Honor Dismantled in Henry IV, Part I

“Honor” is a venerable old word dusted off these days for use primarily in weddings, graduations and courts of law, but it seems a central issue for Shakespeare as he tells his tale of Henry IV. In the opening scene, a clear opposition is established between Hotspur, “the theme of Honor’s tongue” (1.1.80), and Prince Hal with his “dishonor stain[ed] brow” (1.1.84). The comparison is virtually demanded as the king wishes the disparate two had been swapped at birth by “some night-tripping fairy” (1.1.86). Shortly, another comparison is invited as this “disreputable” young Hal jousts sarcastically with old Falstaff about a world turned up side down where thieves are “men of good government” (1.1.28) and notorious Falstaff is appointed hangman by King Hal (1.1.63-72). This Falstaff later asserts that the “honor” explored here is just a word, air, “a mere scutcheon” (5.1.135-6, 141). With these varied perspectives, comparisons of Hal, Hotspur, and Falstaff provide a model through which to explore Shakespeare’s notion of honor and to discover, perhaps, a didactic construct in his swashbuckling drama. If bravery, loyalty, and honesty may be accepted as integral components of enigmatic honor, an analysis of these aspects in our three characters reveals Hal’s honor as a progressive and insightful amalgamation or distillation of the others’.

Whereas Hotspur exhibits a rather crazed bravery that blinds him to inevitable doom, and Falstaff is a proverbial chicken that sinks to playing possum, Prince Hal finds a commendably cautious but effectual courage. Ironically, Hotspur seems more than a mite “cowboy.” As the rebel forces prepare to battle, Northumberland “calls in sick” and reports “that his friends.../ Could not so soon be drawn” (4.1.34-35). Then Vernon reports on the glorious might of the King’s approaching forces (4.1.91-98) and the fact that Glendower will be a couple of weeks late (4.1.133). But Hotspur is dismissive. When Vernon estimates the foes at “thirty thousand,” Hot’s flip reply is “Forty let it be” (4.1.137-38). After the grim summation of the situation, Hotspur’s cheery words of inspiration are: “Doomsday is near. Die all, die merrily” (4.1.142)! He is not a brave tactician, but a hopeless devotee of Esperance (2.3.76; 4.1.53,58; 5.2.100; etc.). Hotspur could take a lesson from the Archbishop who says, “I hope no less, yet needful ‘tis to fear” (4.4.34).
Falstaff, on the other hand, is all about proactive protection of his own sorry arse, costs to his dignity notwithstanding. He lies quite boldly concerning his cowardice, as when he tells—cursing cowards all the while—of being attacked by “A hundred upon poor four of us” (2.4.167-68), or when he declares —after lamenting “Lord, how this world is given to lying” (5.4.148-49)—that he and Percy “fought a long hour by Shrewsbury clock” (5.4.151). This is always slick spin-doctoring well after his sorry skin’s been saved by spinelessness. Prince Hal, though, seems to have all the gallant valor of Hot’ with a dose of Falstaff’s “prudence” sprinkled in. Hal’s is a calculated bravery. Of course, Vern’ praises his daring look with a zeal approaching adoration (4.1.103-16), and Hal vanquishes the great Percy Hotstuff, but it is the cheeky pluck he demonstrates in his scheme to “imitate the sun” (1.2.202-24) by laying low in Eastcheap that might be most admired. Hal suggests his is an act of bravery when he admonishes Francis to take the same sort of route: “darest thou be so valiant as to play the coward with thy indenture, and show it a fair pair of heels, and run from it?” (2.4.47-50, italics added). It takes a good measure of mettle to break from fast expectations, though this is not the sort of courage that earns one of Percy’s medals.

Concerning the loyalty component of honor, Prince Hal does not scout a middle course that modulates the stances of Hotspur and Falstaff, but surpasses both of their narrow views by far. Hot Percy has only fickle political allegiance rather than any steadfast loyalty. While he is passionate in defense of “Revolted Mortimer!” (1.3.95-115), this tirade falls squarely between his avowal of love for King Henry (1.3.71) and his rant against him as “this ingrate and cankered Bolingbroke” (1.3.140). His political defection within the space of a few lines indicates a self-centeredness that transforms loyalty to a matter of choler-driven, personal whim. He does not seem to have friends, and his allies—including his own father!—don’t appear much obliged to reciprocate any loyalty when the battle is afoot.

Falstaff, however, is ether clear about where his loyalty lies. Though the “old lad of the castle” is older and surely more street-wise than Hal, he takes unabashed advantage “so far as [the prince’s] coin would stretch” (1.2.57-58), and then charges: “O, thou...art able to corrupt a saint. Thou hast done much harm upon me, Hal, God forgive thee for it” (1.2.96-98). When the prince is absent, Falstaff asserts, “The Prince is a jack, a sneak-up” (3.3.92). Neither has Falstaff allegiance to king or country. He says, “Well, God be thanked for these rebels. They offend none but the virtuous. I laud them; I praise them” (3.3.201-3). Then Sir John turns a buck converting his ranks from soldiers to beggars and prisoners (gloss on 4.2) whom he eventually sends to slaughter.
This old possum is loyal only to his shifty self, but Prince Hal is steadfast with his loyalty in every direction. He not only foots his friends’ bills, but also keeps them out of trouble, as when he helps them hide from the sheriff (2.4.519-24, 532-42). Though Hal has been prodigiously prodigal, when the king sends word the son responds, “We must all to the wars” (2.4.564) and later offers that he will, “to save the blood on either side, / Try fortune with [Percy] in a single fight” (5.1.100-1). Though Hal vows, “I shall make [Percy] exchange/ His glorious deeds for my indignities” (3.2.150-51), after he killeth Hotspur he exhibits fidelity to the fallen warrior in his praise, discretion, and act of placing his own battle ornaments over Percy’s face (5.4.89-103). Even after Falstaff’s disgraceful behavior at Shrewsbury, Hal’s loyal friendship moves him to say, “if a lie may do thee grace, / I’ll gild it with the happiest terms I have” (5.5.161-62). In this way Hal rejects the slim self-loyalty exhibited by Hotspur and Falstaff in favor of a magnanimous allegiance even to the least deserving.

Henry IV, Part 1’s trivalent model of honor is intriguing as honesty is considered, because Hal may be seen to abstract and reject different elements from the other two characters. Hotspur tends to blind himself with ambition, hubris, and anger, as when he categorically discounts the several serious flaws that develop in his plan (See discussion of bravery on page 2). Although he misleads with his delusions, he is really lying to himself. He is generally honest and straightforward with others, as when he explains to the king about the pestering popinjay that delivered a message on the battlefield (1.3.31-71), or when he is much too honest with his wife telling her “I love thee not” as he heads out to war (2.3.95), or when he admits “I have not well the gift of tongue” (5.2.81). Falstaff, on the other hand, lies in nearly every line he speaks to others (See page 2 for examples). Hal says, “[Falstaff’s] lies are like their father that begets them, gross as a mountain, open, palpable” (2.4.234-35). But Fat Jack is actually rather honest with himself. He admits his shortcomings when he’s alone: “I like not such grinning honor as Sir Walter hath” (5.4.62-63); “to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be...the true and perfect image of life indeed...Zounds, I am afraid of this gunpowder Percy, though he be dead” (5.4.119-24); and his appraisal of honor as merely a word with the subsequent decision: “I’ll none of it” (5.2.135, 141).

What makes Hal’s honor exemplary is his incorporation of frank honesty with those around him, as Hotspur exhibits, and a truthfulness with himself similar to Falstaff’s. In Eastcheap, he is candid with the commoners despite his rank. He enjoys the “leash of drawers” to which he has become “sworn brother” (2.4.6-7), and he resolves various issues fairly with the hostess, sheriff, and gang of thieves. He is honest with his
father, as well, when they are reconciled. As he begs pardon, he says, “I may for some things true, wherein my youth Hath faulty wandered and irregular, / Find pardon on my true submission” (3.2.28-30). His ingenious scheme to “imitate the sun,” “loose behavior...throw off,” “falsify men’s hopes,” and thereby “[Redeem] time when men think least I will” shows a remarkable level of honesty with himself and knowledge of his potential. The prince’s self-deprecating offer to fight Percy one-on-one reveals more of this honest self-evaluation. After glowing praise of Hotspur, he says, “For my part, I may speak it to my shame, / I have truant been to chivalry” (5.1.94-95). It is this honesty about self, coupled with an honesty toward others, that is the hallmark of the progressive honor Shakespeare seems to be endorsing.

“Honor” becomes a matter of genuine integrity, perhaps, rather than conformity to any external expectations. It is not an obsolete measure to be thrown off as Falstaff does, nor a fabricated representation of the self involving acclaim and ornamentation such as Percy’s. It is the virtue expressed by Hal when he says, “I shall hereafter, my thrice gracious lord, / Be more myself” (3.2.94-95). E. M. W. Tillyard confirms that the pursuit of self-knowledge was paramount to the Elizabethans: “to not know yourself was to resemble the beasts...To know yourself was not egotism but the gateway to all virtue” (The Elizabethan World Picture, 72). In Prince Hal, Shakespeare ingeniously incorporates this progressive knowing-of-self into the traditional brave-loyal-honest concept of honor.

Work Cited