

Redeeming Time: Henry V's Transition from 'Comedian' to King

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Abstract: Inspired by the remarkable personage of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and his transition from comedian and actor to an inspirational leader admired around the world, this paper will examine the similar fate of Hal/Henry V in Shakespeare's second Henriad. The focus will be on Henry's comic "career", prior to ascending the throne, "slumming" with Falstaff and his followers, in particular in *Henry IV Part One*. There will be an attempt to demonstrate how Henry, contrary to expectations, makes profitable use of his time to "learn the ropes". Henry in his interactions with Falstaff and others employs a wide range of comic techniques: jokes, insult comedy, imitations, political satire, etc. In contrast, however, with Zelensky who has bravely rallied his country and inspired the world with resistance to a larger aggressor in a defensive war, Henry V does the exact opposite invading neighbouring France on the most flimsy of pretexts. Although lionized in many productions as a great military leader, icon of Englishness and man of the people, this paper will argue for his ultimate failure as a leader, failing to heed the lessons of his comic "apprenticeship", in stark contrast to Zelensky.

Keywords: Second Henriad, Henry V, Volodymyr Zelensky, Transition, Comedian

Introduction

The transition of Volodymyr Zelensky from a comedian, actor and dancer to a world-renowned inspirational figure as the President of Ukraine in these disturbing times is undoubtedly one of the biggest news stories of 2022. One of the most peculiar aspects of his story is the fact that he actually played a secondary school teacher, who is surprisingly elected President, in the popular Ukrainian television series *Servant of the People*, which also became the name of his own political party. Inspired by this remarkable transition from actor to President, I would like to draw certain parallels with the character of Prince

Hal from the *Henry IV* plays, later Henry V in the play of the same name. A new production of *Henry V* starring Kit Harington (Jon Snow in *Game of Thrones*) actually seemingly draws attention to the similarities between the two leaders with Harington sporting a green T-shirt almost identical to Zelensky's signature garb.¹

The character of Hal/Harry/Henry (Henry from now on) has generated a great deal of popular and critical attention. Opinions regarding his transition from "playboy" or "slacker", under Falstaff's tutelage, to "hero" of the Battle of Agincourt have varied greatly. E. M. Tillyard's view that "Henry V was traditionally not only the perfect king but a king after the Englishman's heart; one who added the quality of good mixer to the specifically regal virtues" (Tillyard, 299) personifies the traditional conservative patriotic view. In contrast, John Masefield's commentary would typify the more liberal, anti-war perspective, "Prince Henry is not a hero, he is not a thinker, he is not even a friend; he is a common man whose incapacity for feeling enables him to change his habits whenever interest bids him" (Masefield, 112).

Perhaps the best way to view Henry is through that most Shakespearian metaphor of the world as a stage (*As You Like It*) and all of us merely strutting players (*Macbeth*). Often quoted out of context, these conceits make reference not only to the fleetingness of human life (mortality), but also to the vacuousness of existence (absurdity). Henry is not just any actor/player, but specifically a comic one, a comedian.

My reading of Henry the character, and the attempted parallel with the current political situation and President Zelensky, is also indebted to the groundbreaking work by Jan Kott, who in his *Shakespeare our Contemporary* pointed out the relevancy of the plays to his day, namely the 1950s and 1960s in Communist Poland. Kott eloquently demonstrated how the plays, and the characters in them, continue to speak to the present-day political reality: "Shakespeare is like the world, or life itself. Every historical period finds in him what it is looking for and what it wants to see" (Kott, 3). I should also make clear that one needs to distinguish between the historical personages depicted in the plays (particularly the histories) and Shakespeare's creations, a distinction which Kott would, of course, also make apparent.

1 For a discussion of the significance of Zelensky's trade-mark T-shirt, see <https://www.inside-hook.com/article/news-opinion/zelenskys-t-shirt-means>.

“Playing holidays”, *Henry IV Part One*

In the first play of the Second Henriad *Henry IV Part One*, the Prince explicitly employs many of the techniques of the comedic craft. He is acting from the very beginning, jesting, learning various ‘roles’ and doing impersonations. He covers the gamut of comedic art and techniques: stand-up, insults, banter, word-play, acting out scenes, taking part in rehearsal and even providing political satire. Henry himself immediately compares himself to an actor of sorts in the second scene of the play, his soliloquy.

If all the year were playing holidays,
 To sport would be as tedious as to work,
 But when they seldom come, they wished-for come,
 And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.
 So when this loose behavior I throw off
 And pay the debt I never promised,
 By how much better than my word I am,
 By so much shall I falsify men’s hopes;
 And, like bright metal on a sullen ground,
 My reformation, glitt’ring o’er my fault,
 Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
 Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
 I’ll so offend to make offense a skill,
 Redeeming time when men think least I will. (1.2: 188-210)

This scene has, of course, generated much debate and controversy. Arthur Quiller-Couch referred to it as “the most damnable piece of workmanship to be found in Shakespeare” (Wilson, 43). Samuel Johnson, in contrast, pragmatically suggested that it was “to keep the Prince from appearing vile” (Wilson, 43). There has been much discussion as to whether the soliloquy means that Henry is only using his friends, and Falstaff in particular, as a means to an end, as comic preparation for becoming King/President, razing expectation and playing the dark horse. *The Hollow Crown* film version of the play from 2012 presents the soliloquy as a voice-over, while Henry (Tom Hiddleston) walks among the “low-life” exchanging affectionate smiles, thereby lessening the impact.

Regardless of how one views Henry's intentions, there seems to be no doubt that he plays his role very effectively, at least in *Henry IV Part One*. Prior to the soliloquy, he comes onstage in 1.2 joking, punning and insulting like a stand-up comedian. Falstaff and Henry seem like a well-oiled comic duo act, setting one another up for punch-lines and gags. Henry wakes up his elderly mentor with a barrage of insults concerning his alternative lifestyle. Falstaff counters with a pun on the word 'grace', insinuating that Henry is in both political and religious peril: "And I prithee, sweet wag, when thou art a king, as, God save thy Grace – majesty I should say, for grace thou wilt have none –" (1.2: 16-18). Henry good-naturedly pretends not to understand the implications "Well, how then? Come, roundly, roundly" (1.2: 22) in order to extend the gag further and set up Falstaff for more verbal foolery. When Falstaff pushes things a bit too far, seemingly requesting he and his men be allowed to carry out crime in the future with the blessing of the monarch, Henry wittily turns the table and literally makes use of gallows humour, "by-and-by in as high a flow as the ridge of the gallows" (1.2: 37-38). This is seemingly too much for the elderly Falstaff and he immediately changes the subject with a lewd reference to the charms of the "hostess of the tavern" (1.2: 40). This triggers yet another chain of puns and insults, with Henry (or Shakespeare himself) famously making humorous reference to the original model for Falstaff, the historical Sir John Oldcastle, "my old lad of the castle" (1.2: 41-42).

Falstaff even feigns ignorance (one of his many rhetorical strategies) of the implications of his comic partner's jibes "What, in thy quips and thy quiddities?" (1.2: 44-45). The genius of this interchange is the levels of irony and sarcasm involved, with both seemingly aware that this cannot last, but enjoying it while they can. The scene keeps going at break-neck speed, which demands a great deal of skill and virtuosity for actors when performing the scene; it is, not surprisingly often abridged with sections cut out.

The scene concludes with Falstaff encouraging the Prince to participate in a robbery of a group of wealthy pilgrims at Gadshill. Initially reluctant, Henry finally agrees to the "jest", at his friend Poins' urging, only because they will be 'playing/acting' and providing the possibility for future comic material; setting-up Falstaff to shine on stage so to speak. Falstaff is not, however, in the know or if he is, one can never tell. After Falstaff and his men rob the pilgrims, Henry and Poins intend to double-cross Falstaff in order to see what tall tales it will generate. "Now could thou and I rob the thieves and go merrily to London, it would be an argument for a week, laughter for a month, and a good jest

forever” (2.2: 89-92). Their expectations are not disappointed. As they run off with the ill-gotten treasure, Henry delivers one of his most amusing lines at the expense of the grossly overweight and horseless Falstaff, who has taken to flight on foot “Falstaff sweats to death and lards the lean earth as he walks along. Were’t not for laughing, I should pity him” (2.2: 103-105).

Henry’s range of comic skills is impressive to say the least. While waiting in 2.4 for Falstaff to appear after the robbery, he carries out impersonations of Hotspur and his wife, in theatre productions usually attempting to imitate the voices and mannerism of the two respective characters.

I am not yet of Percy’s mind, the Hotspur of the North, he that kills me some six or seven dozen of Scots at a breakfast, washes his hands, and says to his wife ‘Fie upon this quiet life! I want work.’ ‘O my sweet Harry,’ says she, ‘how many hast thou killed today?’ ‘Give my roan horse a drench,’ says he, ... (2.4: 97-102).

Jamie Parker as Henry, in the Globe production of the play from 2010, puts on a stock northern accent when imitating Hotspur and adds a bawdy touch to the lines about the horse by pulling out his shirt through his fly, implying a request for oral sex from his wife.

Although the popular version from *The Hollow Crown* series shortens and practically passes over the quoted lines, it does draw attention to the immediately preceding dialogue where Henry boasts to Poins of his skill in learning the lingo of the waiting staff, preparing himself for his future role as military leader, where he was famed for his ability to identify with and become sympathetic for the commoners and foot soldiers.

Where hast been, Hal?
With three or four loggerheads amongst three or fourscore hogs-
heads. 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 christen names, as Tom, Dick, and Francis. ... They call
drinking deep dyeing scarlet; (2.4: 4-8, 14-15)

Henry’s arguably feigned interest in the lives and language of the employees in the inn is usually portrayed as, once again, playing a game, but also learning

how to communicate with the common man, something which he perfects in the *Henry V* play when leading his troops into battle.

The audience is very much in on the game when Henry plays the lying game with Falstaff about the robbery. The genius of the scene is, among other things, how the audience or reader never knows if Falstaff even believes his own outrageous lies and tall tales. Upon realising he has milked the gag to its fullest, Henry reveals he knows the truth about the robbery and the interaction moves into insult comedy.² The insults are suited to the physiognomy of the two protagonists with the prolific use of phallic symbols. Henry begins with a rich listing off of fat references: "This sanguine coward, this bed-presser, this horse-backbreaker, this huge hill of flesh –" (2.4: 232-234), only to be countered fiercely by a barrage of thin 'dick jokes': "Sblood, you starveling, you eel-skin, you dried neat's tongue, you bull's pizzle, you stockfish – O, for breath to utter what is like thee! – you tailor's yard, you sheath, you bowcase, you vile standing tuck!" (2.4: 235-238). After the story of the double robbery is revealed in all of its indignity, Falstaff masterfully justifies his apparent cowardly behaviour with an ingenious lie, seemingly indifferent as to whether he is actually believed or not, but primarily pleased that the stolen money is safe and sound. C. L. Barber points out how Falstaff provides the Prince here and elsewhere with a comic tutelage of sorts: "... Falstaff provides him with a continuous exercise in the consciousness that comes from playing at being what one is not, and from seeing through such playing" (Barber, 170). This acquired skill will, of course, serve him well not only in his future role as King, but when having to placate the concerns of his ailing royal father.

Henry not only plays and acts when "slumming" with Falstaff and his cohorts in the tavern in Eastcheap, but also when facing the disapproval of his father the King at court. Falstaff, always looking out for his own interests, encourages Henry to practice his lines and role in a dress rehearsal of sorts prior to the actual confrontation. "Well, thou wilt be horribly chid tomorrow when thou comest to thy father. If thou love me, practice an answer" (2.4: 360-362). This variation on a play within a play³ combines comedy with deadly serious foreboding and foreshadowing concerning the future of their relationship. Initially, Falstaff plays the King and Henry plays himself.

2 Made most popular by the American comedian Don Rickles.

3 Plays within plays, most famously in *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, almost always provide a critical mirroring of the primary plot.

PRINCE Do thou stand for my father and examine me upon the particulars of my life.

FALSTAFF Shall I? Content. This chair shall be my state, this dagger my scepter, and this cushion my crown.

PRINCE Thy state is taken for a joined-stool, thy golden scepter for a leaden dagger, and thy precious rich crown for a pitiful bald crown.

FALSTAFF Well, an the fire of grace be not quite out of thee, now shalt thou be moved. Give me a cup of sack to make my eyes look red, that it may be thought I have wept, for I must speak in passion, and I will do it in King Cambyses' vein. (2.4: 363- 374)

Falstaff makes reference here to an actual play about Cambyses King of Persia, thereby reinforcing the theatrical references. The Hostess, who is crying from laughter, also makes an explicit comparison to a theatrical performance she has already seen. "O Jesu, he doth it as like one of these harlotry players as ever I see" (2.4: 382-383).

Falstaff, as the King, scolds his errant son, but quickly shifts gears and begins to use the opportunity to plead his own case and presumably his own future as an advisor to the future monarch: "... there is virtue in that Falstaff. Him keep with, the rest banish. And tell me now, thou naughty varlet, tell me where hast thou been this month?" (2.4: 414-417). This banishing question is returned to shortly. Henry is dissatisfied with Falstaff's performance and decides to switch roles. "Dost thou speak like a king? Do thou stand for me, and I'll play my father" (2.4: 418-419). The comedy quickly dries up as Henry embraces the stern tone of his father the King, even explicitly comparing Falstaff to the Vice character from the Medieval morality play tradition.

Why dost thou converse with that trunk of humors, that bolt-ing-hutch of beastliness, that swoll'n parcel of dropsies, that huge bombard of sack, that stuffed cloak-bag of guts, that roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly, that reverend vice, that gray iniquity, that father ruffian, that vanity in years? (2.4: 433-439)

Although the insults fly once again, the tone seems to have shifted into viciousness and cruelty. Falstaff defends himself, however, with great vigour and wit.

No, my good lord: banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poins; 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.
(2.4: 458- 464)

The Prince's short answer, "I do, I will." (2.4: 465) is presented in theatre and film productions in a variety of ways, either as a stern condemnation, foreshadowing the end of *Henry IV part 2*, or as a resigned inevitable reality. In most performances of the scene the laughing has dried up at this point and an uncomfortable awkward silence ensues, only to be interrupted by a loud knocking from the guards sent to investigate the robbery.

There is limited comedy in the remainder of the play. On the battlefield at Shrewsbury in 5.3, prior to the culminating duel with his nemesis Hotspur, Henry has no time or patience for Falstaff's jokes and jibes, "What, is it a time to jest and dally now?" (5.3:55). Having said that, he does agree to generously go along with the lie that Falstaff was the one to definitively kill Hotspur, allowing his friend to assume the new role of a war hero, with all of the accompanying perks and rewards. Their relationship changes, however, from this point on.

"I know thee not, old man": *Henry IV Part Two*

Henry IV part 2 is almost universally viewed as less jovial and exuberant than the first part, being introduced by a chorus-like Rumor and being imbued with themes of illness, aging and death. There is much less interaction between Henry and Falstaff, with the former obviously gradually distancing himself from his previous life in preparation for ascending the throne, although he does express nostalgic regret for the "small beer" times back in the tavern. Falstaff has grown not only in size, but also in self-importance and literally hogs the stage and the limelight.

Henry only appears for the first time in 2.2 and in a conversation with Poins expresses fatigue with his new role as a "respectable" member of the court. The Page, a gift from Henry to Falstaff, the Chief Justice, Mistress Quickly, Ancient Pistol and Justice Shallow function as the comic foils in this play to a much greater extent than Henry himself. He and Poins, while in disguise, do briefly witness Falstaff in a romantic mood with the suitably named prostitute Doll Tearsheet.

Upon revealing their identities, there is a half-hearted attempt at comic banter, only to be cut short by news that the Prince is needed at court.

In 4.4, Warwick, one of the high-ranking nobles, reminds the bed-ridden Henry IV of the strategy behind the Prince's doings, once again making use of the acting analogy. Henry is studying various lines and roles which he will make use of in his future greatest performance, in *Henry V*.

The prince but studies his companions
 Like a strange tongue, wherein, to gain the language,
 'Tis needful that the most immodest word
 Be looked upon and learned; which, once attained,
 Your Highness knows, comes to no further use
 But to be known and hated. (4.4: 68-73)

In the infamous rejection scene in 5.5, Henry, now the freshly crowned King, quickly cuts short Falstaff's appeal of fellowship, seemingly knowing all too well the older man's ability to engage him with comic banter and possibly blunt his resolve.

I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.
 How ill white hairs becomes a fool and jester!

 Reply not to me with a fool-born jest.
 Presume not that I am the thing I was. (5.5: 47-48, 55-56)

Henry has turned over a new leaf and no longer has room for his comedy mentor.

"Foreign quarrels": *Henry V*

In *Henry V*, the King assumes a new role and voice immediately. Henry, upon coming to power, instead of focusing on healing the civil rifts, which have plagued the country in the previous two plays, decides to follow the cynical dying words of his father in *Henry IV Part Two*, "to busy giddy minds/With foreign quarrels" (4.5: 213-214) and invade France. He justifies his aggression with a truly twisted interpretation of history, supposedly supporting his right to

the foreign throne. His new "regal" personality is very much on display in 1.2 when he receives a "joke" gift of tennis balls from his rival the French Dauphin as a response to Henry's claim of the rival French throne. Instead of taking this in stride, obviously a reference to his "salad days" with Falstaff, Henry renews his threats of violence full-throttle with the following words to the ambassador: "...And tell the Dauphin. His jest will savor but of shallow wit. When thousands weep more than did laugh at it." (1.2: 295-297) The time for jokes and comedy seems to be over.

Henry takes to his new role with much enthusiasm and has been lauded for his bravery and knack for connecting with the common man in the various patriotic speeches before the battles. With Falstaff deceased at the beginning of the play, Bardolph hung for stealing from a church and the other "low lifes" kept at a distance, Henry is rarely challenged and exposed to mockery. He is very much isolated from any critical voices in the final play, with the exception being the commoner foot soldiers, Williams, etc., who interact and criticise him, when, he is of course in disguise, the night before the final battle at Agincourt. He also, rather randomly, pretends to be Welsh in yet another disguised conversation with Pistol.

His last extended acting role is the "cringy" interaction with Princess Katherine, where his French language skills are grossly inadequate and his courting strategy non-existent. This Henry has practically nothing in common with the wisecracking Hal of *Henry IV Part One*. Although his invasion is "successful", the peace does not last long and both foreign and civil war emerge once more during his son's (Henry VI's) reign.

Conclusion: Zelensky's triumph and Henry's failure

There are a remarkable number of parallels between Shakespeare's character of Henry V and the Ukrainian President. Volodymyr Zelensky's modest beginnings provide a foil for the wonder of his transformation into a world leader, although, as is the case with Henry, there has been cynical speculation that he has been gunning for power right from the beginning of his acting career. The fact that Henry is heir to the throne contrasts starkly, of course, with Zelensky's starting point as a Russian-speaking Jewish entertainer.

Zelensky, in contrast to Henry, took his comic team with him into politics. He did not reject his former comic colleagues, but, on the contrary, brought them

into his administration as advisors, even publicly kissing the head of his Falstaffian acting colleague Yevhen Koshovy on the occasion of his official inauguration.

Both leaders have successfully “pressed the flesh” and used their rhetorical skills to generate support when mixing with their soldiers on the front lines. Zelensky’s impressive knowledge of languages (Russian, Ukrainian, English) is in vivid contrast, however, to Henry’s awkward “wooing” of Katherine and his bumbling attempts to speak French. Olena Zelenska’s prominent and active position by her husband’s side is also diametrically different from Queen Katherine’s submissiveness, lack of agency and silence. Both leaders make use of their backgrounds as comedians and comics to hone and perfect their leadership and marketing skills. With Henry’s invasion of France, however, their paths radically diverge.

Harold C. Goddard comments on the transition Henry undergoes in the plays as follows:

Now Henry had a marvelous chance to begin being such an ideal ruler. He was obviously endowed by nature with a spirit of good fellowship. He had an imaginative genius for a teacher. He had the opportunity of a king. He ought to have taught all England to play. But what did he do? Instead of leading his kingdom first to justice under the spirit of the Chief Justice and then to good-fellowship under the spirit of Falstaff, he led it to war under the ghost of his father. (Goddard, 210-211)

This potential ideal outcome could very much be applied to Zelensky and the actual result (the invasion of another sovereign country) could be, at least in my reading, a description of the current invasion of Ukraine. Henry becomes very much everything he has previously mocked, with his rhetoric in *Henry V* closely resembling the macho posturing of Hotspur in *Henry IV Part One*. The rejection of Falstaff (the jester, who cuts through all the pompous pretense) seemingly leads to a loss of self-awareness, loss of self-criticism, loss of play, the ability to laugh at and mock oneself. By banishing Falstaff and eventually executing his cronies, Henry loses touch with his comic side, the part of him which would allow himself to be humbled, to be mocked, to be taken down a step and which would (I hope) have given him second thoughts about pursuing such a blood-thirsty, brutal policy in France. While Henry, with the cynical help of his church leaders, claims a highly shaky right to the French throne, Putin justifies the war

with Ukraine with convoluted explanations, concerning the legitimacy of nationhood, the presence of so-called “fascists” who need to be rooted out, etc. Although traditionally celebrated as an iconic English King, Henry V is arguably just the opposite. His comic apprenticeship provides him with a number of useful skills, which are, unfortunately, disappointingly used to invade “the vast fields of France” (Prologue: 12).

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