

**UNDERSTANDING SHAKESPEARE:
HENRY IV, PART 1**

Robert A. Albano



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NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (6th Edition, Volume 1).

CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

Critics usually divide the plays by William Shakespeare into three major categories: tragedies, comedies, and histories. Occasionally, critics add a fourth category, romances, to describe a few of his plays. Ten of Shakespeare's plays belong to the category of **histories**. However, the student should keep in mind that such classification is not an issue that Shakespeare himself would have been too particularly concerned with. The ten plays that are called histories focus only on English history. Shakespeare also wrote plays that cover historical figures and events of other lands. For example, *Julius Caesar* is also an historical play about Rome in the Classical Age. But for the sake of convenience, critics label it as a tragedy. On the other hand, *Richard III* is also a tragedy. But for the sake of convenience, critics label it as a history. Another historical play by Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, however, contains more elements related to comedy than to tragedy. Although classification and labels are sometimes helpful, the student should not let the label "history" be too misleading. An historical play may contain elements of both tragedy and comedy, and the emphasis may be on either one.

One of Shakespeare's best history plays is The First Part of *King Henry the Fourth* (hereafter referred to as *1 Henry IV*). Shakespeare actually

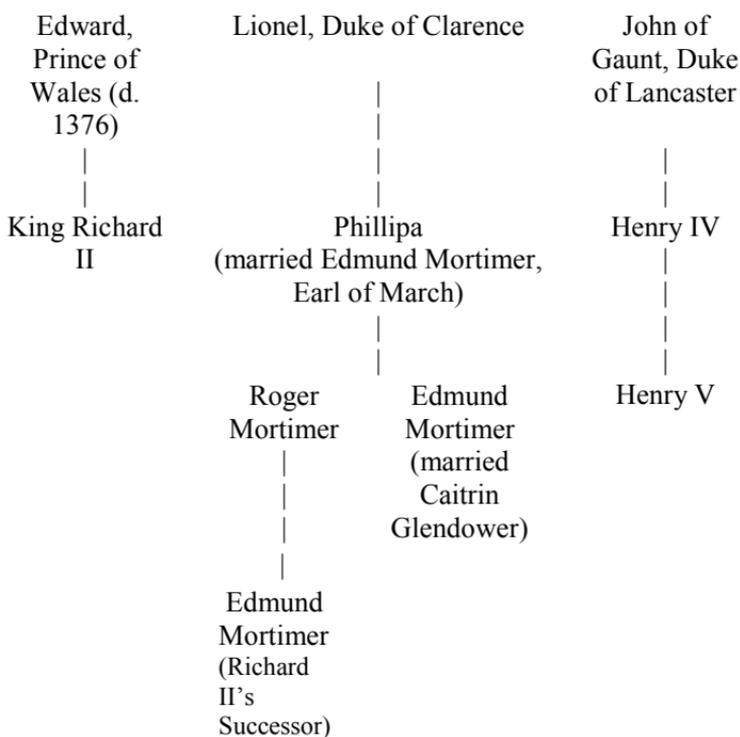
wrote two plays about the reign (or time period) of King Henry IV (1399-1413). (1) In **1 *Henry IV*** Shakespeare covers the rebellion of the Percy family, English aristocrats who had originally helped King Henry IV gain possession of the throne. The play primarily focuses on the young son of the king. Prince Henry (the future Henry V) is an embarrassment to the king, for the prince spends an idle and lazy life drinking and gambling in the taverns of England. However, with the coming of the rebellion, the prince is forced to grow up quickly. (2) In **2 *Henry IV*** (or *The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth*) Shakespeare examines a second rebellion against King Henry IV and continues to develop the maturation (or growing up) of Prince Henry. The play also includes the death of Henry IV and ends with Prince Henry being crowned as King Henry V of England.

Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* was published in 1598, but was probably written as early as 1596. During the Renaissance the growth and development of English drama was remarkable. The reader should keep in mind that just a hundred years earlier English audiences were attending morality plays like *Everyman*. But in the second half of the 16th century, numerous comedies, tragedies, and histories were playing in London and throughout England. However, when Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* first appeared on stage in 1596 (or 1597), the audience encountered a brilliant and new kind of history play that surpassed any other written before that time.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Some historical information will be useful to the student who wishes to understand Shakespeare's play in depth. The following chart may also prove helpful:

King Edward III (d. 1377)



The chart above is simplified. King Edward III actually had seven sons. But his eldest son, Prince Edward, died a year before the king did. In such circumstances, the remaining family members often will contest or argue over who should be the next rightful heir to the throne. But such conflicts were not simply a matter of the law. They also concerned a conflict for power.

The events of 1399 certainly reveal such a power struggle. Richard II was named king when he was still a child. And as he grew older, he proved to be not a very good king. On occasion he could even be a tyrant. Henry Bolingbroke (the future King Henry IV) returned from an exile in France in 1399 because his father, the Duke of Lancaster, died. Henry Bolingbroke returned to become the new Duke of Lancaster. Henry Percy (the Earl of Northumberland) and Thomas Percy (the Earl of Worcester) assisted Henry in attaining his title.

Meanwhile, Richard II was away in Ireland fighting a war. Richard named Edmund Mortimer (the son of Roger Mortimer, the Earl of March) to be his successor (to be the next king) should he die in the war. Not everyone agreed with King Richard's choice. As a grandson to Edward III, Henry Bolingbroke felt that his claim to be the next king was stronger than that of Edmund Mortimer. Mortimer, after all, was (1) a great-great grandson of Edward III and (2) was not directly descended from the male line of that king.

There followed an extreme amount of political confusion and conflict at that point. When Richard II returned from Ireland, Henry Bolingbroke, with the assistance of the Percy family and other nobles, captured Richard and put him in prison. Henry then became King Henry IV. Henry, therefore, did not inherit the title: he seized it (a *coup d'etat*). The following year, in 1400, he executed Richard II.

The political problems for Henry IV, however, were just beginning. Both Wales and Scotland were at war with England. The problems became worse when the other Edmund Mortimer (the son of the Earl of March and Phillipa) became a prisoner in Wales. Owen Glendower, the leader of the Welsh forces, demanded that King Henry IV pay a ransom to release Mortimer. Henry refused. The Mortimers, after all, also had a claim to the throne. And Henry wanted to protect his position.

However, Hotspur (also known as the younger Henry Percy, the son of the Earl of Northumberland) became angry that King Henry IV would not pay the ransom. Mortimer was the brother-in-law to Hotspur, who was married to Elizabeth Mortimer (sister to Roger and Edmund).

So, a plot, a conspiracy against the king, began. Hotspur gathered other members of the Percy family together with the Earl of Douglas (a leader of the Scots), Glendower (the Welsh leader), the Archbishop of York, and other powerful individuals who were not pleased with the leadership of Henry

IV. Hotspur's forces then rebelled and waged open war against the forces of the king.

The rebellion and fighting reached a climax in 1403. In that year the two opposing sides met in a momentous struggle known as **The Battle of Shrewsbury**. Hotspur died in that action, and the forces of the rebellion were brought down. Henry IV would continue to sit on the throne for another ten years.

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