# Parrot, Parody, and Paronomasia: Damnable Iteration in *Henry IV, Part I*

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The skies of *Henry IV, Part I* are aflutter with talking birds. In act one, scene three, for example, after the abrupt termination of his interview with the king, Hotspur angrily vows to train a starling to speak "Nothing but Mortimer" in harassment of "this vile politician Bolingbroke" (221-223, 238).[1] Elsewhere in the same scene, Percy claims that the foppish lord who demanded his prisoners on the battlefield was little more than a "popinjay" (49) or a noisy parrot, while Kate later calls her choleric husband a "paraquito" (2.3.79) when he refuses to answer questions about his preparation for war. Likewise, Hal and Falstaff discuss cuckoos (which mimic cries of other birds) and sparrows in 2.4.341-350, estridges and eagles bate the wind in 4.1.97-99, and Worcester in 5.1.60-61 accuses the king of mistreating his family "As that ungentle gull the cuckoo's bird / Useth the sparrow." Most memorable, perhaps, is Hal's metaphoric indictment of the intellectually challenged Francis, who has "fewer words than a parrot, and yet the son of a woman" (2.4.96-97). Like Hotspur, Francis has descended a full link on the Great Chain of Being, reducing both men to bestial parodies of the divine potential encoded within their immortal souls. These omnipresent chattering birds, mocking their surroundings with satiric glee, are emblematic of a play in which echo, resonance, and mimicry reverberate throughout the dramatic landscape. Such repetition is not only evident in the language and action of the script, but also reveals important truths about Shakespeare's experimentation with the relatively new genre of historical drama so popular in England at the time and helps explain why *Henry IV, Part I* is arguably Shakespeare's most admired, accessible, and satisfying history play.

An important early example of this repetition can be found in the many parodic games played by Hal and Falstaff in the "churls

gone wild" sections of the script—the most delightful of which we might dub "Name that Proverb," in which one contestant offers a sustained prose version of a well-known saying or maxim, while the other attempts to guess its more economical equivalent. In 1.2, for instance, after Falstaff's lengthy depiction of the "old lord of the council" who railed at him unsuccessfully in the street, Hal correctly deduces that Falstaff is referring to the adage "wisdom cries out in the streets and no man regards it" (1.2.80-87). When Falstaff subsequently praises his young companion's "damnable iteration" (88), he refers, of course, to Hal's skill at repeating phrases with a satiric twist—that is, to "damn" or ridicule through comic repetition. Like the chattering birds elsewhere in the script, this "damnable iteration" is everywhere apparent, especially in the ubiquitous puns or paronomasia that bring humor to the dialogue while simultaneously supporting the action of a play deeply indebted to parody.

A mere fifty lines into the script, for instance, the king mimics Westmoreland's report of "uneven and unwelcome news" with the "smooth and welcome news" brought by Sir Walter Blunt concerning Hotspur's victory (1.1.50, 66). Similarly, Falstaff refashions the word "thieves" through such genteel euphemisms as "Diana's foresters," "gentlemen of the shade," and "minions of the moon" in 1.2.24-26. Verbal echoes such as "were it not here apparent that thou art heir apparent" (1.2.55-56), the quibble on "obtaining of suits" (69), the incessant repetition of " when thou art king," and Hal's sun/son puns all characterize a relationship between the two friends that thrives on what Falstaff casually refers to as "unsavory similes" (77). Even the play's occasional couplets provide a verbal context emphasizing repetition and parody—particularly in such slant rhymes as "deaths"/"this" (3.2.158-160) and "horse"/"corpse" (4.1.122-123), in which the second rhyming word of the couplet always mocks the first.

The remainder of the script, in fact, is laced with parody: Falstaff mimes a preacher in 1.2.147-153; Hotspur imitates the foppish courtier in his speech before the king in 1.3; the Second Carrier echoes Gadshill's request for a lantern (2.1.38-39); Falstaff copies the jargon of thieves in 2.2.84-87; Hotspur ridicules the letter of the unsympathetic lord in 2.3; Kate acts out Hotspur's nightmare references to "sallies" and "retires" in 2.3.50-56; Poins and Hal continually call for Francis the Drawer (2.4.35-80); Hal impersonates Hotspur and Kate in his "Fie upon this quiet life, I want work" speech (2.4.102-109); Falstaff repeats then exaggerates the number of men with whom he fought (2.4.200-227); Hal and

Falstaff mirror each other's invective-filled diatribes in 2.4.220-244; Bardolph's "Choler, my lord, if rightly taken" is echoed by Hal's "No, if rightly taken, halter" (2.4.320-321); Falstaff reiterates his own praise in "sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff . . . and old Jack Falstaff" (469-472); Glendower and Hotspur parody each other with "He wisheth you in heaven . . . And you in hell" (3.1.9); Glendower brags that he can "command the devil" while Hotspur counsels him to "shame the devil / By telling truth" (3.1.53-55); Lady Mortimer's Welsh lament is repeated in perfect English by her father (3.1.188-215); when Kate admonishes Hotspur to listen to "the lady sing in Welsh," he counters that he would rather hear "Lady my brach howl in Irish" (3.1.229-230); Hotspur mimics Kate's "Not mine, in good sooth" with his own litany of tepid oaths (3.1.240-250); the king reminds Hal of the time Richard II was mocked by "gibing boys" (3.2.66); and Hal's pledge to his father that he "will die a hundred thousand deaths" reverberates two lines later with the king's "A hundred thousand rebels die in this" (3.2.158-160).

These verbal parallels are themselves echoed and underscored by situational repetition, which is likewise abundant throughout the play and which helps distinguish *Henry IV, Part I* as a self-consciously parodic play. Just as Hotspur's talking starling and Hal's reference to Francis as a dim-witted parrot introduce the motif early in the script, another important image confirms the technique near its conclusion—the specter of counterfeit kings. After Douglas kills Sir Walter Blunt in 5.3, for example, Hotspur explains that his victim was "Semblably furnished like the King himself" (21), but was not, in fact, the royal object of their search. "The King hath many marching in his coats" (25), confesses Hotspur, to which Douglas angrily replies, "I will kill all his coats! / I'll murder all his wardrobe, piece by piece, / Until I meet the King" (26-28). One scene later, when Douglas finally confronts Henry on the battlefield, he moans in exasperation, "Another king! They grow like Hydra's heads" (5.4.24), which is itself a classical image of uncontrollable repetition. "What are thou," he continues, "That counterfeitest the person of a king? (5.4.24-27). Told he is speaking to the king himself, not another of his "shadows" (5.4.29), Douglas admits, "I fear thou art another counterfeit, / And yet, in faith, thou bearest thee like a king— / But mine I am sure thou art, whoe'er thou be, / And thus I win thee" (34-37).

This metaphor of counterfeiting, which further develops the motif of parody and repetition in the play, is introduced earlier by Falstaff when he counsels Hal never to "call a true piece of gold a

counterfeit" (2.4.485-486) and repeated later in the script with Sir John's description of his threadbare soldiers as "slaves" and "scarecrows" (4.2.24, 38). Although disguising commoners as kings was a well-known protective device in medieval warfare, the symbol of a "counterfeit" ruler in this play invites comparisons to Henry's role as a usurper and to the royal aspirations of Hal and Hotspur, each of whom has designs on the throne. A "counterfeit" king—like a "slave," a "shadow," a "scarecrow," an old knight (like Falstaff) who "bates" and "dwindles" (3.3.2), and a worthless golden coin—is a pale and devalued echo of its former self, maintaining the image of its predecessor, but not the true value beneath its facade. It is a "damnable iteration," like the fuzzy, distorted, repetitive image of a third- or fourth-generation video copy, laughable in its pretensions and constantly mimicking the original on which it is based. On another, more metatheatrical level, the counterfeiting in the script takes on deeper significance when we realize that Blunt's impersonation of the king mirrors the manner in which Shakespeare's actors simulate the roles of all the historical characters in the play. In fact, through the process of theatrical doubling so familiar to a Renaissance audience, *1 Henry IV* in performance constantly reminds attentive viewers that the same relatively small group of actors is continually entering and exiting the stage—replete with a variety of costumes, beards, and vocal accents—in a repetitive creative process that brings to life well-known personages from the recesses of English history.

Framed, therefore, between these images of talkative parrots, counterfeit kings, and recurrent actors are a number of additional parodic elements in the action and imagery of the play that complement the verbal references already discussed. Chief among these, of course, is the manner in which the comic sub-plot echoes the more substantive main plot. While Hotspur and the Percy clan are planning their rebellion, for instance, Hal is doing battle with drawers at the Boarshead, where he upbraids Poins in military jargon for having "lost much honor that thou wert not with me in this action" (2.4.20-21). Similarly, the stately verse of the main plot is mimicked by the relaxed prose of the sub-plot until Hal, by accepting his responsibility as the future king of England, changes the rhythm of his destiny with the rhythm of his speech. His first-act soliloquy, in fact, where Hal pledges to "imitate the sun" (1.2.192), introduces a proleptic progress in which he foreshadows his future princely behavior through an anticipatory "pre-echo" (or, in modern cinematic jargon, a "prequel") of his reformation.

In short, the hero's ignoble behavior at the outset of the play sets up a dramatic mirror in which the reformed prince can look back at his earlier frivolous self in triumphant maturity. Hal's prescience in this early soliloquy turns the entire play into a dramatic fulfillment of his vowed reformation in much the same fashion that Poins' 1.2 prediction about the post-robbery behavior of Falstaff is made corpulent flesh during the fat knight's epic defense of his honor in the tavern scene in 2.4. When Hal finally does break through "the foul and ugly mists / Of vapors that did seem to strangle him" (1.2.196-197), he fulfills the pledge in his 1.2 soliloquy and in his interview with his father in 3.2, thereby confirming the audience's faith in the veracity of the young prince's word and commemorating the virtue of a play that always seems to deliver what it has guaranteed.

Additional parodic events in the script include Falstaff's ludicrous description of the robbery in 2.4, which simultaneously rewrites his cowardice at the conclusion of 2.2, echoes the rebel plot to steal the throne, and is itself burlesqued by Sir John's accusation in 3.3 that his seal ring "worth forty mark" (80) has been stolen in the tavern. In this sense, Falstaff steals from others and is then himself the victim of two subsequent comic robberies. Likewise, the linguistic clumsiness of Francis parodies the verbal expertise swirling around him; Hotspur's misguided and egocentric behavior is clearly a perversion of the well-known chivalric code of honor; and Falstaff, who is an exaggerated caricature of other men because of his immense size and comic exuberance, descends to self-parody later in the play when his subdued demeanor is a weak echo of his earlier robust self. In addition, Hal and Hotspur—the twin doppelganger "Harrys"—are mirror images of each other as they move inexorably toward their final confrontation on the field of Shrewsbury, just as Falstaff and the king both serve as father figures to the young prince. Early in the play, when Henry openly wishes that "some night-tripping fairy had exchanged / In cradle-clothes our children where they lay, / And called mine Percy, his Plantagenet" (1.1.85-88), he sets up a comparison in which Hal is the "counterfeit" prince, while Hotspur is the "true piece of gold." In typical ironic fashion, however, this parodic relationship is reversed by the end of the play when Hal, in triumph over his fallen foe, ends the "double reign" of adversaries (5.4.65) and contrasts his rise in power with Hotspur's " ill-weaved" and "shrunk" ambition (5.4.65, 87).

Most impressive, perhaps, is the anticipation of the real confrontation between Hal and his father in 3.2 via the mock

interview featuring Hal and Falstaff in 2.4. The script provides, in fact, a double prefiguration of the later scene by first having Hal play himself opposite Falstaff's king, then reversing the order whereby Hal impersonates his father and Falstaff enacts the prince's part. Both playacting episodes create a sense of *déjà vu* for audience members when they are finally treated to a solemn version of the two earlier humorous scenes, thereby forecasting the script's eventual movement from comic to serious mode via the final defeat of the rebels and the restoration of royal order at the conclusion of the play. Thus the script creates a Janus vantage point whereby viewers watching the playacting scene can look backwards in time to the real-life historical interview between Hal and his father that undoubtedly took place, as well as forward to the later theatrical encounter in 3.2. In addition, we learn a great deal about this dysfunctional father-son relationship through the earlier mirror scenes involving Hal and Falstaff. Not only do the two "actors" brilliantly anticipate the speech mannerisms of the prince and his father in 2.4, but the intensity of the king's anger at his son is expertly parodied in the earlier scene. Further, Hal's "I do, I will" provides a pseudo-comic anticipation of his eventual rejection of Falstaff at the conclusion of *Henry IV, Part II*. Similarly, Falstaff's agonized "Give me my horse, you rogues, give me my horse . . ." (2.2.28-29) might be seen as a prequil to King Richard's "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse" (5.4.7) in *Richard III*—but that's a topic for another paper.

This vast network of verbal and situational parody encourages us to consider other important ways in which the rhetorical device of repetition serves the script. To do so, we need to step back from the play and evaluate its proper place in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* tetralogy and in the larger scope of the author's entire series of history plays. *Henry IV, Part I* is, of course, the second play in the four-part series dealing with the beginnings of the Wars of the Roses, which surveys historical events ranging from the early 1390's to Richmond's victory over Richard III in 1485. The second tetralogy, including the first three parts of *Henry VI* through *Richard III*, was written first, yet it deals with historical events following those of the *Richard II – Henry V* series. In this sense, the *Richard II* tetralogy is itself a prequil—composed later, yet dealing with earlier historical material. All theatrical versions of history are repetitive, of course, since the very nature of the genre relies heavily on an audience's prior knowledge of past events. In these two tetralogies, for example, Shakespeare was indebted to narratives derived from Holinshed, Daniel, Hall, Froissart, and other

chroniclers of the time whose sole purpose was to provide recorded historical information for a reading public eager to learn more about its national identity. As a result, Shakespeare's plays echo and reshape his sources, which are themselves a written compilation of actual historical moments that lie at least three removes from the scripts that rehearse and popularize these actual events from the past. When Shakespeare's characters speak of the "pattern" of history, then, as they do in *The Winter's Tale* (3.2.36) and elsewhere, the phrase suggests the commonplace adage that "history repeats itself," which enables the "past" represented by these plays to become our "present" via the miracle of theatre. Through the repetitive hearing and rehearing of these well-known stories—that is, through the "rehearsal" of history—we find ourselves situated within a chronological continuum that teaches us our proper place in the universe and our complex relationship to the millions of lives that surround us.

Among these eight popular chronicle plays, therefore, Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I* may be viewed as the only true "comedy" since it contains rich and plentiful humor, along with a plot structure that clearly moves from problem to solution and from bad fortune to good. Perhaps the ultimate parodic element in the play, then, is found not in its repetitive language or dramatic situations, but in Shakespeare's manipulation of the genre itself. In this crucial sense, the entire play is a parody of English history, putting a positive comic spin on well-known factual events. Somewhat akin to Polonius' "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral" sub genre in *Hamlet* (2.2.398), Shakespeare is refining the relatively new dramatic category of "historical comedy," which was still in its infancy at this time in the evolutionary development of theatre. If history is a story told by the winners, then *Henry IV, Part I* may legitimately be viewed within the comic context of Hal's rise to power and eventual ascent to the kingship. Although Hotspur is a worthy antagonist, he is defeated as much by the inexorable forces of history and the inevitable movement from feudalism to nationalism as he is by the deadly sword of Prince Hal.

As a result, Shakespeare has created what *New Yorker* movie critic Anthony Lane has, in another context, called "the comedy of apocalypse"[2] by turning the horrors of war and death into a comic masterpiece. History plays are usually parodic since playwrights are always under pressure to rearrange and massage past events to yield an ending that congratulates the victors. In a more meaningful way, however, *Henry IV, Part I* is "comic" because Prince Hal is an obvious paean to Elizabeth I. For an attentive

Renaissance audience, England's "ideal king" is a prelude to England's "ideal queen" within the majestic and enduring symphony of time. Like Prince Hal, "who never promiseth but he means to pay" (5.4.43), the script of *Henry IV, Part I*—through its abundant mimicry, echo, repetition, and parody—confirms audience expectations at every turn, thereby satisfying the dramatic appetite it has so cleverly created. Though Prince Hal dwells at the center of the play's "damnable iteration," this textual repetition is violated in a single, meaningful way when the son refuses to copy the actions of his father. In order to become a mirror for magistrates, Hal must of necessity articulate a different vision of kingship than that presented by Henry IV, whose stain of usurpation and manifest behavioral flaws he must eschew before he can rightfully govern the kingdom. In this sense, the play is an intensely personal parable about a young man who breaks out of the repetitive and parodic world around him to find his own unique and ultimately "comic" path to the throne of England.

## Notes

1. All quotations are taken from *Henry IV, Part I*, The Arden Shakespeare, edited by David Scott Kastan (London: Methuen, 2002).

2. "This Is Not a Movie," *The New Yorker*, Anthony Lane, 9/24/01, p. 79.