

ENGLISH: *HENRY IV PART 1*

“Falstaff is the true hero of the play” – Discuss.

Set in the tumultuous era following Henry Bullingbrook's usurpation of the throne and implication of his involvement in the murder and forced abdication of rightful king Richard II, William Shakespeare's historical drama 1 Henry IV questions what makes a legitimate leader. Further, two hundred years on from those dubious actions, Shakespeare explores the heroes amongst the rebels and the crown alliances who meet on the Shrewsbury plain. Central to the play is the influence of the old decayed knight Sir Jack Falstaff and his role as a friend and unconventional father figure to the Prince of Wales and his behaviour at the Battle of Shrewsbury. Falstaff's consistency in his behaviour allows both Elizabethan and modern audiences a gauge with which other alternate heroes can be compared. The value of chivalry and the sincerity of it can be critiqued in Sir Walter Blunt's, Hotspur Percy's and Hal's deeds. Further, Falstaff's manipulative conduct too can be used to reference the authenticity of other characters' demeanours. Shakespeare uses this play within the Quattro to explore the different merits of different kinds of heroism.

“Old” Jack Falstaff is the only character in the play who is consistently frank in his openness of his values. He is true to himself. Falstaff is aware of his behaviour, and it does not faze him. “Plump Jack” is more than happy to live in the moment for the simple pleasures in life. Consequently, this willingness to express his opinions to other characters and the audience makes him the truest hero in the play. Unabashedly aware and confident in who he is, allows Falstaff to be this consistent hero of “a dull fighter and a keen guest”. Alone on stage at the end of Act III Scene 3, Falstaff sits at a table in the Boar's Head tavern following Hal's declaration that Falstaff will command a “foot” regiment of light infantry and that all the “good lads of Eastcheap” would be coming along to join the crown's campaign. Here, Falstaff addresses the audience of the Globe Theatre, wherein the actor has full advantage of being able to see the well-lit faces of the people he speaks to. Using this more open and inclusive environment than modern performances, Elizabethan audiences are given great insight into Falstaff's declaration to the world wishing the “tavern were my drum”. Falstaff doesn't want to go to war, he would prefer to stay in the pub and have his breakfast. In the context of the Globe Theatre, this is more a public declaration than a soliloquy as often interpreted in modern recreations of the play and thus reflects clearly, Falstaff's openness in values and trueness in his heroic character.

Falstaff's openness in character is one of few heroic traits he represents. One fault in the Elizabethan ideology of a hero that stands clearly obvious is his self centeredness. “Sir John Paunch” as he teased by his Eastcheap companions is not the model of a chivalric knight. Claiming to be “as virtuously given as a gentleman need” isn't truly believed by the audience, nor is it acceptable to the standards of his bestowed knighthood. Even the unreformed Hal notes the “natural coward(ice)” of Falstaff. In the midst of Act V's battle, Falstaff comes across the body of Sir Walter Blunt. Slain by Douglas following an honourable engagement in “single combat”, Falstaff reminds the audience of his catechism on honour, noting to the audience “there's honour for you”. Only moments before however, “Lord Harry Percy” stood by Blunt's body and lauded him as a “gallant knight”. Hotspur values chivalry and is seen throughout the play to seek chivalric honour, as such, this touching comment standing by the body of his enemy reflects that Hotspur his a better model for a courageous hero. Contrasting this however, on his death bed Percy adopts an attitude to honour that parallels Falstaff's quite notably. Hotspur seems to have regret for how he has lived his life fervently seeking honour. Hal is later in the play seen going to the aid of his father duelling the “noble Scot” Douglas. As he engages the Scottish Earl, the Prince of Wales declares his wish to avenge “Blunt” who strengthens his “arms”. Both Henry Percy and Prince Henry offer superior models of how a knight and courageous hero should act in battle and in respect to the fallen.

Falstaff is so often remembered for his sharp wit and ability to manipulate people of lower intelligence as a result of it. Falstaff acts to use people for his own end and financial benefit. Late in Act III, Falstaff and Bardolph enter the Boar's Head Tavern. Here Falstaff demands from Mistress Quickly, the tavern hostess, to know who "picked (his) pocket" and demands recompense for her keeping "thieves in [the] house". Falstaff exaggerates the worth of the "ring of (his) grandfather's" which was supposedly worth "forty mark". The hostess is able to defend herself briefly noting that Hal had observed the ring to be "copper". Falstaff continues to play tricks on Mistress Quickly, forcing her to fall into traps of wordplay. At the end of the scene, after Hal had defended her (arriving just in time), Falstaff again tries to manipulate the hostess declaring that he "forgive(s)" her, and says bringing him his breakfast would make all even. Whilst Falstaff's manipulation of people here certainly evidences a lack of heroic behaviour, Hal isn't guiltless of similar actions. Reformed somewhat in this scene in Eastcheap, Hal has also manipulated people even within the walls of the same building. Francis, the waiter, fell victim to a plot of Hal's. Further, as the play progresses, Hal continues to manipulate people, raising the question is he a planned hero. Hal's manipulations however develop to be for the good of England, as seen in the final scene of the play where he releases Douglas back to Scotland in order to manipulate the Scots to be sympathetic or at least not in rebellion against the crown. Following this, it must be considered that both Falstaff and Hal are at fault of not conducting themselves as true heroes in the Elizabethan interpretation of honourable and truthful qualities.

Falstaff is the audience's hero because he is flawed. He is one of Shakespeare's most relatable characters throughout the ages and is still relevant to modern audiences. It is his unheroic behaviours that bestow him this epithet. His desire to "go by the moon" and live for simple hedonistic pleasures from the profits of "taking purses" is what characterises his antithetical hero behaviour. At the Battle of Shrewsbury, the audience is exposed to Falstaff alone on stage deciding to "swear (he) killed" Hotspur, and to prove this action add a "new wound" to his thigh. Carrying Harry Percy's corpse across the battlefield, he encounters the Prince of Wales and brother Lord John of Lancaster. To these men he demands of their father "to be either earl or duke". The pause that Hal takes before he speaks is indicative of how much disbelief he has in Falstaff's behaviour. Hal believes Falstaff is betraying their friendship. In addition to this, the audience gets a sense that Falstaff claims this behaviour in order to protect and provide for himself, considering Hal's ominously foreboding claim in Eastcheap, that he "will" banish Falstaff at some point. Such a cunning and dark plot of Falstaff's is evidence of Sir John's intellect. Having at one point been a noble knight, Falstaff knows the power and influence that being "honoured" can bring. Historically, it was almost like a currency, allowing "good men" to be able to influence others. For Falstaff, this means skipping bills and payments. He does however finish the play on a light note, underscoring that he has not changed, nor will he "change" and "live cleanly". He is as a result of such behaviour, truly the amusingly tragic hero in the audience's mind. He is pitied for his lifestyle, and also envied. Falstaff is the character likely to leave the greatest impression on any audience once the play is over.

Shakespeare's 1 Henry IV introduces multiple types of heroes, with many characters representing the virtues and vices of them. Hotspur's courageous hero, ultimately on his death bed shows a man regretting risking his life so young. Sir Walter Blunt's chivalric hero whilst being able to engage in battle fairly with Douglas saw him fall slain in deceitful sacrifice and service for the king. Prince Hal's victorious hero appears to the audience to be equally grand and planned. Within the Elizabethan era opinion on great medieval heroes, one pictures a talented swordsman with good grace, limitless courage, and total honour and respect for the weak. No one character of Shakespeare's is able to represent a totally true hero, and that seems to be where the mastery of this play lives. Each character is therefore real and relatable. In some cases the rebels are better examples of heroes than the supposedly "just" crown forces. Sir John Falstaff is a key embodiment of this ideal. He is a knight who has fallen from grace and the chambers of the king. In Henry IV Part 1 he is the antithesis of a chivalric hero of the time, yet whilst flawed, he is true and open of himself to all he encounters. The play is filled with these incredibly human characters which are all admired as heroes in differing definitions and in differing situations. Consequently, there are no true heroes present in the play.