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Essay: Hal and Henry: Shakespeare's Creative Use of Holinshed's Facts in The First Part of King Henry the Fourth

Although Shakespeare often adheres to historical facts found in Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Ireland, and Scotland, when structuring his historical plays, for dramatic purposes he deviates freely from what was then considered historical facts. One such instance concerns the relationship between Hal, Prince of Wales, and King Henry IV, and the role Hal plays at the battle of Shrewsbury. A scrutiny of Holinshed's account of this father and son reveals that Shakespeare depicts quite a different relationship in his play. A departure in character, as well as the interactions and relationship between the two, paints a distinctly different picture than that seen in Holinshed. The result of Shakespeare's creative literary brush strokes of these two figures, broadens Hal's stature as a more noble and heroic figure than Holinshed's image of him.

To accomplish his thematic end, Shakespeare must enlarge Hal's "historical" role; and to that end, Shakespeare places Hal at the center of the play. This depiction drastically departs from Holinshed's mention of the prince. The Chronicles focus on Henry's preoccupation with the numerous civil battles within England, the wars with the Scots and the Welsh, and the uprising against him led by the Percies. The many military engagements that mar Henry's reign mark the unrest and animosity the people felt towards him. Holinshed's comment demonstrates these sentiments:

> Oh what a suspected state therefore is that of a king holding his regiment with the hatred of his people, the hartgrudgings of his courtiers, and the peremptorie practises of both togither? (Holinshed 181)

Stressing the intensity of his enemies' feelings, Holinshed also relates that Henry lives in constant fear of assassination by his own people and provides a list of the various ways this might be accomplished. Of the fifteen pages Holinshed devotes to Henry's military engagements, only one sentence recalls Hal's participation on the battlefield, and a scant few paragraphs contain information regarding difficulties between this father and son.

Shakespeare's play, on the other hand, draws major attention to the disharmony between Henry and Hal. In addition, he makes Hal the centerpiece in the uprising with Hotspur as its leader. By these changes, we see a focus reversal from Holinshed's work. With exception to this Percy uprising, the balance of Holinshed's comments, Shakespeare reduces to the first scene in Act I. The bulk of the play is dedicated to Hal's escapades with Falstaff and the tavern cronies (a Shakespeare invention), his troubling relationship with his father, and his ultimate repentance from his unruly youthful ways. King Henry's role, then, is relegated as a witness to Hal's metamorphosis---a concept foreign to Holinshed's version of the historical events.

Shakespeare's retelling of the central interview between Henry and his wayward, eldest son bears significant differences from Holinshed's reporting of the event. First to be considered is Hal's manner of dress at the interview. Holinshed reports:

> He was apparelled in gowne of blew satten, full of small oilet holes, at everie hole the needle hanging by a silke thred with which it was sewed. About his arme he ware an hounds collar set full of SS gold, and the tirets likewise of the same metall. (Holinshed 193)

Also noted was a dagger that Hal carried into the meeting with his father. Understandably, Shakespeare found it necessary to drop these two strange details from his scene of the father-son encounter. The image of Hal dressed in this bizarre costume with a dagger would most assuredly generate an unfavorable opinion of Hal, an opinion the playwright's purpose couldn't allow introduced at this point. Regardless of the reasons the real-life Hal had for appearing in this outrageous outfit, the effect of appearing so attired for Shakespeare's character would have jeopardized his believability and sincerity, given this pivotal importance of his speech.

A second instance of deviation from Holinshed that Shakespeare takes involves the general tone of the interview itself and Henry's attitude of acceptance towards the errant son. Holinshed reports that after the battle of Shrewsbury, the Prince's political influence grew during the next few years and that "more than once it was suggested that Henry IV might, or should, abdicate in his son's favour. . . [and] he removed the Prince and his supporters from the Council" (Bullough 193). In addition, the King's servants brought tales that made Henry suspect Hal of planning to usurp the crown. When Hal appeared at court for the interview with his father, he came "with such a number of noble men and other his freends. . ., as the like traine had beene sildome seene repairing to the court at any one time in those daies"

(Holinshed 193). Although Hal was admitted alone into the king's chambers, reflective of Henry's suspicious nature of Hal, the interview occurred "in the presence of three of foure persons, in whome [the king] had confidence" (Holinshed 194). This recounting shows grave distrust, if not between both the son and father, at least of Henry towards his son. Thus, it appears that Henry keeps in the room several protectors, or bodyguards.

Shakespeare's play also hints at similar rumors about Hal's possible disloyalty, however, Henry openly receives his son into a familial intimacy with no one else present. King Henry says, in Act 3, Scene 2:

> Lords, give us leave: the Prince of Wales and I Must have some private conference; but be near at hand,
> For we shall presently have need of you. (Pelican 689)

> Perhaps the comment, "but be near at hand" is Shakespeare's version of Henry's discomfort and reservations about Hal's true intent. In any event, Shakespeare's interview creates an atmosphere, although estranged, nevertheless of intimacy and of a parent and child's willingness to trust. Unlike Holinshed's confrontational-like meeting, where Hal's appearance at court approaches the magnitude of harmful aggressor, this version has the feel of a frank, heart-to-heart conversation of a concerned father for his son. This important modification to Hal's appearance and demeanor makes him appear non-threatening, thus, rendering a more likable character than his reported real-life counterpart.

Hal's attitude towards his accusers marks a third departure Shakespeare takes from Holinshed. Here, again, Shakespeare uses a softer approach. The Chronicles report that Hal requests that his accusers answer for their wrongful slanders:

> . . where he could not but greevouslie complaine of them
> that had slandered him so greatlie, to the defacing not onelie
> of his honor, but also putting him in danger of his life, he humblie
> besought the king that they might answer their unjust accusation;
> and in case they were found to have forged such matters upon a
> malicious purpose, that then they might suffer some punishment
> for their faults. . . . (Holinshed 195)

In comparison, Hal merely exclaims in the play:

> And God forgive them that so much have swayed
> Your majesty's good thought away from me. (3.2.130-31)

With such a simple statement, Shakespeare presents Hal as a forgiving and gentle young prince, an image vital to Shakespeare's purposes. As such, it becomes easier to forgive Hal his youthful indiscretions or apparent trespasses against his father and his station.

The fourth, and possibly the most important, change Shakespeare makes in the father-and-son exchange, reveals the depth of sincerity Hal expresses in his speech to Henry. In both situations, the prince comes before his father in answer of his wayward actions and in defense against the rumored suspicions that Hal harbors ill-will towards the king, causing him substantial concern and anguish. In Holinshed, Hal's speech culminates in his pledge of allegiance to his king and father. He kneels before the king and pleads:

> . . . where I understand you have in suspicion my demeanour
> against your grace . . . I beseech you most redoubted lord and
> deare father . . . to ease your heart of all such suspicion as
> you have of me, and to dispatch me heere before your knees,
> with this same dagger, [and withall he delivered unto the king his dagger . . .]
> and therefore in thus ridding me out of life, and your selfe from all suspicion. (Holinshed 194)

This declaration strikes the ear as excessively emphatic and overly dramatic. This speech, viewed in context with other factors of Hal's arrival, such as coming with a multitude---a somewhat threatening gesture regardless that he willingly met with the king alone---and his bizarre manner of dress, including the dagger, shows a father and son strongly alienated and distrustful of each other. His rather dramatic actions appear more self-serving than humble, a quality his calculated speech unsuccessfully tries to impress. His grand display seems designed more to appease his ailing father than to assure him of his fidelity or to repent his ways. The credibility of Hal's words suffers from the exaggerated nature of these showy pretences. Perhaps King Henry accepts all of this as a measure of Hal's sincerity, but it's doubtful that Shakespeare's audience would.

In Shakespeare's hand, this scene casts a considerably different picture of the Prince. Hal's manners are refined and subtle, and his words are simple, calm, and elegant showing him as mature and thoughtful. When seen in context with his first monologue in I, ii, where he acknowledges that he plays a game with the Eastcheap crowd, creating his own image as a foil against a future image of actions excelling any words he could utter, there's little doubt that he is prepared now to set that course into action. In other words, he deliberately diminished himself in the eyes of the world so that when he is ready to step forward to assume his rightly place as prince and heir, his actions will command the respect he seeks as his own, apart from the taint of his father's rule.

During the interview, Hal quietly accepts the insults the king hurls at him, and in his seeking to "find pardon on [his] true submission" (3.2.28) he pledges to redeem himself on Percy's head, whose blood, when washed away, "shall scour my shame with it" (3.2.137). With this pledge, Shakespeare creates the portrait of a committed, courageous, and noble warrior, one worthy of ruling a kingdom, a major thrust of Shakespeare's focus.

Juxtaposed to Hal's graphic depiction of his actions to gain redemption in his father's and the people's eyes, is the king's own account of the way he manipulated the populace to be in awe of him, as well as his contempt for King Richard, whom he deposed to ascend to the throne. Against the background of the king's subversive, manipulative actions, Hal's superior qualities emerge in a powerful, new light. Shakespeare masterfully creates a future sovereign, full of promise and sensibility---a drastic departure from the overly- dramatic, complaining prince found in Holinshed's Chronicles.

A final note worthy of mention regarding the changes Shakespeare made, which deviate from his main source, concerns the Battle at Shrewsbury. For Shakespeare, this is the principal focal point of Hal's development as a future king. Whereas Holinshed's Chronicles mention that the king's life was saved during the battle, no specific mention indicates who the savior may have been. If the honor is Hal's, the chronicler fails to give him credit. Hal's only recognition is the line, "the prince that daie [did] holpe his father like a lustie yoong gentleman" (Holinshed 191). Shakespeare, however, takes advantage of this critical life-saving event to place Hal in that laudable position as proof of his loyalty to his king and father. By this action, Shakespeare gains advantage for his protagonist in several ways. First, Hal proves his loyalty to both his father and his kingdom. Second, he shows himself dependable, a good leader, and a valiant warrior. And, third, if the battlefield is viewed as a microcosm, correspondent to England as the macrocosm, Hal undoubtedly proves himself worthy to be England's king.

Certainly, changes that Shakespeare makes in the characters of Hal and Henry, and in their relationship to each other, are central to his development of Hal's superior qualities as a leader and England's future monarch. These are not the only liberties Shakespeare takes with the "facts" of his sources. Equally important are the modifications made to Hotspur and Falstaff, and their connections with the prince. It isn't possible here, unfortunately, to delve into the magnitude of Falstaff's significance and Hotspur's role as the sacrificial lamb to Hal's emergence as a worthy leader. On the other hand, focusing on the relationship of the father and son provides a solid understanding of the playwright's purpose of compressing, deleting, expanding, and adding to the information found in Holinshed's Chronicles to mold a believable and admirable character, heroic in stature and worthy of a nation's esteem. Shakespeare proves himself, once again, the successful creator of a superb and memorable character.

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