

## “A World of Figures:” Language and Character in *Henry IV Part I*

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In Dr Johnson's opinion, the dialogue of Shakespeare's plays exhibits "so much ease and simplicity, that it seems scarcely to claim the merit of fiction."<sup>1</sup> The legend of Shakespeare's "naturalness" has persisted so strongly since Johnson's time that it may seem impertinent even now to enquire into the means by which this illusion of spontaneity in speech and lifelikeness in character is sustained. But a Shakespeare play is a carefully fashioned linguistic structure, and *Henry IV Part I*, with all its abundant life, remains a "fiction" in which the semblance of "ease and simplicity" owes as much to "art" as to "nature."

*Henry IV Part I* is a microcosm of the various styles and genres in the drama of its period. From the measured, elegiac tones of the grieving King Henry, through the heroic diction of several characters, to Falstaff's fantastical boasting, it charts the rich copiousness of Elizabethan drama, and shows it being explored by a playwright at the height of his early powers. We may examine in *Henry IV* how Shakespeare endows his many characters with individual and recognizable voices, how he prevents a drama of rapid action and potentially confusing events (even to an audience several hundred years closer to the events depicted) from devolving into a mere procession of battle-pieces, declamations and "humour" scenes. That this was the result of skill, rather than a consequence of plucking great drama out of nature, is attested by the earlier *Henry VI* plays, where the largely undifferentiated succession of voices gives some minimal flesh but little individuality to the characters and the action. That the apparent naturalness of *Henry IV* is the result of conscious, calculating art is less evident, but only because the play represents a more subtle and restrained artifice than, for example, *Richard III*, with its deliberate stylization, or *Richard II*, with its patterned contrast between the ceremonial King and the matter-of-fact Bolingbroke. The great art in *Henry IV* resides, in large measure, in Shakespeare's delicate gradations of style among the many contrasted characters in the play.

Most obviously, he exploited the distinction between verse and prose and the attendant social and literary notions concerning their use. King Henry, at the pinnacle of the play's social scale (no matter

1 *Preface to Shakespeare*, in *Selected Writings* (ed. Mona Wilson, London, 1950, pp.491-2.

how dubious his claim to the crown) speaks verse throughout; by contrast, Falstaff's speech is almost without exception cast in prose.<sup>2</sup> This is expected and conventional; it represents the broad distinction between a character of highest rank and seriousness, on the one hand, and on the other a *déclassé* "irregular humourist." But it is what Shakespeare makes of this conventional differentiation that reveals the complex and subtle art of the play. The King and Falstaff are anti-types, reverse images of each other, representing extremes between which Hal, the play's most problematic character, moves. Their language reveals, in consequence, a series of fascinating reflections and echoes.

Many characters in the play beside the King speak verse, but none is given quite the same type of verse as he speaks. His opening speech establishes the characteristic "key" of Henry's utterances:

So shaken as we are, so wan with care,  
Find we a time for frighted peace to pant,  
And breathe short-winded accents of new broils  
To be commenc'd in stronds afar remote:  
No more the thirsty entrance of this soil  
Shall daub her lips with her own children's blood,  
No more shall trenching war channel her fields,  
Nor bruise her flow'rets with the armed hoofs  
Of hostile paces: those opposed eyes,  
Which, like the meteors of a troubled heaven,  
All of one nature, of one substance bred,  
Did lately meet in the intestine shock  
And furious close of civil butchery,  
Shall now, in mutual well-beseeming ranks,  
March all one way, and be no more oppos'd  
Against acquaintance, kindred, and allies,  
The edge of war, like an ill-sheathed knife,  
No more shall cut his master.<sup>3</sup>

The dignity, seriousness and melancholy of this address is achieved through the measured, even pace of the verse. Most of the lines are end-stopped, the phrases are formally balanced; the syllables, for instance, often display conscious alliteration. In short, this speech (like so many of the King's speeches) is distinguished by the restrained use of a number of rhetorical devices, just as the utterances of some of the other characters are marked by the presence of different devices of embellishment and eloquence.

In several of his early works, Shakespeare demonstrated his skill in rhetorical elaboration, as in the bravura performance in *3 Henry VI*

2 The few instances of Falstaff's speaking verse are insignificant, consisting only of rhymed "tags" placed at the end of scenes and of patches of verse where he is aping King Henry's mode of speech.

3 *The First Part of Henry IV*, ed. A.R. Humphreys, London, 1960, l.i.1-18. All subsequent references are to this edition.

in which the troubled King spins an elaborate conceit around the topic of the contentment of the shepherd's life (II.v.21-39). The mature plays avoid, on the whole, such "operatic" displays of rhetorical skill; the obvious and easily discernible embellishment of language is to be found, for the most part, in the speeches of those characters who attempt to mislead or hoodwink others — the most notable example being Claudius's self-justifying address to the Danish court in the second scene of *Hamlet*, where the over-elaborate employment of rhetorical devices demonstrates the character's eagerness to justify unjustifiable actions. While the opening speech in *Henry IV* is capable of being analysed in accordance with rhetorical formulae, its distinguishing characteristic is the subdued restraint of its eloquence. The widely dispersed appearance of the phrase "No more" at the beginning of lines 5, 7 and 18 is an instance of *repetitio*, one of the simplest and most commonly encountered of rhetorical figures. Here, however, instead of appearing in successive lines with formal regularity, the figure is employed with greater skill to mark off important stages in the King's address. Lines 5 and 6 and lines 7 and 8, together with the first hemistich of line 9, are two formal amplifications of the one idea — the King's mind plays on the sense of regret (even perhaps of foreboding) which accompanies the celebration of peace and the resolve to mount a Crusade.

The King's speeches move within a narrow but resonant ambit of dignified, patterned eloquence. The emotional range is relatively restricted, but Shakespeare allows him several flashes of anger, and in one of these instances at least, during his meeting with Hal in III.ii., the climax is marked by a much more "dramatic" rhetorical device, usually known as *copulatio* or *plоче*, in the reiteration of "such" in lines 12-14.

I know not whether God will have it so  
 For some displeasing service I have done,  
 That in his secret doom out of my blood  
 He'll breed revengement and a scourge for me;  
 But thou dost in thy passages of life  
 Make me believe that thou art only mark'd  
 For the hot vengeance and the rod of heaven,  
 To punish my mistreadings. Tell me else  
 Could such inordinate and low desires,  
 Such poor, such bare, such lewd, such mean attempts,  
 Such barren pleasures, rude society,  
 As thou art match'd withal, and grafted to,  
 Accompany the greatness of thy blood,  
 And hold their level with thy princely heart?

(III.ii.4-17)

Henry's speeches, as already suggested, find a reverse image in the fluid prose periods of Falstaff. But, as also suggested, the structure of this play avoids the symmetrical patterning of a play like *Richard II*, where King Richard and Bolingbroke, two antithetical and counterpoised forces, are differentiated by the very individual accents and verse-patterns given to each. Admittedly, King Henry and Falstaff adopt something of that curiously symbiotic existence familiar from other contrasted pairs in Shakespeare's plays — not merely Richard II and Bolingbroke, but, above all, Othello and Iago — whereby one character depends on and is defined by the existence of the other. But in this play the spaces, as it were, between the King and the fat knight are filled in by a number of characters with individual, recognizable modes of address.

Most interesting of these is Hotspur, for just as Falstaff's language provides the greatest contrast to the King's, so Hotspur, of all those in the play who speak verse (and may seem to belong, therefore, to a particular part of the world of the play), provides the most markedly different style of speech. His voice displays a far greater variety than the King's sonorous monotone. The range is remarkable, embracing blind anger —

Why, look you, I am whipp'd and scourg'd with rods,  
 Nettled, and stung with pismires, when I hear  
 Of this vile politician Bolingbroke (I.iii.236-9)

— colloquial wisdom (hovering uneasily but most effectively on the borderline of verse and prose) when he rebukes Glendower for claiming that strange events attended the Welshman's birth —

Why, so it should have done  
 At the same season if your mother's cat  
 Had but kitten'd, though had never been born (III.i.15-17)

— and a formal, poetic rejoinder to the King's claim that Mortimer was guilty of rebellion and treachery:

Revolted Mortimer!  
 He never did fall off, my sovereign liege,  
 But by the chance of war; to prove that true  
 Needs no more but one tongue for all those wounds,  
 Those mouthed wounds, which valiantly he took,  
 When on the gentle Severn's sedgy bank,  
 In single opposition hand to hand,  
 He did confound the best part of an hour  
 In changing hardiment with great Glendower.  
 Three times they breath'd, and three times did they drink  
 Upon agreement of swift Severn's flood,  
 Who then affrighted with their bloody looks  
 Ran fearfully among the trembling reeds,  
 And hid his crisp head in the hollow bank,  
 Bloodstained with these valiant combatants. (I.iii.92-106)

Shakespeare's method of conveying Hotspur's character is, therefore, very different from that employed in the case of the King. Hotspur seems to possess no individual speaking voice — his mercurial, quixotic personality is depicted through the changeable extravagance of his language. His *actions*, it is essential to note, reveal, by contrast, a remarkable consistency of purpose: Worcester's comment

He apprehends a world of figures here,  
But not the form of what he should attend

(I.iii.207-8)

is an apt enough descripton of Hotspur's multi-faceted, extravagant language in this scene, but misses the important point that this linguistic (and therefore emotional) instability is accompanied by a notable tenacity of resolve.

In this manner, then, Shakespeare uses his characters' "voices" to establish a contrast between Hotspur and King Henry. The young Percy, seemingly lost in "a world of figures," yet displaying a sustained resolve once he decides to mount a rebellion, is pitched against the grave, monumental figure of the King who speaks throughout in measures of great dignity, yet seems to display not only the agony of disappointment but of conscience as well. Nevertheless, Hotspur is not totally protean, his language is not entirely a babel of conflicting voices. Through the many changes of mode and style we catch accents that differentiate him from other characters: his satiric outbursts, for instance, are different from Hal's diatribes against his tavern cronies. Just as Hotspur's utterances in "King Cambyses' vein" are different from Vernon's description of an heroic Prince of Wales and his retinue:

All furnish'd, all in arms;  
All plum'd like estridges that with the wind,  
Bated, like eagles having lately bath'd,  
Glittering in golden coats like images,  
As full of spirit as the month of May,  
And gorgeous as the sun at midsummer;  
Wanton as youthful goats, wild as young bulls.  
I saw young Harry with his beaver on,  
His cushes on his thighs, gallantly arm'd,  
Rise from the ground like feather'd Mercury,  
And vaulted with such ease into his seat  
As if an angel dropp'd down from the clouds  
To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus,  
And witch the world with noble horsemanship.

(IV.i.97-110)

Shakespeare achieves such differentiations, giving a sense of individuality to a character, largely through the careful marshalling of figurative language. A full appraisal of this complex topic cannot be

attempted here: we must be content with observing but one aspect: Hotspur's use of a group of devices which the rhetoricians of the sixteenth century classified as *tropes*.

Renaissance theorists of language usually divided rhetorical devices into two classes, *schemes* which impose formal patterns on words and phrases without altering their literal meanings, and *tropes*, representing a much more violent use of language, which bring about the alteration of literal meanings, usually through the violent juxtaposition of incompatible terms. Naturally, all figurative language, all metaphor, any pun, is technically speaking a trope. When King Henry wonders whether Hal's riotous life is heaven's way of scourging him for his misdeeds he is speaking *tropically*, for Hal is not literally a scourge nor does he actually assault his father. This figure, partly *metonymy* (the cause substituted for its effect) and partly *synecdoche* (a part standing for the whole) is so much a part of the life-blood of Shakespeare's language (as of the language of most poets) that King Henry's use of it is of no particular significance. But it is significant that several of Hotspur's speeches display a use of more flamboyant tropes, a more violent wrenching of conventional meaning, thereby indicating the character's extravagance and emotional instability.

This aspect of Hotspur's character may be observed to advantage in the long speech (I.iii.28-68) in which he seeks to excuse himself for his refusal to deliver to the crown his Scottish prisoners. The speech begins with measured tones, relatively free from figurative terms:

My liege, I did deny no prisoners,  
 But I remember, when the fight was done,  
 When I was dry with rage, and extreme toil,  
 Breathless and faint, leaning upon my sword,  
 Came there a certain lord, neat and trimly dress'd...

As Hotspur commences his description of the courtier, the language undergoes a notable change: the balanced phrases (reminiscent, perhaps, of the King's style of utterance, and indicating Hotspur's attempt at deference) give way to a much less temperate description of the "popinjay," a fantastical creature, according to Hotspur, who then launches his description with several similes, figures which do not change the literal meanings of words and are therefore schemes rather than more radical tropes:

Fresh as a bridegroom, and his chin new reap'd  
 Show'd like a stubble-land at harvest-home.  
 He was perfumed like a milliner...

But the language is already homely rather than courteous, and more

extravagant possibilities begin to be glimpsed in statements such as "his chin new reap'd" which begins to lead the speech into the world of tropes. Hotspur continues:

And 'twixt his finger and his thumb he held  
 A pouncet-box, which ever and anon  
 He gave his nose, and took't away again  
 Who therewith angry, when it next came there,  
 Took it in snuff...

The taking of snuff becomes the occasion for an interesting use of a figure known as *prosopopeia* which Peacham describes as follows: "the faining of a person, that is, when to a thing senceless and dumbe we faine a fit person."<sup>4</sup> The courtier's taking snuff becomes, in Hotspur's fancy, an independent, voluntary action not on the part of the person but on the part of his nose. Peacham's warning about the use of *prosopopeia* is particularly illuminating in this case:

This figure is an apt forme of speech to complaine, to accuse, to reprehend, to confirme, and to commend, but the use of it ought to be very rare, then chiefly, when the Orator having spent the principall strength of his arguments, is as it were constrained to call for helpe and aide else where, not unlike to a Champion having broken his weapons in the force of his conflict calleth for new of his frendes...<sup>5</sup>

That Shakespeare intended Hotspur's use of this figure to be perceived as extravagant and exaggerated is probably confirmed by its being employed in conjunction with a figure known as *ambiguitas* or *amphibologia* (better known to us as the pun) in the words "Took it in snuff." This carries two meanings: that the courtier's nose took offence at the offer of unpleasant material, and that it devoured the stuff eagerly. It is essential to recognize that most rhetoricians regarded the use of this figure as a vice of style; while Shakespeare did not, in all probability, agree fully (certainly, Dr Johnson thought that he could rarely resist an opportunity for punning), there is nevertheless evidence to be had from the plays that persistent punning is a sign of extravagant or unstable states of mind or personality, as Hotspur's is. The remainder of the speech, describing the manner in which the perfumed courtier expresses his demand for the hostages, continues in an extravagantly exaggerated manner, mingling the violent dislocations of meaning with colloquial directness ("This bald unjointed chat of his..." l. 64).

In this manner, Hotspur provides a contrast to the measured and dignified tones of the King's speeches. It is customary to regard this character as an antithesis to the Prince, and he is so presented many

4 Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence*, London, 1593, p. 136 (from the facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1954).

5 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

times in the play. But on the rich (though less easily perceptible) level of linguistic textures — the interplay of many voices — the audience senses a contrast between the troubled monarch and the hotheaded youth, so that each character, and beyond that the world in which each moves, is identified, given substance to by such disjunctions of speech and voice. Though Hotspur speaks with many tongues, we perceive his variety in the context of a consistently maintained extravagance of the figures that appear in his many modes of speech.

It is into this context that we must place Falstaff's prose rhythms. It is tempting — and not all have resisted the temptation — to regard the seemingly spontaneous language of Falstaff and his cronies, the world of the tavern, as the product of "nature," the direct transcription of the language of men. Moreover, this apparent naturalness has at times been seen as a deliberate stance adopted by Shakespeare, a commitment to an idea of history, the revelation of a way of life more honest, more valuable than the heroic posturings of the King and the northern rebels. Given the astonishing indecorum of the scenes in which Falstaff appears (though anticipated by *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* and sanctioned by the legendary riots of Prince Hal), it is possible to see how such attitudes towards the play have arisen, how Falstaff's language may be seen as unembellished naturalness, though tending towards chaos and anarchy, when compared with the King's melancholy dignity, Hotspur's extravagance or Glendower's megalomania. But in the case of Falstaff, at least, this contrast, signalled by his characteristic prose accents, is the product of a high degree of artifice and stylization, a complex use of linguistic devices far removed from the mere recording of language overheard in tavern or street.

Moreover, and this differentiates Falstaff's language from several characters' ways of speaking, his use of some of these devices is deliberate and self-conscious: Falstaff, in his own way, is a rhetorician and he knows that he is. Hotspur is intended, in all probability, to be unaware of the language he speaks; Shakespeare selects and emphasizes certain forms of linguistic elaboration in his speeches in order to provide a dramatic, literary impression of a quixotic, unstable and spontaneous personality. But Falstaff is often aware of the nature and implications of the language he uses, as in his punning words to Hal "were it not here apparent that thou art heir apparent" (I.ii.55-6). In this he is closest in the play to the King himself, for Henry is as studied, as self-conscious in his use of linguistic formulae as Falstaff. The gulf between the King's measured verse and the knight's punning prose seems, at first, limitless, yet in this respect at least the play establishes a remarkable community between these two



elderly men each with his claim on the young Prince.

With Falstaff, then, we are looking at the play's most complex use of language; briefly, and no doubt not entirely satisfactorily, his voice may be characterized as a mixture of colloquial diction and a curious elegance. It is vulgar, fantastical and direct. His opening words suggest no more, perhaps, than a magnification of those parodies of euphuistic language to be encountered in Armado's speeches in *Love's Labour's Lost*:

Indeed, you come near me now, Hal, for we that take purses go by the moon and seven stars, and not "by Phoebus, he, that wand'ring knight so fair:" and I prithee sweet wag, when thou art King, as God save thy Grace — Majesty, I should say, for grace thou wilt have none...

Marry then sweet wag, when thou art king let not us that are squires of the night's body be called thieves of the day's beauty: let us be Diana's foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon; and let men say we be men of good government, being governed as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal.

(I.ii.13-18, 23-9)

But the range of Falstaff's diction and the complexity of his speeches excel any of the fancies of *Love's Labour's Lost* or the fantastical diction of other comedies: in passages such as the celebrated discourse on honour there is a remarkable mixture of stylization and directness, of elaborate patterning and familiar discourse:

Well, 'tis no matter, honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on, how then? Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died a-Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis sensible, then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it...

(V.i.129-40)

Yet for all the patterned elaboration, Falstaff's speeches, like the King's, are not highly metaphoric — his is the language of allusion and simile, rather than a language which brings together alien and incompatible terms and concepts. So even where metaphoric language appears in his speeches — as in his puns — it is carefully qualified to demonstrate that these are analogies, not identifications:

If I be not ashamed of my soldiers, I am a soused gurnet; I have misused the King's press damnably. I have got in exchange of a hundred and fifty soldiers three hundred and odd pounds. I press me none but good householders, yeomen's sons, inquire me out contracted bachelors, such as had been asked twice on the banns, such a commodity of warm slaves as had lief hear the devil as a drum, such as fear the report of a caliver worse than a struck fowl or a hurt wild duck. I pressed me none but such toasts-and-butter, with hearts in their bellies no bigger than pins' heads, and they have bought out

their services; and now my whole charge consists of ancients, corporals, lieutenants, gentlemen of companies — slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth, where the glutton's dogs licked his sores; and such as indeed were never soldiers, but discarded unjust serving-men, younger sons to younger brothers, revolted tapsters, and ostlers trade-fallen, the cankers of a calm world and a long peace, ten times more dishonourable-ragged than an old fazed ancient; and such have I to fill up the rooms of them as have bought out their services, that you would think that I had a hundred and fifty tattered prodigals lately come from swine-keeping, from eating draff and husks. A mad fellow met me on the way, and told me I had unloaded all the gibbets and pressed the dead bodies. No eye hath seen such scarecrows. I'll not march through Coventry with them, that's flat: nay, and the villains march wide betwixt the legs as if they had gyves on, for indeed I had the most of them out of prison. There's not a shirt and a half in all my company, and the half shirt is two napkins tacked together and thrown over the shoulders like a herald's coat without sleeves; and the shirt to say the truth stolen from my host at Saint Albans, or the red-nose innkeeper of Daventry. But that's all one, they'll find linen enough on every hedge.

(IV.ii.11-48)

One of the more highly metaphorical statements in this passage, "I pressed me none but such toasts-and-butter," is carefully prepared and contained by the repetition of "such" earlier in the speech. The result of these practices — odd though it may sound — is to confer a certain stateliness, even dignity, on Falstaff's diction. And in this, as already alleged, he displays a curious similarity to the King's very different, verse-structured stateliness. Falstaff's is, of course, comic, manifesting itself in the balanced sentences and "regal" imagery of his recovery when he realizes that Hal was the chief of the mysterious assailants on Gad's Hill:

By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye. Why, hear you, my masters, was it for me to kill the heir-apparent? should I turn upon the true prince? Why, thou knowest I am as valiant as Hercules: but beware instinct — the lion will not touch the true prince; instinct is a great matter. I was now a coward on instinct: I shall think the better of myself, and thee, during my life — I for a valiant lion, and thou for a true prince...

(II.iv.263-71)

The comic dignity of much of Falstaff's language enables him to retain something of his own voice when masquerading as the irate King in the "play extempore." The two voices — the fat knight and the mock king — merge and mingle, so that we listen not merely to Falstaff's parody (and a cruel one at that) of King Henry, but to an echo of the King himself:

If then thou be son to me, here lies the point — why, being son to me, art thou so pointed at? Shall the blessed sun of heaven prove a micher, and eat blackberries? A question not to be asked. Shall the son of England prove a thief, and take purses? A question to be asked. There is a thing, Harry, which thou hast often heard of, and it is known to many, in our land by the name of

pitch. This pitch (as ancient writers do report) doth defile, so doth the company thou keepest: for, Harry, now I do not speak to thee in drink, but in tears; not in pleasure, but in passion; not in words only, but in woes also.  
(II.iv.400-12)

The effect of such a speech (and of the episode containing it) is complex, subtle, disturbing. The basic situation — a bar-room revel — reaches out, by way of role-playing and masquerade, towards implications of a fascinating and perplexing kind. It is not merely that Falstaff uses this occasion to attempt to elicit a guarantee of continuing patronage from the Prince, nor that when the roles are changed Hal gives a chilling forecast of his eventual banishment of plump Jack; the effect is greater — an intangible, yet powerful identification (momentary, provisional, contradictory even) of the King and Falstaff through these minglings of tones and voices, through the sophisticated use of levels of theatrical artifice.

It has been said (not without some exaggeration, it is true) that *I Henry IV* is concerned with the relationship between fathers and their sons: the King is disappointed in Hal, wishing that Hotspur were his son; Hotspur is betrayed by his father and seeks a curiously aggressive relationship with another elderly figure of authority, Glendower; Falstaff stands most oddly and ambiguously *in loco parentis* to the wastrel Prince. While such possibilities must not be magnified beyond their function in the play, the curious similarity in the voices of the King and Falstaff (notwithstanding the manifold difference between their modes of speech) lends some weight to this possibility. The way Shakespeare manipulates the patterns of language in the play, through contrast and similarity, disposes the characters within a pattern of relationships which implies a complexity of inter-relationships.

This becomes particularly important when we consider the voices with which Hal, the Prince of Wales, is made to speak. Structurally, he is the central character. The two parts of *Henry IV* chart the emergence of Henry V from the riotous Hal of Eastcheap. Yet this pivotal character displays many faces, many characteristics, so that no clear or unambiguous image of him emerges from the play. A persistent critical debate about his significance in the play is a reflection, in all probability, of this: for some readers, Hal is a cynical manipulator, an opportunist, almost a Machiavel; for others he is the true prince from the beginning, the future ruler exploring (and perhaps exposing) all corners of his realm. Significantly, it is possible to extract passages from the play that support either point of view. For example, several lines in the soliloquy which concludes I.ii. —

So when this loose behaviour I throw off,  
 And pay the debt I never promised,  
 By how much better than my word I am,  
 By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;  
 And like bright metal on a sullen ground,  
 My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,  
 Shall show more goodly, and attract more eyes  
 Than that which hath no foil to set it off

(I.ii.203-10)

— sound like arch-cunning, yet earlier in the scene we sense that his attitude towards his cronies, especially Falstaff, is governed by moral and ethical inclinations, rather than by opportunism.

We should look to the language Hal speaks to give us some insight into the way Shakespeare focusses our often conflicting attitudes towards Hal's character, but his language, as already intimated, is remarkably varied and changeable. At one extreme he speaks with a gravity reminiscent of the King's measured tone

Tell your nephew,  
 The Prince of Wales doth join with all the world  
 In praise of Henry Percy: by my hopes,  
 This present enterprise set off his head.  
 I do not think a braver gentleman,  
 More active-valiant or more valiant-young,  
 More daring or more bold, is now alive  
 To grace this latter age with noble deeds.

(V.i.85-92)

At the other extreme, he echoes Falstaff's elegantly colloquial speech-patterns:

Sirrah, I am sworn brother to a leach of drawers, and can call them all by their christen names, as Tom, Dick, and Francis. They take it already upon their salvation, that though I be but Prince of Wales, yet I am the king of courtesy, and tell me flatly I am no proud Jack like Falstaff, but a Corinthian, a lad of mettle, a good boy (by the Lord, so they call me!) and when I am King of England I shall command all the good lads in Eastcheap.

(II.iv.6-14)

Whereas Hotspur's many voices are held together by a consistent extravagance of diction and violence of figurative language, Hal's diction displays no such unifying characteristic — the critical quandary over his function in the play seems to be echoed by the lack of individuality in the manner of his speech. This according to most canons of literary propriety should be accounted a fault, a failure, perhaps, on the part of the dramatist to see his character "steady and whole." But we must entertain the possibility that this aspect of Hal's character represents a dramatic stroke of some boldness, that though lacking recognizable individuality, the Prince of Wales is much

larger than other, more easily categorized characters, and also much more disturbing than they are.

It may indeed be argued that in his portrait of Hal, Shakespeare liberates the Prince from those moral and ethical discriminations which we are often asked to exercise in literature and in drama. How we regard Hal should, of course, be a question of considerable importance within the play, and many characters are directly concerned with delivering judgments on his riotous way of life. But Shakespeare, I would argue, prevents his audience from engaging directly with this issue — rather, he makes us aware of the contradictory possibilities inherent in this complex and ambiguous character. The play presents Hal both as a cynical opportunist and as a man seeking a measure of freedom from the constricting world of political ambition. As the two plays concerned with the reign of Henry IV chart Hal's reformations and his backslidings, his acts of loyalty and heroism and his dubious and puzzling actions and attitudes, such as the filching of the crown in Part Two, we remain, on the whole, puzzled and perplexed. When, at the end of the second play, he banishes Falstaff with words of chilling majesty ("I know thee not, old man"), our feelings towards him are as mixed and as ambivalent as they are at the end of I.ii. in the first play, when, changing from the fluid prose of the earlier part of the scene, he begins to speak (presumably *in propria persona*) in verse of measured, unembellished directness:

I know you all, and will awhile uphold  
The unyok'd humour of your idleness.

(I.ii.190-91)

Shakespeare presents this enigmatic, disturbing personality through the language he speaks and through the contrast his language offers to the greater harmony and fixity of diction to be encountered in other characters. Their "voices" establish a complex polyphony; Hal's voice, though not discordant, is not so closely integrated with that texture. We do not have to be told by any character that the Prince is enigmatic and puzzling: the way Shakespeare places his tones of speech within the play's world of figures ensures that we recognize his otherness.