

To Pluck Bright Honor for the Hard-Spur's Moon

By Mark Motley

*In a writing class did David Mamet insist
That "English is the only language in which
The prime writer is a dramatist."¹
Pentameter was his rhythm to praise the Bard.
We'll likewise give Will Shakespeare our regard.*

*Among his most popular plays in Shakespeare's day²
Was Henry the IV Part 1, the wonderful history.
Dr. Samuel Johnson said of parts 1 and 2,
"Perhaps no author in two plays has ever
afforded such delight."³
Wrote James Mustich just two years ago
In his 1,000 Books to Read Before You Die,
"Shakespeare wrote no play more entertaining
than Henry IV, Part 1."⁴*

*It has comedy, action, national and family strife,
Political intrigue, tragedy, battlefield contest,
And of all of Shakespeare's inventions, three o' th' best:
Sir John Falstaff, Prince Hal, and Henry Percy,
Who's also known as Hotspur⁵ of the North.*

*And each of these three persons in the play
Have half again as many lines as does the king⁶.
And each in different ways is more than he,
E'en though, of course, the play is named for him.*

Background:

*In Richard II, rash Bolingbroke revolts,
Usurps high kingship from the rightful heir,
And takes the name King Henry the IV.
As the play called Henry the IV Part 1 begins,
Hard news from Wales: defeat, the peace is rent.
Beset by foes, the King's repose wears thin,
He sets a troubled stage with this lament:
"So shaken as we are, so wan with care,
Find we a time for frightened peace to pant"⁷
Against this England sundry rivals bear:
Wild Scots and dire French, as magical Welch enchant
Rebellion's hex in seething, pregnant air.*

*Yet young Prince Hal is truant from the court
And leaves directing armies in the field
To nobler champions so that he may sport*

*With th' less well-heeled in London's seediest part,
At th' Boar's Head Tavern in East-cheap.
He's there to keep company, to laugh and cavort
With the likeable, incorrigible, Jack Falstaff.*

*And chief among those fighting for the king
is Henry Percy, Hotspur, of Northumberland.
His nickname - originally "Hard-spur" -
Was given by his enemies the Scots
In grudging admiration of his maneuver:
A stunning march of thirty-one miles in a day.
Then just before the onset of the play,
He'd seized The Duncan⁸ in frightful battle fought
To hold for royal ransom that leader of Scots
Who king demands, thus springs their tension fraught.⁹*

Thesis:

*The problem's that too many modern stagings
Are spun to make the hero Prince Hal.
A typical case in point and widely known
Is th' BBC's extraordinary "The Hollow Crown".
That series spins Prince Hal with charm and wit
And its Falstaff's a sympathetic rogue,
But Hotspur's there a hothead, dense an' unfit
Whose only saving grace is that he's bold.*

*Today it's clearly not the view in vogue,
But I'll make every effort here to show
It's Hotspur's tale that merits being told.
An' in telling, I'll hope to share a different way
To think of Shakespeare's finest history play.*

The Argument:

Three points each argue Hotspur is the lead:
1) the characters' stage presence in the play
2) the history of the stagings of the work, and
3) the drama's titles given by the Bard.¹⁰
So, let us now examine each in turn:

Stage Presence:

*In words that Hal and Hotspur each accrue
Has Hotspur more by one hundred seventy-two.
Moreover,
The King appears in only six o' th' scenes,
While Hotspur and Falstaff are each in eight,
Hal's ten might seem of him the lead to make.
Yet Percy speaks or is spoken of in sixteen,*

*The same for Hal is one scene less at fifteen.
In scenes appearing in or spoken of,
In uttered words and reference in the play,
It's Hotspur has more presence on the stage.¹¹*

Performance:

*It's just within the latest seventy-plus years
Performance of this play has spun 'round Hal.¹²
For three plus hundred years ahead of that,
Most leading actors of the day insisted
That they be only cast in Hotspur's role,
An' to make his part the lead it was directed.¹³*

Titles:

*The Bard's original title for the play
Was "THE HISTORIE OF HENRIE THE FOURTH:
With the battell at Shrewsburie, between the King and Lord Henry Percy, surnamed
Hotspur of the North, with the humorous conceits of Sir John Falstaffe."¹⁴
That thirtyone-word title was a mouthful,
Yet long as it was, he failed to mention Hal.*

*In its second printing, Shakespeare chose the name:
"The First Part of Henry the Fourth,
With the Life and Death of Harry Sirnamed Hotspur."¹⁵
Again, specific reference to Hotspur,
No mention whatsoever of Prince Hal.
(And not a word 'bout comic Falstaff either.)*

*Then in a royal record of expenses
Of a staging of this play put on to mark
The wedding of Princess Elizabeth in sixteen-thirteen
It compactly called the play "The Hot-spurr".¹⁶*

I would say "case closed"

However:

*An arc of growth the modern viewer expects -
Improvement in a vital way to reflect,
As a drama's leading role moves through a tale.
And Hal's apparent progress seems quite real.*

Consider:

*In the opening scene o' th' play,
The King bemoans Prince Hal's unprincely ways,
And honors Hotspur as both worthy and brave.
He wishes aloud that Harry Percy were
instead of Harry Plantagenet, his own heir.*

But:

*As border strife gives way to war uncivil
That's boldly led by Hotspur aright,
Prince Hal now takes his place on field of battle.
He saves his father's life, and then he fights
The warrior that is first in proven mettle,
The Hotspur, in single combat, grudge to settle.
An' against all odds the wild young prince prevails.*

*This seems to be an ideal arc of growth:
From wild-child prince, to last young man still standing.
On surface he appears to turn to honor,
At long last acting princely for a change.
But as we know, appearance can betray.*

The Modern Spin:

*Today will both the actor and director
Portray Prince Hal with utmost sympathy,
And smooth his shaming and disloyalty
To Falstaff his large old friend who loves him dearly.*

*What's more, today in nearly all productions
They'll also tend Hotspur to simplify,
To make of him an unthinking, rash,
And slightly dense man-child hellbent for glory,
Whereas he is in fact a man complex:
An intuitively logical tactician
Who suffers hard from post-traumatic stress.*

Whereas Hal is Not Deserving, but Hotspur is:

*The drunken, bumbling Falstaff is a rascal to the core,
But a rascal as endearing as can be.
So, some of his appeal to Hal will pour
As often together are the Prince and he
Engaging in their trademark repartee'.
But Hal reveals quite early in the play,
Alone and toward the end of the second scene,
His tavern crawl and lowly brothel demean
Are all just part of his grand planned out scheme
First to lower expectations, then exceed them,
Having plotted his own "glittering" "reformation"¹⁷
From revels of a misspent youth abated
And wasted time with those who were beneath him,
While using everyone along the way
To further Machiavellian ambitions.
Such scheming an' crafting aren't a hero's conditions.*

*Delightful sparring between Prince Hal and Falstaff
Will lose some charm as Hal's incessant scorn
Of Falstaff over time will cross the line
Of every code and unwritten norm
Of guy-talk that's just-for-fun benign,
And veer instead into the mere unkind.
Today we'd deem his taunts to be fat-shaming.*

*Then Hal and Falstaff in one revealing scene,
Improv a play in which does Hal disclose
In spite of Falstaff's love that all but glows,
He'll banish Falstaff cold when he's the king.
Disloyalty and cruelty aren't what we seek in heroes.
And no good tale has need of an anti-hero
When close at hand it has the real thing.
For Hotspur's ever forthright, not conniving.
And when he does rebel, it's open war.
For only does he do so after espying
Authentic casus belli worth fighting for.
It's not for any personal ambition –
The object of the Hotspur-led rebellion
Is t' elevate not Hotspur but Mortimer,
With better claim than Henry to the throne.*

In Which Hotspur is Complex

Part 1. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:

*This Hotspur never waivers in a fight,
But in his home, he wrestles hard with demons
Of crippling doubt and paralyzing fright.
In one key scene within the Second Act,
He's at his home with Kate his loving wife,
Who intervenes to ask about these facts:
Now Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was
No diagnosis in William Shakespeare's day,
Yet one reviewer calls dear Kate's frank speech,
"The best description of post-traumatic stress
Disorder in the English language, and
it was written four hundred years ago." ¹⁸
Comparing the Veteran Administration's
Full list of PTSD indications ¹⁹
To Kate's account of Hotspur's troubling symptoms
Reveals a nearly perfect correspondence. **Consider:**
He has no appetite, can't sleep, is depressed,
Ignores for a fort-night the "treasures" of her body²⁰
And his own obligation of consortium to her,
He sits in melancholy, startles easy,
His cheeks have lost their color as he broods.*

*Of battlefield commands in sleep he issues,
And bellows all the cries and terms of war:
Of engines, trenches, sieges, and maneuvers,
Of prisoners, and blood and death and more,
This as his face contorts into strange features
And beads of sweat profusely fill his brow.*

*In private Hotspur suffers battle stress
That robs him of the quiet of his rest.
But never does he falter on the field
Or waiver as he bears up sword and shield.*

Part 2. The Welshman:

*While he's thought to be obsessed with earning alone
Great honor and glory in perilous battle won'
In Wales, he meets a vital newer friend,
Grand Owain Glyndŵr, who leads the Welsh rebellion,
But Hotspur can't abide Glyndŵr's large claims
Of magical, mystical powers, so he takes aim
At every wild assertion Glyndŵr proclaims,
Thus, undercutting bonds of new alliance,
And subverting glory's odds with each declaim.*

Part 3. Debate on Battle's Eve:

*At counsel of war on th' eve of battle's commencement
Near Shrewsbury toward the end of th' play,
It's Hotspur wants attack without delay
As others say to wait for reinforcement.
But he's the only one who rightly reasons
That the King has help that's also on the way,
And says that "His is certain, ours is doubtful."²¹
The wrong choice here would clearly be delay.
And nothing's rash about this Hotspur counsel.*

*And then most others argue they must wait
As some of their own knights have just arrived
And couldn't attack with horse so worn and tired.
Again, it's Hotspur says attack is advised—
And note that this is rational, and wise —
As all the King's fell horse are likewise tired
Whereas the bulk of theirs are "full of rest".²²*

*He's right yet he relents, they wait for day.
No, this is not the logic of a hothead
Or firebrand as shown on stage today.
Kate may assert he's ruled by his emotions,
But battle judgement shows that he is merely
The quickest to identify best options.*

Day of Battle:

*As neither 'is father's nor Glendower's force appeared,
Morale of his outnumbered troops did sway,
As hope did surely wane, and stout men feared,
His last brave words to his men before the sortie
Were "Esperance! Percy", Hope! Percy!
He called for trumpets an' urged that all embrace
As some would not again obtain that grace.
There's no bravado here or strut for show.
This Percy was a true hero.
Thus, Shakespeare shocks us for Hotspur dies in the play
As Hal with royal sword does Percy slay.*

*In th' actual battle in four-teen-oh-three
Some fourteen thousand mustered for the king
'Gainst Hotspur's smaller force to disagree.
But Percy's Cheshire archers shot first an' took
A devastating toll, the Royals shook.
The King's Left broke, then Hotspur charged the fray
As every yeoman vassal in his way
Was cut down not to rise again that day.
Two Lords he killed, each decoys of the King,
The Duncan slayed one more, 'twas a one-sided thing
Until it was that Percy died of an arrow
Through his open visor raised to search the field
For a king too much afraid to be revealed
By coming to battle displaying his colors alone,
So, he had doubles disguised as himself and bearing his shield²³
To draw away attention o' th' man he feared.
It was a craven act and not to be revered.*

The Play and the Battle:

*Percy's not a man too hard and mean t' be mourned,
His courage an' character make us rue he's lost.
It's Shakespeare's license to build a better yarn,
And charge his death to a wholly different cost.
It's brilliant twist of history to make the victor Hal
And genius to make us gasp and wince at th' thought.
But the modern director would spin all that around
Would have us cheer that Henry Percy's down,
An' applaud that Hal's the last one holding ground,*

Conclusion:

*Now I became obsessed by the Henry Percy
Of both Shakespearian invention and of history,
Only after lineage bloodline was discovered
With the man through my own genealogy.²⁴
Which lead to study and to this ... biased view
To guild this hero with fascination's allure,
An' t' dreams of martial scenes in iambic pentameter.*

*Percy's moon still brightly shines on English history
Though in drama its face has paled in present day.
The reason why's a literary mystery
For Hotspur's larger footprint in this History,
Its original titles as giv'n by Shakespeare,
And performance in its first three hundred years,
All argue that Hotspur, Henry Percy,
Was first esteemed the hero of the play,
And likewise, should he be its star today.*

*Improvement is the aim o' th' avant-garde.
But no one can improve upon the Bard.*

Hope Percy!

Footnotes

- 1) <https://www.masterclass.com/classes/david-mamet-teaches-dramatic-writing/chapters/dialogue#transcript>
- 2) Estimating popularity based on copies printed.
- 3) Dr. Samuel Johnson, "The Plays of William Shakespeare".
- 4) James Mustich in *1000 Books to Read Before You Die*, 2018, p. 712.
- 5) The British Premier League football club the Tottenham Hotspurs which placed second in last year's Champion's League tournament is named for Harry Hotspur. Many fans, however, believe their team is named for the spurs tied on the legs of the team mascot and logo, the fighting cock.
- 6) McMillan, referenced in [The Norton Shakespeare. Histories](#), p. 626.
- 7) First two lines of the play, Act 1, Scene 1
- 8) The Duncan apparently had the same publicist as The Ohio State University.
- 9) The King's demand for The Duncan (and, therefore, for his ultimate ransom) was the start of their feuding in the play. Historically, that was only part of their dispute. Per contract, the King owed the Percy's 60,000 pounds a year for providing security against the Scots in the North Marches. That's the equivalent of about \$12.3 million dollars today. Short of coin, the King offered 40,000 pounds, the equivalent of about a \$4.1 million-dollar shortfall today. In Bolingbroke's earlier usurpation of the Crown, The Percys were among his most important supporters. But when the king sought to renege on \$4 million owed, and then to lay claim on a prisoner that would surely have been worth the equivalent of a million or two more, was too much for the Percys - the usurper King had proven too false a partner - and so they thought it better then to fight. Perhaps they also reasoned: if the King had actually had much of an army of his own, why would he have hired the Percy's to defend the North March against the ravaging Scots?
- 10) All three points of this argument come from "Tragical-Comical-Historical Hotspur" by Roberta Barker, published in the peer reviewed [Shakespeare Quarterly](#), Volume 54, Issue 3, 1 October 2003. This was a significant source for this paper and is also referenced in numbers 11 and 13-15 below.
- 11) Unless one considers Henry IV Parts 1 and 2 to be one play, in which case, Hal has much more "stage presence" than Hotspur.
- 12) "Tragical-Comical-Historical Hotspur" by Roberta Barker (see note 9)
- 13) Sir Lawrence Olivier's portrayal of Hotspur at the Old Vic in 1945 being the last major performance in the era in which the leading actors of the day typically played Hotspur (notable exception: Richard Harris played Hotspur in 1991 at the Public Theater in New York). As an aside, one of those leading actors who only played Hotspur and not Hal was David Garrick, an original member of Dr. Johnson's Literary Club.
- 14) "Tragical-Comical-Historical Hotspur" by Roberta Barker (see note 9)
- 15) Ibid
- 16) Ibid
- 17) 1 Henry IV Act 1, Scene 2
- 18) U.S. Army veteran and actor Stephan Wolfert uses this speech in his one-man show, *Cry Havoc!*
See also: <https://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2017/11/03/shakespeare-post-traumatic-stress-disorder/>

Also, clinical psychiatrist Dr. Jonathan Shay:

<https://www.publicinsightnetwork.org/2013/05/28/a-shakespearean-view-of-ptsd/>

Or this from the British Journal of Psychiatry:

https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/83B74F4CF26F69F09DC71AD223B9A468/S0007125000254718a.pdf/shakespeare_and_posttraumatic_stress_disorder.pdf

19) List of symptoms of PTSD per the VA:https://www.mirecc.va.gov/cih-visn2/Documents/Clinical/PCL-5_with_Info_Sheet.pdf

20) 1 Henry IV, Act 2, scene 3

21) 1 Henry IV, Act 5, scene 1

22) 1 Henry IV, Act 5, scene 1

23) http://www.percyfamilyhistory.com/?page_id=274

24) Henry "Hotspur" Percy, was one of my 18th great-grandfathers (and since the number of 18th great-grandfathers we each have is up to 524,288, he is somewhat likely to be one of your 16th-21th great-grandfathers as well, but that's another tale):

degree of

<u>great-grandparent</u>	<u>title</u>	<u>birth</u>	<u>death</u>	<u>spouse or addl. Information</u>	
18th	Henry Percy, KG "Hotspur"	Knight of the Garter	1364	1403	Elizabeth "Kate" Mortimer
17th	Sir Henry de Percy	2nd Earl of Northumberland	1391	1455	
16th	Sir Henry Algernon Percy	3rd Earl of Northumberland, MP	1421	1461	
15th	Lady Margaret de Percy		1477	1486	
14th	Joan Gascoigne		1483	1556	Husband: Wm Gascaigne, Chief Justice
13th	Anne Bulkeley		1515	1591	Husband: sheriff of Northhamptonshire
12th	Robert Edmund Spencer	Baron of Cople	1533	1620	
11th	Nicholas I, of Cople Spencer		1573	1626	
10th	Mary Spencer		1609	1645	Born England; died Virginia
9th	Elisabeth Mottrom		c.1631	1655	Born England; died Virginia
8th	Jane Presley		1655	1704	
7th	Francis Thornton		1682	1736	
6th	William Montpelier Thornton		1717	1790	
5th	John J. Thornton		1744	1800	
4th	Nancy Thornton		1804	1860	
3rd	Almedah K. Brumfield		1829	1901	
2nd g'father	John Scott Motley		1856	1933	
great g'father	Johnson Motley		1887	1970	
grandfather	Wilbert Motley		1910	1986	
father	Billy Motley		1928	2004	
	William Mark Motley				

End Note: This magnificent statue of Harry “Hotspur” Percy is in a courtyard of Alnwick Castle, ancestral home of the Percy family (and movie location for Hogwarts Academy of the Harry Potter films). While Hotspur seems stiff, in contrast, the charger and its caparison (its cloth robes) capture more sense of movement than one should think possible in any statue made of brass or stone. Spectacular!

