The Place, Space, and Voice of Rebellion: Limits of Transgression in *Henry IV, Part I.*

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Henry IV, Part I is replete with images of transgression. From Henry IV's seizure of the crown that precedes the play, to prince Hal's uproarious living that does not befit an heir apparent, to the classically grotesque figure of Falstaff and Hotspur's uncontrollable wrath, to the hybridity of the land itself, little, if anything in the play is free from transgressive tropes. Cutting through boundaries is more the rule than the exception; and the royal family's example has made misbehaving the norm. But does all this amount to transgression? Can one subvert limits that were not stable to begin with? Ultimately, in this world of shifting boundaries and ever-changing ethics, rebellion in the form of true transgression becomes impossible; there must first be stability in order to disrupt the norm. Henry's originary transgression of uncrowning the clown king Richard creates a world where subversion is status quo, and nothing is a violation.

In the first scene of the play, the newly crowned Henry IV is preparing to lead a crusade into Jerusalem, "[t]o chase these pagans in those holy fields / Over whose acres walked those blessed feet / Which fourteen hundred years ago were nailed / For our advantage on the bitter cross" (I.1.24-27) .[1] Henry's reference to the crusade contains layers of transgressive imagery; on the surface he is talking about a war, an invasion of the boundaries of a nation. The notion of a crusade also recalls medieval beliefs of the Crucifixion of Christ as the "original transgression," a violation which, in Henry's world, would have been considered the most subversive uncrowning of a king to ever take place. The metadramatic process of uncrowning a king is a staple of carnivalesque and subversive play-acting[2]; it also, of course, is reflective of Henry's own transgression: he usurped the throne from the rightful monarch, Richard II. Henry is paying for his violation by existing in a kind of purgatory, a liminal space where he can no longer claim superiority over an

impotent authority (as he did to his cousin Richard); neither is he fully the king, since he lacks divine right. As Claire McEachern notes, Henry seems "ill-suited to the political order (and disorder) his accession to the throne has unleashed."[3] Henry's was a violent seizure of the throne, and it legitimized the notion that the kingship belonged to he who was strong enough to take it.

This notion problematizes the concept of divine right, the rule of law that had interpreted genetic succession as the will of God. Henry's blatant mocking of this concept creates an inversion in the world of the play; here, the will of man is as powerful as that of God—maybe even more so. This causes slippage between the man/God binary, and blurs the boundary between human and divine will. This makes Henry's position a hybrid one: he is neither rightful, nor entirely inappropriate heir to the throne. This concept of hybridity is vital to understanding the kind of chaotic transgression that Henry unleashes upon his kingdom. Jervis' definition of transgression is useful in explaining this relationship:

> The transgressive is reflexive, questioning both its own role and that of the culture that has defined it in its otherness. It is not simply a reversal, a mechanical inversion of an existing order it opposes. Transgression, unlike opposition or reversal, involves hybridization, the mixing of categories and the questioning of the boundaries that separate categories. It is not, in itself, subversion; it is not an overt and deliberate challenge to the status quo.[4]

Henry's usurpation of the crown spotlights many issues about the king's body as divine vessel. Henry, it would seem, was not divinely selected, and therefore does not possess the necessary connection with a religious or mythological past that would serve to legitimize his reign.[5] He is forced to create that link, mimetically depicting himself as the rightful king through spectacle. As Henry lectures Hal on his misbehaviors, he also lets the wayward prince know how he has managed to solidify his legitimacy in the hearts of the people—through pageantry and spectacle:

> By being seldom seen, I could not stir
> But, like a comet, I was wondered at;
> That men would tell their children, "This is he!"
> Others would say, "Where? Which is Bolingbroke?"
> And then I stole all my courtesy from heaven,
> And dressed myself in such humility
> That I did pluck allegiance from men's hearts,
> Loud shouts and salutations from their mouths
> Even in the presence of the crowned king. (III.2.46-54)

Henry creates a royal spectacle even before he becomes king; this is the beginning of a metadramatic process intended to confirm his shaky legitimacy in the hearts of the people. In such a procession, Michael Bristol explains, "the city streets become a stage, [and] the royal personality occupies the center of a theatrical performance."[6] Henry's transgression extends well past his mere usurpation, as he hybridizes both social space and his image as a member of the royal party before he became king. Rather than an inversion or a reversal, Henry's seizure of the crown is a hybridization that manipulates the boundary between divine and human will.

Henry's personal opinion of his transgression is somewhat unclear; one is left to wonder whether he was mounting a crusade to do penance, to follow his beliefs, or, as he later advises his son in 2 *Henry IV,* to "busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels" (IV.5.213-14). Whatever Henry's feelings toward his transgression, there is no doubt that his kingdom is paying a dear price for it: Bristol suggests that "The violent uncrowning of the royal martyr or royal villain is invariably accompanied by a more generalized, pervasive social violence or civil war."[7] Henry's actions have struck a mortal blow to monarchical power and authority; that authority rests on the agreement of all to abide by it and Henry's violations have opened up a space for the people to disagree with both him and his method of assuming the throne. This disagreement finds its loudest voice among the Percy family, whose displeasure at Henry's behavior leads them to instigate a civil war. In a lovely bit of ironic augury, Hotspur encourages his father and uncle to participate in treason against Henry, to atone for their roles in Richard's overthrow and to protect their potentially besmirched reputations. He asks them:

> Shall it for shame be spoken in these days,
> Or fill up chronicles in time to come,
> That men of your nobility and power
> Did gage them both in an unjust behalf
> (As both of you, God pardon it! have done)
> To put down Richard, that sweet lovely rose,
> And plant this thorn, this canker, Bolingbroke? (I.3.170-176)

The rebellion begins, and Hotspur's transgression is evident in his speech as well as his actions. It is easy to see how a full-out treasonous rebellion is transgressive; Hotspur is in the middle of the storm, and his seriocomical wrath plays into his image as a carnivalesque parody. Worcester says of his nephew that "he hath the excuse of youth and heat of blood, / An adopted name of

privilege— / A hare-brained Hotspur, governed by a spleen" (V.2.17-19).

The transgressiveness of the insurgents is compounded by the hybrid nature of their group. Hotspur is to keep his Scottish prisoners, and Worcester contracts with the king of Scotland to have those troops fight in the uprising. Edmund Mortimer's Welsh marriage and position as Richard's successor made him a formidable enemy to Henry; his alliance with Glendower brought Welsh forces to the fray. This conjoining of powers that were often very much at odds leads to a somewhat monstrous (and very threatening) hybrid army, and suggests that the Percies were not the only ones who saw Henry's transgression as an open invitation to cross boundaries. Like the rebels themselves, the land is also hybridized, as the insurgents prematurely divide up their spoils, and Henry's kingdom is "gelded," "divided" and "transformed"; Hotspur even contemplates repositioning a river to ensure that his portion of the land is properly delineated (III.1.69-131). In the spirit of true transgression, this partitioning of the land cuts through established boundaries of ownership, yet, paradoxically, also completes those boundaries by reaffirming their current existence.[8] The civil war is similarly transgressive: it creates and subverts boundaries; in the process it reaffirms the strength of the boundaries that already existed. Nevertheless, this is all based on truant authority and the absence of a metanarrative; belief in an unchanging authority and a metanarrative are each required for actual transgression. This absence suggests that, in the world of the play, binaries are disrupted and boundaries are arbitrary. With no edge to challenge, there can be no transgression.

The scene structure of the play (echoing the land) is heterotopic. The play leaps from scenic location to location, mixing people, spaces, and perspectives—it is, itself, hybridized, and Hal is the link between the many worlds. In the tavern, Hal leads a life of carnivalesque abundance with Falstaff. Falstaff is widely recognized as Shakespeare's consummate incantation of the grotesque carnival body. Grossly fat, lazy, gluttonous and lustful, Falstaff happily inhabits at least five of the seven deadly sins.[9] Falstaff is a personification of Bakhtin's carnival laughter, which is

> A festive laughter…it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people…It is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants…This laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding.[10]

The audience laughs both *with* Falstaff and *at* him, much like Hal does. Hal's relationship with Falstaff is representative of "an inverted world, where the desired object must always be of lower status, where dirt triumphs over the family hierarchy, where 'the bottom' is the source of all delight."[11] Hal chooses Falstaff over his own aristocratic background, particularly his father. Juxtaposed against the cruel machinations of both the court and the rebel camp, the tavern scenes are a welcome diversion—a carnivalesque atmosphere of acceptance. Combined with acceptance, however, is mockery, creating yet another heterotopic and hybridized space within the play. Employing festive imagery, Hal is constantly describing Falstaff is as a piece of meat or food; he never misses an opportunity to describe the fat knight in grotesque and culinary terms, referring to him as "that trunk of humors, that bolting hutch of beastliness, that swoll'n parcel of dropsies, that huge bombard of sack, that stuffed cloakbag of guts, that roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly;" even when Hal presumes Falstaff is dead, he calls him a fat deer (II.4. 434-437, V.4.106). The prince's good-natured ribbing of his companion disguises an ambivalence in these scenes; the jokes are both amusing and disconcerting, the characters both warm and threatening—and none more so than the prince himself.

Hal's transgressive characteristics are in some ways the most vivid of the play, and in others the least; while the other characters are somewhat confined to their worlds and roles, Hal is the only fluid element that has a place among all the worlds. Bakhtin's theory of open-endedness—the idea that the body is not fixed, but rather is in a constant process of becoming—can be applied to the prince's body, which, since he is heir apparent, is becoming the king's.[12] Hal will be king someday; and he views his time with Falstaff and the other denizens of Eastcheap as a preparation, just another step in his development and progression toward the time he will rule. He is develops a heteroglossic language,[13] one that is represented by hybrid construction, and employs a tension between official and unofficial discourses within the national language. Hal sees the use in a king who can "drink with any tinker in his own language" (II.4.18). In *Henry IV, Part 2*, Warwick reminds the king that his son is acquiring this language, telling him that:

> The Prince but studies his companions
> Like a strange tongue, wherein, to gain the language,
> 'Tis needful that the most immodest word
> Be looked upon and learnt. (IV.4.68-71)

This learning is vital to Hal's becoming the king. The medieval

conception of the king's body as a "doubling," which encompasses both the physical body of the monarch as well as the symbolic body that represents structural stability, is at play in Hal. Aware of what his future holds, Hal is readying himself for kingship by imitating "the sun, / Who doth permit the base contagious clouds / To smother up his beauty from the world," so that he may emerge triumphantly when the time is right (I.2.190-192). Seemingly, Hal does this in order to legitimatize his (and, retrospectively, his father's) reign; becoming a

> Figure of authority that is at once distanced from the here and now by self-identification with mythological and legendary past, and at the same time fulfills and completes the here and now by revealing the underlying harmony of a continuous and durable social structure.[14]

Hal, through his prodigal performance and revolutionary transformation (which, he informs the audience in the second scene, he is already planning), links himself to the mythological past of the bible. Hal creates the durable social structure of which Bristol speaks, but his cunningly planned reformation generates the appearance that he is in fact *revealing*, rather than *creating* the structure. Hal's change masks his true transgression by making it seem like he was just going through a 'phase,' something akin to the rites of passage that Jenks describes as being "frightening, dangerous, and damaging but also predictable, expected, and routine." The phase is not transgressive because transgression is always "a step into the unknown and a step that is without precedent."[15] Through his plan Hal manipulates public opinion, presenting himself as an ideal king to follow Henry—one that will restore order to the world by reinstating the boundaries his father collapsed.

Once it is clear that Hal is not frequenting Eastcheap because he likes it, but rather because it is a necessary part of the metanarrative he's created for himself, he is no longer a participant in the carnivalesque laughter, but a usurper of it. Carnival laughter is for everyone, to be sure; but not, one would think, for those who only *pretend* to be part of 'everyone.' Hal is a consummate actor, and knows the best way to gain the love of his companions. When Falstaff kids that Hal has had dalliances with Mistress Quickly, Hal retorts:

> *Prince:* Why, what a pox have I to do with my hostess of the tavern?
>
> *Falstaff:* Well, thou hast called her to a reckoning many a time and oft.

Hal then reminds Falstaff what kind of a reckoning this was:

Prince: Did I ever call for thee to pay thy part?
Falstaff: No; I'll give thee thy due, thou hast paid there.
Prince: Yea, and elsewhere, so far as my coin would stretch; and where it would not, I have used my credit. (I.2.47-55)

In a clever inversion, Claude Peltrault points out the true nature of the prince's kindness. The prince "has not just paid everybody's part, he has played a part to everybody."[16] His manipulation extends to everyone in the play; his father thinks he's a waste and Hotspur refers to Hal as "The nimble-footed madcap Prince of Wales / ...that daffed the world aside / And bid it pass" (IV.1.95-97). Eventually, however, Hal fulfills his plan, defeating Hotspur and showing himself to be the rightful heir to the throne. Before he kills him, the prince warns Hotspur "think not, Percy, / To share with me in glory any more. / Two stars keep not heir motion in one sphere, / Nor can one England brook a double reign / Of Harry Percy and the Prince of Wales" (V.4.62-66). On the battlefield, the prince fulfilled the measure of his scenario, using his pretended transgression to prepare him for the kingship. Hal's full reformation is not finished until the end of *Henry IV, Part 2* when, upon becoming king, he casts Falstaff out of his life for good; however, Hal's performative utterance in Act 2 of Part 1 suggests that he had already exorcised his friend from his heart. During a bit of play-acting Falstaff implores Hal:

Falstaff: Old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry's company, banish not him thy Harry's company. Banish plump Jack and banish all the world!
Prince: I do, I will.

Hal's answer has a sense of finality to it, and reminds the audience of his manipulative intent. But even Hal's transgressions—his prodigality, his abandonment of the inhabitants of Eastcheap, his manipulations of language and image to suit his needs, his hybrid existence—are enabled by Henry's chaotic world. Hal has no intent of breaking any real boundaries; and his pseudo-transgressive manipulations have restored order to the world: Henry has solidified his power, the land has no new divisions, and the rebellion has been quelled.

Hotspur's death signifies Hal's entry into the royal arena. Hal's actions thus far have set him up as a dark horse, so he can emerge triumphant at last. His plan was an attempt to secure his legitimacy; a variation on the theme of Tudor kings and queens, whom Bristol

suggests "used the royal entry partly as a political technique to confirm their questionable legitimacy."[17] His was quite a royal entry; he had learned from his father that appearances are everything. Hal's outward appearance as one perfectly in control of his destiny may, however, be a chimera; his newly ordered and balanced kingdom

> May on closer inspection seem like radical instability tricked out as moral or aesthetic order; what appeared as clarity may seem now like a conjurer's trick concealing confusion in order to buy time and stave off the collapse of an illusion...what we took to be the "center" may be part of the remotest periphery."[18]

Hal's redefinition of boundaries may, in fact, be merely illusion that covers up a kingdom just as 'un-transgressable' as his father's. Particularly in the Lancastrian tetralogy, Shakespeare refuses to create seamless metanarratives that define the center and periphery, forcing a reevaluation of the sense of transgressiveness. True transgression requires something to subvert, differences to hybridize, and fixed boundaries to cross, and since the world Henry created is already in a state of chaotic flux, authentic transgression is made impossible—perhaps for generations.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part One*, ed. David Bevington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Text references are to act, scene, and line of this edition.

2. Michael Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre: Plebian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 70-71. Bristol further notes that the uncrowning of a clown king in carnival festivities was a "transgressive metaphor of [the] popular festive form" that was used to "interpret actual events. From where the common people stand, many of the episodes of high political life can be seen to decline inadvertently into self-travesty. The tragedy and violence of contingent historical events like the fall of a king are witnessed in the public square as grotesque and bloody self-parody." *Henry IV, Part 1* conflates the uncrowning of an actual king (Richard) with the uncrowning of a clown king (through its use of carnivalesque metaphor), blurring the boundary between carnivalesque play-acting and reality.

3. Claire McEachern, ed, Introduction, *Henry IV, Part One*, by William Shakespeare (Penguin Books, 2000), xxxi.

4. J. Jervis, *Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 4.

5. Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre,* 59-60. Authority must ground itself in an unchanging legitimacy sanctioned by mythological or religious (biblical) genealogy. Bristol suggests that this legitimacy allows the figure of authority to be "at once distanced from the here and now by self-identification with a mythological and

legendary past, and at the same time fulfills and completes the here and now by revealing the underlying harmony of a continuous and durable social structure."

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 198.

8. Chris Jenks, *Transgression*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 2. Jenks repeatedly emphasizes this paradox, insisting that "to transgress is to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe. But to transgress is also more than this, it is to announce and even laudate the commandment, the law or the convention. Transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation."

9. Lawrence E. Levin, "Hotspur, Falstaff, and the Emblem of Wrath in *1 Henry IV*." *Shakespeare Studies,* 10: 43-65: 44.

10. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11-12.

11. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 168.

12. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 26. The body "is not a closed, completed unit: it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits."

13. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (), 264. Hal "makes use of the internal stratification of language, of its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it."

14. Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre*, 62.

15. Jenks, *Transgression*, 42.

16. Claude Peltrault, "(Para-) Dramatic Inclusions in *1 Henry IV*: the Transgression of the Play, the Play of Transgression, Royalty and Theatricality," *The Show Within: Dramatic and Other Insets, English Renaissance Drama (1550-1642)* (Montpellier: Publications de Universite Paul-Valery, 1990), 168.

17. Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre*, 61.

18. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 47, 173.