



Henry IV, Part I (Folger Shakespeare Library)

William Shakespeare

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Family relationships are at the center of *Henry IV, Part I*. King Henry IV and Prince Hal form one major father-son pair, with Henry in despair because Hal lives a dissolute life. The father-son pair of Hotspur (Lord Henry Percy) and his father, the Earl of Northumberland, is in seeming contrast; the king envies Northumberland “his Harry,” wishing he could claim the gallant Hotspur as his own. Meanwhile, Hal has entered into a quasi-father-son relationship with a disreputable but amusing knight, Sir John Falstaff.

Another strand of action centers on still more family relationships. Hotspur’s stand against Henry focuses on Hotspur’s brother-in-law, Mortimer. Mortimer, who fought against the Welsh magician Owen Glendower, was defeated and captured and has married Glendower’s daughter. King Henry pronounces Mortimer a traitor whom he will not ransom. Hotspur, in declaring war on Henry, sees himself as fighting for Mortimer, his wife’s brother.

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Essay by Alexander Leggatt

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