soul, … I will weep for thee; For this revolt of thine, methinks, is like Another fall of man. (II.iii.94-97, 140-142)
the reasons why Hal should be destroyed by his playacting, he survives, and if acting were itself sinful, how could it be that God grants the King the ability to triumph against such odds at Agincourt?

Richard III likens himself “to a chaos” (3HVT III.ii.161), an appropriate term to describe a Renaissance player such as he is. Such chaos contains great power, however, and Shakespeare’s depiction of Henry V represents the harnessing of that power, utilizing its energies to play the King’s role. The King that Hal portrays is legion, becoming all things to all people: he finds a role to play for every social sphere, from Harry le Roy to the self-effacing wooer of Katherine, and in so doing finds the perfect outlet for the potentiality of his theatrical energy. His keen understanding of the world in theatrical terms marks him as the master of his play from his first entrance. Far from being reviled for these traits, Hal is beloved, a “star of England” (Epilogue 6) and “the mirror of all Christian kings.” (II.0.6) The anxieties of the anti-theatricalists are confronted within the character of Hal, and one by one, refuted by this true Player King. His triumphs on the battlefields defeat the moral arguments against theatricality in the political sphere, and Shakespeare’s contemporary court finds its vindication at his side.
Bibliography


