

ENGLISH: *HENRY IV*

Henry IV Part 1 mixes poetry and prose to a significant degree. Why did Shakespeare choose to write the play this way?

Set during the cultural shift from Medieval to Renaissance England, William Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1* juxtaposes the informality of prose with the elegance of poetic blank verse most notably to separate different worlds. The play adheres to the Elizabethan dramatic convention that colloquial prose is the vernacular of commoners, and blank verse or unrhymed iambic pentameter is the appropriate language for nobles. The transition between these two forms of language accentuates the division between personal and political personas, and the stratification of classes such as the lowly world of the tavern at Eastcheap and the pragmatic calculation of King Henry's upper political sphere. Shakespeare also mirrors the "reformation" of protagonists through the language and employs irony, whilst ruminating on poetry, to explore the notion that elegiac language is a threat to the masculine honour code.

Shakespeare's inclusion of dignified blank verse alongside unrefined prose accentuates the division between significant settings in the play, comments on the class structures in England at the time and illustrates the way in which language reflects the characteristics of domains. An air of tradition and nobility permeating through it, one of the primary worlds in the play is the royal court of the pragmatic King Henry. At the play's "shaken" opening, the audience is well aware of the unnatural circumstances of which Henry came to rule, following the dishonourable usurpation of Richard II. Adding to the illegitimacy of his "borrowed title" is the anger of the Percy family at their mistreatment despite assisting Henry in the political coup, encapsulated when Hotspur employs metaphor to compare "that sweet lovely rose, Richard" and "this canker, this thorn, Bolingbroke". Hence, since Henry cannot rely on his status alone to garner obedience, his control of language becomes a pivotal part of his successful leadership. Henry's ability to speak with dignity and composure amidst "civil butchery" – which has ravaged the "panting", exhausted landscape – allows him to assert his authority despite the emotions of guilt and shame which corrode him. Henry's command of language is embodied in a clarion affirmation when he peremptorily dismisses Worcester in the royal court, "get thee gone, for I do see danger and disobedience in thine eye". When juxtaposed with life in the Boar's Head tavern – characterised by an indifference to politics and an indulgence in excess – Shakespeare emphasises the way in which language mirrors the opprobrium and slovenly lifestyles of this world. The informality and lowly class of this sphere is reinforced by the abundance of colloquialisms, "What, in thy quips and quiddities?" "What have I to do with a buff jerkin?", the malapropisms of the rather slow Mistress Quickly, and Falstaff's revelry in puns and wordplay, shown by his play on "heir apparent". Hence, the playwright's comparison of language serves a key purpose in distinguishing different domains and the qualities they each embody.

The "reformation" of the play's protagonist from a "truant to chivalry" to a "fiery Pegasus" is emphasised by seamless transitions from informal prose to rousing rhyming couplets and regal blank verse. In Hal's first appearance (Act 1 Scene 2), he is portrayed ricocheting puns with the irrepressible Falstaff in a repartee, or easy conversational style. This is evidenced when Falstaff continues Hal's conceit of the moon, with the "villainous, abominable misleader of youth" ruminating on the notion of thievery and "minions of the moon" or "Diana's foresters". This jovial and relaxed language mirrors their apathy and dissoluteness, which initially appears off as Hal is indeed a prince and Falstaff a knight, although a figure whose debauchery and personification as the "reverend Vice" renders him incapable with the ideals of chivalry. At the play's zenith at the Battle of Shrewsbury, Hal abandons his "vile participation" and assumes his "kingly role", employing a rousing couplet to inspire his troops, "The land is burning, Percy stands on high, and either we or they must lower lie". Throughout the play, regardless of the world he inhabits, Hal is able to switch between the dignity of blank verse and the improvisal nature of prose, shown when he speaks in blank verse in his soliloquy (Act 1 Scene 2) and in the play extempore (Act 2 Scene 4) – both

scenes interestingly occurring in the lowly tavern. Hence, Hal's seamless transitions from prose to verse reaffirm his soliloquy that he is merely playing a part, and highlights his inherent leadership potential when he decides to "break through the foul and ugly mists" and "imitate the sun".

Through the intertwining of poetry and blank verse, the playwright ruminates on the notion that words and elegiac language is a threat to the honour code and the established terms of masculine virtue. Personifying chivalrous behaviour is the "theme of honour's tongue", Hotspur, who despite his impetuosity ("impatient fool") and idealism ("he apprehends a world of figures") is a valiant and honourable warrior. Hotspur worships the honour code hyperbolically, shown by his desire to attain honour from "the pale faced moon" as if it were tangible, and displays an eagerness for "hurly burly innovation". Part of Hotspur's evangelical beliefs and values is a strong dislike for language, which he asserts he "has no time for" and associates with dangerous effeminacy. This is particularly exemplified by Hotspur's rancour for the "bald, unjointed chatter" of the feminine "popinjay" following his defeat of Douglas and his allies. Nonetheless, Shakespeare mixes poetry and blank verse in Hotspur's speech to subvert this idea, ironically highlighted when Hotspur employs personification to describe the river as "bloodstained with valiant combatants". At Warkworth Castle, Shakespeare reverses standard gendered assumptions when he compares Hotspur's elusive, slippery use of language with Lady Percy's direct speech, "answer me, directly", to contradict Hotspur's attribution of forthright language with the masculine honour code.

In a play contrasting different worlds and varied social class structures, Shakespeare employs the mellifluous and elegiac nature of poetic blank verse contrasted with unrefined prose to accentuate divisions in Henry IV Part 1. Through the use of language, Shakespeare reiterates Hal's reformation and redemption of "princely privilege", and also subverts the idea that language is a threat to the established terms of masculine virtue.