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K. G. W. Cross and D. R. C. Marsh,
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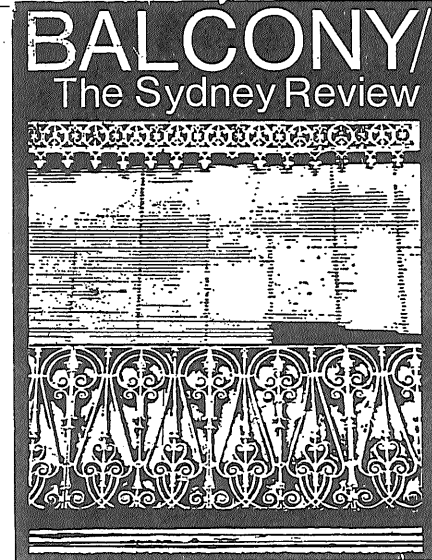
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HENRY IV

AND THE HUMAN COMMITMENT TO HISTORY

by James Tulip

In Shakespearean tragedy we find ourselves at moments of utmost misfortune for man affirming "this is what life is like," and do so, not willingly, but because we see that Shakespeare has already done it for us. The sense is there that in his creation of a world transcending time and place, Shakespeare himself has discovered an affirmation of man, and that he has done so in the midst of men, in time and in place—in other words, in history. And it is this that points to the largest value of the History plays in Shakespeare's total achievement: that without them the tragedies would not have been possible. For it was in treating of history that Shakespeare's imagination won its first impossible victory. It was of an imagination setting itself against a world of inexorable realism; against history with its focus on man as finite and mortal; history with its evidence of man as object of every destructive force thrown up by experience; history with its demonstration in the Wars of the Roses of the way man for his own part assists the malign agencies of time and place and circumstance; history with its pressure of necessity provoking ultimately and for stability's sake an ethic of necessity as the only viable, though limiting, human response: these were the conditions of human experience that Shakespeare accepted as his material and in which his imagination bedded itself down. It was this view of "life" implicit in history that Shakespeare had to transmute and transcend to make real his view of "man".

It is too seldom realized how the process of history and the process of drama oppose each other. Shakespeare's History plays certainly revolve around this problem, how to create the affirmation of man indispensable to drama out of the qualifications and negotiations of him in the material of history; indeed, these plays offer the extreme illustration of this general paradox in the creative imagination. In Shakespeare we find the affirmation of man most real in tragedy: as when Lear can put the question "Who is it that can tell me who I am?", the question of identity asked in adversity and prosecuted to the point where the fortunes and feelings of the individual man are purged of their individual attachments and become the content of a universal wisdom regarding man's nature. It is only at this moment of tragic vision, the moment that carries the full weight of man's experience of existence through suffering, that his heroic stature reveals itself. The sense at this point is that "to be man" matters, and matters magnificently; it is a sense that comes with an enlarging and liberating impact to us, a sense of the human self having the capacity to grow into a new being and to make of suffering something redemptive; it is a sense of man at the depths of misfortune having the power, if not to set right, yet to see right the world that has destroyed him. Such discoveries as these are "dramatic" truths, wrested by Shakespeare out of the alien world of fact.

The "otherness" of history, its intractability to human desires, lies heavily on Shakespeare's Histories. So far from grasping in these plays any redemptive capacity for self, Shakespeare's recurring problem presents

itself as conceiving of the very possibility of self. In the contingent milieu of historical event, man appears often as little more than yet another atom of existence. And how to appropriate this existence as an intellectual order, and, more vitally for the theatre, an affective order is the crux of Shakespeare's own creative commitment to history.

History as event and history as exemplum, these were the basic viewpoints offered to Shakespeare by the source chronicles; and there are, admittedly, large parts of the History plays that are tied down to these basic viewpoints. Yet Shakespeare's viewpoint as dramatist obviously transcends these conditions in his sources. Essentially, he saw history not as event or exemplum but as human existence. And within this more philosophical frame he perceived that what men undergo matters equally with what they do in establishing the quality of their existence. Man's passivities, he saw, must be treated along with man's activities to give anything like the full human picture. And it was in his grasp of the place and modes of the human passivities that Shakespeare's great break-through as a dramatist came.

By passivities Shakespeare understood man's passions, his capacity to feel and respond, his capacity for experience. Falstaff stands as the culmination of these capacities; his appetites, his size, his language, his general lust for life incarnate as a great positive this one side of the human self. Falstaff "undergoes" life, and, until late in his career, keeps asking for more. He is the extreme case. Yet it pays to remember that even in the most dogged stretches of the History plays it is Shakespeare's attribution of a power and an activity to the passions of other and lesser men than Falstaff that not only saves the scenes as drama but more significantly gives these men such stature as they have. For the passions of man always imply man's capacity for self-realization: his self has been challenged in some way or other and his passion is his response towards reasserting this self.

But the relation between action and passion that defines the human self varies throughout Shakespeare's Histories. In 'Henry VI' we see the passions of men occurring largely as "reactions" to events, that is, determined by them. There is, in a tentative sense, the feeling in part of this trilogy that the human passions might attach themselves creatively to something larger and higher than self-interest, to some central transcending object that embodies the whole life of the nation, some "respublica" figure such as the King. But this attempt to transcend self-interest in the name of the nation only turns back viciously upon those men who show capacity; for the nation or state, Shakespeare lays bare, is a contingent thing, wholly dependent on the self-interest of the men who make it up. The milieu of history in 'Henry VI' presents itself as an ironically viewed vicious circle, with the crown provoking, rather than subsuming, the self-interest of its subjects.

In 'Richard III' and 'Richard II' there is virtually no relation established for the protagonists between what they do and what they undergo. Richard III, we feel, is no more than what he does, the activist par excellence; Richard II interests us only in what he undergoes, as it were, after the event. The disjunction in both cases, though taking opposite forms, implies the absence in the milieu of history of any order larger than that of the fortunes of individual men. John of Gaunt in his prophetic dying eulogy to England enunciates his faith in such a large and noble order,

but this again holds an irony. He cannot act to appropriate or make real this vision of order, no more than Richard can redeem his crown for all his great passion about it; indeed, we feel the passion in both cases as the grimmest sign of each man's real pathos. And there is in this recognition the sombre revelation to Shakespeare that his nation is ruled not by king or some postulated higher order but by human self-interest, and that any order that comes to terms with this reality will be one that controls it on its own terms.

We see, as the Histories proceed, a whole structure of faith crumbling before our eyes. King, crown, church attempt to stand out from the flux of history; but it is the man, Henry Bolingbroke, who gauges the true nature of his world as political and who finds a mode of reason adequate to answer to the demands made upon it. We observe him towards the end of 'Henry IV' reflecting on this whole process of history with that master of statecraft Warwick: "Are these things then necessities," he asks, "Then let us meet them like necessities." Bolingbroke thus establishes a new dimension of social existence. And in doing so he opens up for Shakespeare a new world of possibility for the drama.

As the man who becomes king, Bolingbroke still remains man. For him kingship occurs as experience, the daily preservation of his own existence. His self-interest is the nation's self-interest, and thus it is that the crown through identity with man takes on the quality of self. The whole milieu of English life under Henry IV is accessible to drama, and nothing more so than the king himself. The irony of human existence envelops him all the more: with every facility for action now in his grasp he finds himself committed to a series of reactions; his victory has made him a victim; his gains have involved him in loss. Shakespeare sees him as a creature whose existence brings together at last the two capacities of man—to act and to suffer. And in this poised existence is contained the possibility of tragedy.

It is then as an interaction of what men do and what they undergo, an interaction felt in the self of the man who is king that defines the process by which Shakespeare made his way out of the world of event and exemplum that is history into drama. But 'Henry IV', for all that as a play it goes beyond the other Histories and for all that it opens up the possibility of tragedy, still remains a History. We feel the king as "a man", not yet as "man". The capacity of Lear to ask the question of his own identity is not given to Henry. The fact that he has found in his ethic of necessity his answer to life precludes the possibility of a full human experience for him. His is a static passivity, vital only in its feelings and never advancing beyond them to a larger understanding. He lives vicariously through his subjects and especially through his own son Hal whose self-assertions suggest themselves to the father as "a scourge . . . out of my own blood". All that we see Henry IV "do" in his own play is to go to Shrewsbury to fight the rebels. But even here the point is given emphasis that the battle is fought for him by his sons and the men who wear his disguise. Thus the condition of history cramps and confines what Shakespeare may do with this very interesting man, and indeed with the whole play.

What he does, however, is no less than amazing. Accepting the passivity of Henry as his centre and testing for us its strength and validity against other forceful passivities such as Glendower's and Falstaff's and simple ones such as Shallow's and Quickly's, he then proceeds to set against this composite sense of the nation's experience two dominant

creatures of action in Hal and Hotspur so that a whole picture of English existence is caught and evaluated by the play. It makes for a world like a prism. The several milieux occur at acute angles to one another; their lights are bent and refracted against their opposite milieux, and obliquely they establish the spectrum of values that is England. The possible relationships the play offers us for consideration are endless. We see one small but nice example in the following exchange when the rebel Worcester confronts his king in the presence of Hal and Falstaff:

Worcester: Hear me my liege.

For mine own part I could be well content
To entertain the lag-end of my life
With quiet hours. For I protest
I have not sought the day of this dislike.

King Henry: You have not sought it? How comes it then?

Falstaff: Rebellion lay in his way, and he found it.

Prince Henry: Peace chewet, peace!

(I, V, i, 23-30)

Brief as it is, this moment throws up for us the essential conditions of history and drama. First the simple historical confrontation of Worcester and Henry, the act and reaction with literal, limiting qualities. Then the interjection of Falstaff detaching the moment from historical commitment, introducing an ironic intelligence playing round about the incident. And last the way that Hal, who is contained by the moment himself, contains Falstaff. Each point of view is separate and partial: there is no omniscience established; and all told there is an autonomy in the moment that makes of it a moment of drama. But while the moment is dramatic in quite a literal sense, it is also dramatic in a freer and more interesting sense for us. We have the chance to complete the irony of Falstaff. He uses it against Worcester, but we see that it applies also to the King as a fair observation on his career; and let loose in this fashion it grows in our minds into a quite general irony touching on the true place of "self" in man's affairs. It takes someone as self-interested as Falstaff to sense the self-interest of others, and someone as un-self-interested as Hal to miss the point, and someone like Shakespeare to show that this interchange about self-interest may be seen selflessly. As with so many other moments in this play, this one begins for us with "men" and ends with "man".

This prismatic method and the demands made upon our intelligence to complete the total meaning is there to the full at Shrewsbury. Falstaff's passivity is without a doubt the most active force on the battlefield. It presents itself as the intelligence of naked self-interest set off against the altruisms of the men who fight—and die. "God keep lead out of me," Falstaff cries, "I need no more weight than mine own bowels." But how pointed this wisdom actually is strikes us when we listen to Falstaff testing the value of "honour"!

Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm?

No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour
hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honour?

A word. What is that word honour? What is that
honour? Air—a trim reckoning."

This is Falstaff's answer to one of the rebels. His answer to another is to fall down "dead" before his onslaught: "to counterfeit dying . . . is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed." Set off against men whose self-interest is to kill him, Falstaff's self-interest presents itself as a saving grace for man, a grace which, when put in such striking universal terms as "Give me life," diffuses a humane light over the whole sorry scene. "There's honour for you, here's no

vanity," is Falstaff's interpretation of the dead body of Sir Walter Blunt; and we agree, as he observes, "I like not such grinning honour as Sir Walter hath."

Yet it is in this very moment of Falstaffian truth that we begin to feel less kindly towards Falstaff himself. Blunt's life is a valuable one, a point the play underlines at several stages. We meet him first posting down from Scotland, "stained with the variation of each soil," with the news of Hotspur's victory; then as the "warlike Blunt" who yet could entreat of the rebels "I would you would accept of peace and love". And when he dies at Shrewsbury wearing the garments of the king, we see a man who has found a self-fulfilment in serving something larger than himself, a self-transcendence in the cause of the nation. Thus, against the solidity of his values, Falstaff's humour gets refracted into its several and devious colours; and with the stabbing of the corpse of Hotspur, Falstaff's self-interest presents itself no longer as a response to circumstances but as an impulse and a motive seeking to manipulate them.

It is only the presence of Hal and the magnanimity of what he does (more so than of what he says) that act to contain Falstaff's role at Shrewsbury; and, in general, it is only in Hal that the play senses any real security as it plunges into the throes of history. Hal is as essential to Falstaff and the play as Falstaff is to him and the play.

Hal is "secure" and Falstaff is "alive"; each is an answer to an opposite quality, and together they comprise Shakespeare's search for an answer to history. It is the measure of the play's achievement that an answer is found; and yet it is also a measure of the play's integrity that this answer should in turn be found to be contingent.

III

Falstaff and Hal bring opposite identities to their relationship. Falstaff is the embodiment of "self" and Hal the embodiment of "history". Yet theirs alone, of all the parallel relationships of active and passive forms of existence throughout the play, holds out the possibility of something larger. history. We see this best in the Tavern scene of I, II, iv. The climax of this scene is a burlesque of the central historical issue of the play, the succession of kingship, a problem that gets looked at from the varying angles that the alternation of roles in the scene makes possible. Two things remain constant throughout all the farce, the reality of the problem itself and the reality of Falstaff; each enactment of the father-son confrontation ends with the establishment of the fullness of Falstaff; he is the vantage point in terms of which the play can contemplate historical existence and sense a right relationship between king and future king.

But while Falstaff is the postulate of this new intelligence, his being what he is is not simply postulated for the scene so much as created in it. Two incidents have led up to this climax. First, the game Hal and Poins play with Francis, and second the way they repeat it on Falstaff; together these incidents create the conditions that make for the fullness of the climax. The game with Francis is, as it were, life on Hal's terms; it shows us his psyche released by itself, and it reveals this psyche as the very image of the historical psyche felt throughout the play. A repressed lust for action bursts upon the scene, a will to manipulate and a readiness to mock mankind realizes itself. Francis is an image of man caught in this dilemma of being manipulated and mocked. "Upstairs and downstairs" is his fate. Hal's humour is cruel; and yet it has its point in the way it lets

Hal see the limitations of Hotspur, the epitome of history; and in suggesting this intelligence in Hal it implies a detachment for him from his own commitments. For his cruel humour includes himself.

When he repeats the game on Falstaff, we see, however, not only a new condition of man emerging in Falstaff's response but a new condition of awareness in Hal as well. Falstaff is caught like Francis, and Hal comes at him like Hotspur at a Scot. But Falstaff breaks the dilemma simply by absorbing it. His passive self is so immense, both in body and soul, that the wound of truth Hal and Poincils inflict re-emerges as a saving lie. And it is this creative capacity of Falstaff, his instinct for self-redemption, that Hal, for all that he abuses Falstaff, abuses him in terms of: "These lies are like their father that besets them, gross as a mountain, open, palpable." These last words point to Hal stumbling on an opposite sense of man from the one he had assumed with Francis.

The two incidents thus create a relationship for Hal and Falstaff in terms of its most sharply opposed extremes. Hence the quality of release and buoyancy to their relation when together they can enact the burlesque of succession. It is indeed drama's answer to history; and in no sense is it more dramatic than in the fact that it contains the elements of its own dissolution. The comic detachment of the Tavern milieu is there, the banishment of Falstaff is held up before our eyes, and Hal's equivocal tone as he says "I do, I will" all admit the contingency of their relation at the moment of its fulfilment.

When the rupture of their relationship finally comes, it happens with a sense of impersonality to it. It is not just Hal banishing Falstaff, but a way of life unable to admit an opposite way of life. We sense the figures of Prince John and the Lord Chief Justice standing behind Hal just as we see the figures of Shallow and Pistol behind Falstaff. They amount to two kinds of society; and the values of history exercise the judgment. Thus the play has come full circle; the forces of history have caught up with the contingent answer that is Falstaff. "Si fortuna me tormenta, spera me contenta" is Pistol's final remark, and there is something exactly relevant in Falstaff's condition here not just in the point made but in the dog Latin itself and its foreignness in this English milieu of history.

IV

The end for Falstaff really comes much earlier than in the formal and impersonal rejection by Hal. It comes when Falstaff sees that he cannot make Prince John smile. For what is being rejected here is the quality that is Falstaff more so than the man and his fortunes. And sensing in the rejection what was truly at stake Falstaff offers us a defence of "the first humane principle". It lies in "an addiction to sack," or, in other words, to himself. But in his own words:

A good sherris-sack hath a twofold operation in it; it ascends me into the brain, dries me there all the foolish, and dull, and crudy vapours which environ it, makes it apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble, fiery, and delectable shapes, which delivered o'er to the voice, the tongue, which is the birth, becomes excellent wit. The second property of your excellent sherris is the warming of the blood . . . the sherris warms it, and makes it course from the inwards to the parts extreme. It illumineth the face, which as a beacon gives warning to all the rest of this little kingdom, man, to arm; and then the vital commoners, and inland petty spirits, muster me all to their captain, the heart; who, great and puffed up

with this retinue, doth any deed of courage. And this valour comes of sherris.

This "first humane principle" is as obviously "humane" as it is not a "principle". It is a quality of life that is grounded in imagination, not in history. It acts nonetheless in relation to other qualities of life that are shaped by history. It can purge and inspirit, judge and delight. It makes accessible to man the world of the senses; it lets him sleep at nights, and in his sleep even to snore; it offers him the beguiling notion that leisure might be the basis of culture. But most of all this quality of life that is Falstaff is summed up in his capacity to say "I am". This is the possibility offered to man as Falstaff's first humane principle, if we judge from his actions rather than his argument.

And noting this we also think of the other dominant motif of the play, Hal's "I know". In this motif we hear the answer Shakespeare is giving to history in making "reason" the lord not just of man's will but of time, place, circumstance, and ends. And even more than this Hal's reason takes on at times the quality of a response to the world he is being so eminently reasonable about. His sense of Falstaff is exact, almost omniscient:

Falstaff sweats to death

And lards the lean earth as he walks along,

Were't not for laughing I should pity him.

The sympathy to his intelligence suggests that the play might be feeling for something in Hal larger than merely an answer to history, the possibility of a self who might say "I know who I am". But this would be to venture beyond history into the fullness of tragic experience. And nowhere is Shakespeare's commitment to history made so real as in the way he makes Hal ultimately turn on Falstaff and without either laughter or pity say "I know thee not old man, fall to thy prayers." It is in this final and rigorous acceptance of the commitment of man to history in 'Henry IV' that Shakespeare establishes the detachment of his art.

OLD MAN

Fresh down the channel
The boats are gone
For fish and the wind
And my glorious arms, and my wide
Joy-rowing, and the shout
Fading, the last stern bobbing,
And the tide is out;
They have gone with the sea and
Drunk with delapidation,
On rotting, spindly legs,
Crazy, dejected boathouses and I
Prod usefully
The mud for worms.

ELIZABETH LAWSON.