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Performativity and the Role of King in *Henry IV, Part 1* by Saveria Steinkamp

Henry IV, Part 1, is the first in a series of historical plays, commonly referred to as the *Henriad*, widely held to represent some of the best in Shakespeare's impressive arsenal. Embedded within his script, Shakespeare includes a "play-within-the-play" device, or *play extempore*, in which a drama plays out within the scope of a larger play. In *Henry IV, Part I*, the staging of this interior drama in a tavern, and the company for which it is performed, has led many critics to pass only lightly over the device in their examinations of the overall play. Some all but dismiss it as an enactment brought about solely for comedic or recreational purposes. However, the *play extempore* actually provides valuable insight into Prince Hal's character, and propels the action of the play; therefore, it must be considered as integral to an overall reading of the greater play. In fact, through the power of performativity, the *play extempore* becomes the catalyst that enables Hal's climactic confrontation with his father.

The *play extempore* comes about in Act 1, scene 2, when Falstaff seeks to create a diversion from a debacle embarrassing to himself. After Poins and Hal learn of Falstaff's intentions to rob a group of travelers on the morrow, they decide to play a prank on him. When Falstaff has exited the scene, Poins declares excitedly to Hal: "If you and I do not rob them [Falstaff *et al.*], cut this head off from my shoulders" (I.ii.159-60). The prank is carried out in Act 2, scene 2 and the episode ends in scene 4, defined by Falstaff's false account of the action:

Fal. ...There's four of us here have ta'en a thousand pound this day morning.

Prince Where is it, Jack? Where is it?

Fal. ...Taken from us it is. A hundred upon poor four of us! (II.iv.151-5)

Poins and Hal recognize Falstaff's claim as a false glorification of the truth, and waste no time in calling him on it. In an attempt to dissuade the pair from their attack on his

cowardice, Falstaff finally offers, "shall we have a play extempore?" (II.iv.268). His attempt to change the subject fails, as Hal responds quickly, "Content—and the argument shall be thy running away" (II.iv.269-70). However, Falstaff gets his distraction, after all, when the Hostess comes to inform the group that a nobleman awaits at the door. Hal has been summoned to meet his father in the morning, and Falstaff predicts Hal will be "horribly chid tomorrow" and prompts Hal to "practice an answer" for his father (II.iv.360-2). The play extempore, already on the table, can now be adapted to this purpose.

Hal responds to Falstaff's plea, calling on Falstaff to "stand for my father and examine me upon the particulars of my life" (II.iv.363-4). Falstaff believes himself to be in the clear and out of the spotlight; however, the play extempore has embarked on a tense subject that will prove to test his character and, more significantly, that of Prince Hal.

The play extempore begins as an exposition of King Henry IV's views on the manner in which his son, the heir apparent, conducts his affairs. The light-hearted scene within which this little drama has developed, and the attempts by both Falstaff and Hal to avoid the more serious nature of what lies at hand, create an anticipation of some light role playing. This set-up arises from the characters' initial intentions, perhaps, but does not account for the underlying tension. Misconceptions of the play extempore's purpose as comic relief ignore the surfacing of these tensions as the scene proceeds to develop into a much more serious enactment than is initially suggested by the frivolous activity.

The play within the play has been called, and sometimes dismissed as, an "advance parody" on the grounds that it dramatizes Hal's confrontation with his father (McGuire 49). Shakespearean scholar Richard L. McGuire laments that "Too often the skit between Hal and Falstaff has been discounted as a 'burlesque', or as having only 'purely comic purpose.'" However, McGuire does not

extend meaning of the play extempore to include Hal's discovery of "the humor of his relationship with the king" (51). If anything, McGuire continues, the scene aptly portrays very serious events, including Bolingbroke's deposition of Richard II, as Hal deposes Falstaff, and provides a prelude to Falstaff's banishment, and therein lies its significance.

Paul A. Gottschalk, author of "Hal and the 'Play Extempore' in *Henry IV, Part 1*," takes this argument a step further, and argues that the scene cannot even be adequately called a "play within the play," and therefore does not constitute a turning point in Hal's awareness. He goes on to claim that Hal has not discovered anything he was not aware of in his soliloquy of Act 1, scene 2. He claims, "Hal's 'I will' is no more than a summary of his soliloquy at the end of I.ii," and "his 'I do' suggests the promise [of] a present change in his actions [that] remains unfulfilled"(606). According to Gottschalk, Hal's action directly after the play extempore, in which he hides Falstaff from the sheriff, negates any "present" promise laden in his statement. Additionally, Gottschalk looks at Hal's confrontation with his father in light of Hal's return to the tavern and deduces the purpose of the scene is to "perpetuate the humor of earlier scenes," a choice which goes against Hal's "future" promise, as well. Lastly, and perhaps most tellingly, according to Gottschalk, Hal's acceptance of Falstaff's claim to the death of Hotspur illustrates clearly Hal's remaining leniency for Falstaff when he says "For my part, if a lie may do thee grace/I'll gild it with the happiest terms I have"(V.iv.161-2).

Despite the arguments offered by both McGuire and Gottschalk, the play extempore does represent a significant turning point in the structure of the play which propels the action toward the climax. As a scenario of playacting, the play extempore provides a crucial opportunity for Hal to step into his father's role through the

power of performativity. When Hal gets that taste of his father's position, and experiences first-hand, through performance, his own position as the heir apparent, he awakens the king within himself through acting, coming to what McGuire refers to as "discovery of self through pretense"(52). This self-discovery is emphasized by the contrast between Hal and Falstaff in the role of king: Hal latently embodies a viable king, whereas Falstaff does not. Of the two, Falstaff must strive more to convey a sense of surface realism, going to considerable lengths to stage the play:

Fal. ...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.

Fal. Well, an the fire of grace be not quite out of thee, now shalt though 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... (II.iv.365-76).

He does not, in fact, ever transcend his own character. In the roles of both Hal and the King, Falstaff focuses on bolstering his own image, and as a consequence, he remains quite himself. Hal, on the other hand, undercuts Falstaff's attempts at a realistic setting when he calls attention to Falstaff's props as mere "joined stool[s]... leaden dagger[s] and...pitiful bald crown[s]." However, where Falstaff fails to convey regality convincingly, Hal plays the King with power and authority—a stark contrast to the single weak line he is afforded while playing himself:

Fal. ...there is a virtuous man whom I have often noted in thy company, but I know not his name.

Prince. What manner of man, an it like your majesty? (II.iv.404-6)

Not only does this line illustrate a Hal led along by Falstaff

—a parallel to the reality of their relationship in tavern life, which Hal alludes to when he calls Falstaff a “misleader of youth”(II.iv.447)—it also allows Falstaff to go off on a string of self-compliments. That Hal then proceeds to take over as a convincing King indicates the beginning of a change “to come from within the action rather than from exterior and anterior motivation,” as Hal comes to realization “through the very action of the play”(McGuire 52).

Carol Marks Sicherman states that Hal’s “search for his central self” is facilitated by his foil, Hotspur. However, while Hal’s relation to Hotspur as a motivating force and a contrasting character provides Hal with a concrete goal that only such a rivalry can affect, it is the play extempore which allows—almost forces—Hal to discover the internal truth of his character. Despite Gottschalk’s claim that Hal does not actually discover anything unknown to him in Act 1, scene 2, the play extempore’s placement of Hal in his father’s position—one which he is expected to one day take—allows him an awareness he did not possess when he uttered his soliloquy. In Act 1, scene 2, Hal’s status as a Machiavellian character allows him to grasp his situation as a “madcap” prince and hatch a plan that would glorify his rise from the taverns to the throne. However, not until the play extempore does the reality of his situation—in relation to Falstaff and his father—fully settle; this fact is evident in that Hal never mentions his intended actions toward Falstaff—merely his removal from the world that Falstaff occupies. Through the course of the play extempore, Hal realizes that Falstaff cannot be left unchecked—an epiphany that ultimately leads to Falstaff’s rejection in *Henry IV, Part 2*. If anything, Falstaff’s own self-praising speeches fuel Hal’s increasing distaste for his association with the tavern and Falstaff, which, according to McGuire, Shakespeare illustrates through verbal imagery:

Prince Why dost thou though converse with that trunk of

humours, that bolting-hutch of beastliness, that swollen 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 grey iniquity, that father ruffian, that vanity in years?...

Fal. 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 (II.iv.442-457).

The play extempore also facilitates Hal’s “search for his central self” by drawing him away from his position as “an imitator.” Sicherman points out that, due to the company of “low-life characters” that Hal keeps throughout much of the play, “not to imitate, to lead, would fatally compromise him”(503). This fact reiterates the importance of Hal’s time in the King’s role—a position of leadership. That he takes that role with such authority—even deviating from his “Henry IV” persona into what will grow into his “Henry V” persona—indicates his level of seriousness and the degree of political tension brought to bear on this play extempore. Though Sicherman also suggests that Hal’s deviation from his father’s style shows Hal is “not ready to assume regal authority, even as a joke”(507), the fact that Hal does, in fact, embody a kingly status, without mimicking his father, is evidence that Hal has discovered his inner king. As a result, the play extempore provides “clarification of values” for Hal and has shown him the “essential seriousness of his royal position and the necessity for renouncing his companions” (McGuire 51).

The play extempore’s inherent importance to the play’s progression is further emphasized by its location. The play extempore occupies a position bookended between two scenes depicting Hotspur’s rashness, creating an unavoidable contrast between Hal and Hotspur

as foils, further emphasizing Hal's authority and Machiavellian nature as it is portrayed in the play extempore. Moreover, this alteration of scenes—Hotspur, Hal, Hotspur, Hal—illustrates a swapping of the character's positions, politically. Where Hotspur was previously favored as "the theme of honor's tongue/...sweet fortune's minion and her pride" (I.i.81-83), and Hal was the prince his father wished "some night-tripping fairy had exchanged" (I.i.87), Hal has shown himself, through the play extempore and the confrontation scene, to have transcended his "madcap" role, while Hotspur demonstrates only rashness, particularly in his reaction to the letter in Act II, scene iii:

Hotspur. ...I say unto you again, you are a shallow, cowardly hind and you lie. (II.iii.14-15).

Hotspur's tendency toward action rather than contemplation is also demonstrated in his dealings with Glendower in Act 3, scene 1, when he continues to rashly bait his ally:

Glendower Why, I can teach you, cousin, to command the devil.

Hotspur And I can teach thee, coz, to shame the devil—
— By telling the truth. Tell truth and shame the devil.

If thou have power to raise him, bring him hither,
And I'll be sworn I have power to shame him hence.

O, while you live, tell truth and shame the devil!
(III.i.56-62).

This swap serves to emphasize the vital role of performance. Throughout *Henry IV, Part 1* Hotspur's character comes progressively more to light as one of action and not contemplation—a disposition unsuited for kingship. However, Henry IV favors him in the beginning of the play, suggesting the illustration of another performance mechanism: Hotspur projected the image of one suited for the throne by acting the part in the eyes of the king. The

swap showcases Hal's awareness through performance just as, by contrast, Hotspur drops the act he has been caught in from the beginning as Hal's foil.

The play extempore also serves as what McGuire refers to as "one end of the bridge" over the center of the play—a bridge that is completed with what is the natural continuation of the play extempore: Hal's confrontation with his father. This bridge connects the play extempore to that scene in a demonstration of the cause and effect relationship of the two scenes, which is reinforced by parallels in speech and action between the two scenes. As McGuire points out, King Henry IV is connected to Falstaff—the other father figure—through tears. However, where Falstaff must counterfeit his tears through sack, the King's are marked as reluctantly legitimate:

King ...Not an eye

But is aweary of thy common sight

Save mine, which hath desired to see thee
more;

Which now doth that I would not have it do—
Make blind itself with foolish tenderness.

(III.ii.87-91)

Furthermore, Hal continues to utilize promises for the future in his assurances to his father: "I will redeem all this on Percy's head...I will call him to so strict account...I will die a hundred thousand deaths/Ere break the smallest parcel of this vow" (III.ii.132-159), the last of which once again, in more dramatic terms, demonstrates his conviction where these promises are concerned.

The phrase "I do, I will" implements this conviction by providing a tone of seriousness that has developed as a result of Hal's new awareness, emphasized by the shortness of the statement. Compared to the eloquence of Hal's soliloquy, the blunt pithiness of this phrase indicates that this time, his promise is not for the audience, but for himself, and therefore needs no extended explanation. The

phrase follows, and therefore contrasts, Hal's earlier rant, and disrupts the rhythm of speech that has been developed through banter in the play extempore. This brief eloquence embodies neither the humor nor violent passion of earlier speeches, giving instead a sense of cold, hard intent.

The actual words "I do, I will," also reflect the development of Hal's awareness and underline the resulting resolve Hal feels regarding both his ascent to the throne and his rejection of Falstaff. As McGuire points out, "we never again see Falstaff and Hal together as they were before the play-within-the-play" (50). Additionally, these four words provide a unique blending of present and future tense. "I do, I will" is, as McGuire also recognizes, spoken by Hal as both prince and king. Therefore, in the moment of this statement, Hal is experiencing both roles at once; the play-within-the-play has brought about a merging of Hal and the inner King it has allowed him to discover. By extension, Hal is also speaking both as the current Hal and as Hal the future King. As such, the statement represents present change as well as a future promise, "do" being situated firmly in the present, and "will," as a more serious continuation of his earlier soliloquy, promising his future reformation (Gottschalk 605).

Gottschalk argues that Hal fulfills neither his promises for a current change, nor a future one. However, Hal clearly demonstrates the degree of his reformation by the end of *Henry IV, Part 2* when he takes his place as king and finally banishes Falstaff, fulfilling the future promise. As for the promise of change in the present, Gottschalk claims that Hal's hiding Falstaff from the sheriff demonstrates a stasis in Hal's character. However, Hal's decision not to turn Falstaff over to the sheriff is more likely a response to a challenge from Falstaff, who almost daringly says, "I hope I shall as soon be hanged with a halter as another" (II, iv, 480-2). By announcing that he will not run or hide

from the sheriff—which is, of course, another of Falstaff's counterfeits—the old man bolsters his image yet again, seeming to raise himself away from his professed "instinctual" cowardice (II.iv.261-2). Hal, who has just realized the extent to which this man has intentionally misled him (however unsuccessfully) and caused trouble for both the kingdom and his father, cannot simply watch Falstaff hang for thievery, which would effectively bury his less conventionally labeled crimes. In hiding Falstaff, Hal demonstrates his intention to deal with the man himself, which is another aspect of the promise in the statement "I do, I will."

The trajectory of the play extempore in relation to that of the play as a whole makes possible the power of "I do, I will" as a catalyst for the series of events that will define the remainder of the play. The play's line of action, and the manner in which it concludes, are depicted in this firm statement, and could not have happened without the play extempore's impetus. Moreover, the play-within-the-play involves a progression of realization emphasized by Hal's insults to Falstaff as they become more and more severe, finally culminating with "white-bearded Satan" (II.iv.548). This progression reaches both its climax and its conclusion in the phrase "I do, I will," marking that phrase as the center of the action. The physical position of the enactment, as well, indicates its key function as a bridge through the physical center of *Henry IV, Part 1*. The phrase occupies a unique position in which Hal is both King and Prince—both present and the future—providing a hinge on which the action of the play swings. Ultimately, the phrase "I do, I will" embodies the very heart of *Henry IV, Part 1*, and exists as a central turning point in the action of the play.

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