

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Henry IV Part 1 or Hotspur*, presented by Shakespeare's Globe, June 5, 2019**

Nicholas Jaroma  
University of New Hampshire  
[njj1010@usnh.edu](mailto:njj1010@usnh.edu)

Directed by: Sarah Bedi and Federay Holmes. With Sarah Amankwah (Prince Hal), Philip Arditti (King Henry IV/Peto), Nina Bowers (Poins/Douglas/King's Man), Jonathan Broadbent (Earl of Northumberland/Hostess Quickly/Earl of Westmorland), Leaphia Darko (Sir Walter Blunt/Lady Percy/Vintner), Steffan Donnelly (Prince John of Lancaster/Earl of Worcester), Colin Hurley (Francis/Lord Mortimer/Traveller 1/King's Man), John Leader (Bardolph/Lady Mortimer/King's Man), Sophie Russell (Vernon/Gadshill/Owen Glendower), Helen Schlesinger (Falstaff), and Michelle Terry (Hotspur/Sheriff).

The Globe's 2019 production of *King Henry the Fourth, Part 1* was not a pleasant experience, in particular due to its handling of comedic elements. The presence of comedy is of course not a problem in productions of this play, as it contains many funny scenes involving Hal, Falstaff, and their friends at the tavern. The issue was with the execution and interpretation of that comedy by the production. Scenes that contain dramatic weight were lightened, and in some instances the production fell back on outdated tropes for cheap laughs. As a result, one of Shakespeare's strongest and most moving plays often seemed like one of his weakest.

When I first entered the theatre, I saw flags surrounding the audience, representing different factions and nationalities within the play, and I became excited. Nationalism and bigotry are on the rise in this world, and *Henry IV, Part 1* lends itself to such an interpretation as it features figures from British history of various nationalities. In the meeting between Henry's adversaries in 3.1,<sup>1</sup> Glyndŵr is Welsh; Hotspur, Worcester, and

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<sup>1</sup> Act, scene, and line references are to *The Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2016).

Mortimer are English; and, although he is not present during this scene, another leader in their rebellion is the Scottish Earl of Douglas. In that scene, the English and Welsh are tearing apart the land between themselves on a map before the battle has even occurred. In lines 94-103, Hotspur voices his displeasure when he perceives he is receiving less land than the others. Naturally, an argument ensues between the group about whether or not to change the divisions, and a frustrated Hotspur responds to Glyndŵr, 'Let me not understand you, then; speak it in Welsh' (116), taking a jab at Glyndŵr's nationality. What is very interesting is Glyndŵr's response:

I can speak English, lord, as well as you,  
For I was trained up in the English court,  
Where, being but young, I framèd to the harp  
Many an English ditty lovely well  
And gave the tongue a helpful ornament –  
A virtue that was never seen in you. (117-22)

Glyndŵr attempts to hurt Hotspur's nationalistic pride by saying that, despite being Welsh, he speaks English more gracefully than Hotspur does. Later on in the scene, as they are listening to Glyndŵr's daughter sing in Welsh, Hotspur comments to his wife, 'Now I perceive the devil understands Welsh', as well as 'I had rather hear Lady, my brach, howl in Irish' (225, 231).

The rebels are so confident that they will win that they are already dividing the spoils of war. However, this confederacy is doomed to fail, as there is little unity between them. What this scene demonstrates is that these allies were only allies against Henry. Had this uprising succeeded and had they usurped Henry, they would only be at one another's throats over more territory afterwards, as evidenced by Hotspur's dissatisfaction and open contempt for the Welsh in this scene. Since these are the play's antagonists, and since they are defeated at the end of the play, with Hotspur himself killed, the play could be used to present a message that nationalism and division will only lead to destruction.

However, despite my initial hopes, the Globe's production did not take many opportunities to address nationalism. The previously described scene was played for laughs rather than as a dire warning. The closest the production came to the message I was expecting was during the battle, when each side would wave its own flag, and even used them as weapons. While I do like that idea (one of the very few things I liked about the production), there was no buildup to it. The flags did not appear to be about what nationalism does to people, but rather a device to differentiate sides in this battle. The directors could have used these figures from British history to connect with their (mostly)

British audience in order to present a more affirmative message about unity, but that did not happen.

Most of the performances were unspectacular, including Michelle Terry's unsympathetic portrayal of Hotspur. The less serious, more comedic King Henry IV of Philip Arditti arguably hurt one of the play's defining elements, the contrast between the stern Henry and the humorous Falstaff. However, Sarah Amankwah's Hal was particularly poor. She performed her scenes as if she were in a sitcom. While that might work for the scenes at the inn with Falstaff, it was particularly jarring in serious moments such as Hal's killing of Hotspur. Hotspur's final lines are 'No, Percy, thou art dust / And food for—' Hotspur then dies, but Hal finishes the sentence, 'For worms, brave Percy' (5.4.84-86). As the following lines reveal, Hal is reflecting on Hotspur and his death, in a moment of serious introspection. However, this production played it for laughs, and Amankwah's tone and body language suggested that Hal was mocking Hotspur. While there are plenty of comedic elements in *Henry IV, Part 1*, there are also many scenes to be taken more seriously, and this was one of them.

The production featured interesting casting choices, as many, though not all, male characters were played by women and vice-versa. Three of the leads – Hal, Falstaff, and Hotspur – all traditionally played by men, were played by women. A reason for this, according to directors Federay Holmes and Sarah Bedi, was to change the conventional wisdom that the *Henriad* consists of 'men's plays'; Holmes explains that, 'When we met actors, men would generally come in knowing much more about these plays than women'.<sup>2</sup> Bedi says,

As a director, I never anticipated directing these plays. It's such a masculine history of England. I'd seen so many versions and they all had casts of white men, and as a female director I felt uncomfortable with that world. But then in the preparation phase, I had a very intense period of falling in love with them – it felt like meeting someone you've heard some bad things about, and then actually getting to know them. Of course the play is some of that stuff, but there's a beauty in allowing it to be what it is.<sup>3</sup>

Both directors stated that they have staged it this way being fully aware of the political turmoil of today, with Bedi stating, 'I am very aware that we could not have produced

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<sup>2</sup> Federay Holmes, qtd. in 'Characters Change from Scene to Scene, from Play to Play', in *Shakespeare's Globe: Henry IV Part 1 or Hotspur* (Programme), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

them this way at any other time and come up with the same response. Our unconscious experience of what's happening in the world – individually and as a collective – is going to appear in the shows'.<sup>4</sup> The directors thus state that the goal of the genderblind casting is one of 'making something that has space for everyone, including our audience, to explore their own experience of the world'.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the directors were trying to create a more inclusive interpretation of the traditionally masculine *Henry IV*, a production for a modern age.

However, there was one very poor casting decision in this regard that makes me question the productions' intentions. I cringed when Hostess Quickly came on stage, performed by a man, Jonathan Broadbent. There was a pause for the audience to laugh at this man dressed as a woman, and much of the audience did. The effect was to reinforce the stereotype that drag is for the amusement of cis people. Despite the directors' intent to stage a production for the current time, this moment felt like a throwback to the 1990s where a show was considered progressive for simply including a queer character even if they were the butt of jokes. What added to my disdain, after that scene was shown, was when I was waiting in line at the concession stand during intermission, and a white American couple behind me commented about how 'awesome' and 'progressive' it was for this production to have genderblind casting. This moment in the play made the directors' stated goals of making a more inclusive production ring hollow and performative, as if they were more concerned with appealing to progressives, than with actually being progressive. At best, they had noble intentions, poorly executed.

Ultimately, this production of *Henry IV, Part 1* was at its best moments mediocre, and at its worst, hard to sit through within a shell of hollow platitudes, and bad comedy. *Henry IV, Part 1* is one of Shakespeare's best plays, filled with potential to connect with a modern audience both emotionally and politically. I just wish the team at the Globe had drawn that out more strongly in their production, rather than focusing on cheap laughs and tired clichés.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Bedi, qtd. in Programme, p. 15.