

English 10

Summaries of Shakespeare's History Plays Related to *Henry V*

Richard II

The play opens with a dispute between Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford, and Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk. Bolingbroke has accused Mowbray of treason, and the two of them exchange insults in the presence of King Richard. After attempts to reconcile them fail, Richard orders them to take part in a traditional chivalric trial by combat. On the field of combat, the king changes his mind and banishes the two men — Bolingbroke for ten years (commuted to six) and Mowbray for life. Then the king makes plans to leave for the wars in Ireland.

Before departing, Richard visits the ailing father of Bolingbroke, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. Gaunt warns Richard with his dying words that he is flirting with danger and doing great harm to the country by allowing himself to be influenced by his sycophantic courtiers. When the old man dies, Richard takes possession of all of Gaunt's wealth and sets out for Ireland.

Unhappy with Richard's incompetence as a ruler and worried by his seizure of the Duke of Lancaster's wealth, a number of nobles rally support for Henry Bolingbroke. When Bolingbroke and his army decide to return from exile in France, the rebel forces prepare to confront Richard on his return from Ireland.

The rebel noblemen force the king to abdicate, and Bolingbroke is crowned as Henry IV. Richard is imprisoned in Pomfret Castle, where he faces his death alone, philosophically contemplating the meaning of his fall from grandeur. Sir Pierce of Exton decides solely on his own to execute the deposed king; as a result, he is banished by King Henry. The play ends with Henry IV planning a penitential pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Henry IV, Part I

When the play opens, King Henry has called the Percies — Northumberland, Worcester, and Hotspur — to the palace. He demands to know why the ranking Scottish prisoners taken by Hotspur have not been turned over to him. The Percies are furious with Henry's seeming arrogance; they deeply resent the fact that this man whom they helped to the throne should demand absolute obedience from them. Thus, they begin to plot their revolt.

Meanwhile, in the comic subplot, Prince Hal and his boon companions make plans to rob a group of travelers in order to play a practical joke on their beloved, blustering cohort, Sir John Falstaff. The joke almost backfires, but Falstaff manages to barely escape, and back at the tavern, he emerges triumphantly as the comic hero of the escapade. The merrymaking is interrupted, however, when Prince Hal is called back to court on urgent business.

Hotspur's threats are serious; meeting with Worcester, Mortimer, and Glendower at the residence of the Archdeacon in North Wales, the men plan a campaign against the royal forces; afterward, they plan to divide England into three parts. Momentarily, Hotspur is dejected that he cannot count on Northumberland's troops, but he reasons that perhaps the populace will be even more impressed when they realize that Hotspur accomplished his *coup* without Northumberland's help.

When he learns that Henry's royal army has set forth for battle, Hotspur is again worried — this time about the news that Prince Hal accompanies his father's troops as second in command. But deciding that his victory will seem even more miraculous if he can dispose of Hal personally, Hotspur vows to kill Hal himself, and his ardor and impetuosity is rekindled.

When the plot returns to the comic characters, Falstaff is arrayed as a military commander, leading a group of pitiful, physically unfit "soldiers" who vow they will fight for England. Both Prince Hal and Westmoreland remark on the company's unfitness, but they decide to let them continue to march. In the meantime, the Archbishop of York is alarmed to learn of the Percies' plot and about the fact that neither Mortimer nor Northumberland will be accompanying Hotspur's men; he fears reprisal from King Henry if Hotspur is defeated.

In parley at the king's camp at Shrewsbury with two of Hotspur's allies, Worcester and Vernon, Prince Hal speaks words of praise for Hotspur, modestly concedes that he himself has been derelict, and offers to fight his rival in single combat, in place of an all-out battle between the two opposing forces. The two rebel leaders depart, ostensibly to report to Hotspur what has been said by the king and the prince.

Hotspur impatiently decides to engage in total combat. During the course of the battle, most of Falstaff's men are killed; Hal heroically rescues his father from the sword of Douglas, a Scottish earl; and he slays his rival, Hotspur. Worcester and Vernon are captured and later put to death, but Douglas is released by a generous Prince Hal. The rebel forces have been badly defeated, and King Henry sends another of his sons, John of Lancaster, to the North, where John will oppose

Northumberland and Archbishop Scroop; Henry himself will leave with Prince Hal to fight the forces led by Glendower and Mortimer.

Henry IV, Part II

When Part I closed, Henry IV was dispatching his son John of Lancaster to the north to fight Northumberland and Archbishop Scroop; this play now opens with Northumberland receiving conflicting news about the results of the Battle of Shrewsbury. When he hears of the defeat and death of his son Hotspur, he flees to Scotland to await further developments. Meanwhile, Falstaff becomes involved with Mistress Quickly, and he uses his royal commission to avoid being imprisoned for debt. He continues his riotous feasting and drinking and joking with Prince Hal. Prince Hal, however, while tolerating the unrestrained behavior of Falstaff, nevertheless shows some concern for his royal father and for the affairs of the realm. Since the prince has already shown his valor and honor at the Battle of Shrewsbury, we are now more receptive to his comic behavior with Falstaff, as he once more endorses the precept that life should have its lighter moments — as we will see in *Henry V* when King Henry plays a practical joke on Williams, a common soldier.

Meanwhile, Prince John moves against the rebel forces and is able to subdue them and arrest the leaders for high treason. This news, however, does not gladden the dying King Henry IV because his main concern is with the conduct of Prince Hal, who at this moment is dining with Poins and other lowly associates. Henry ponders the fate of England when Prince Hal becomes king, and he hopes, above all, for unity among his sons. Prince Hal is defended by the Earl of Warwick, who argues that the prince is schooling himself to understand even the lowliest subject, and he predicts that Prince Hal will turn "past evils to advantage."

Prince Hal enters at this point and learns that his father is gravely ill. Everyone leaves except the heir-apparent, who says that he will keep watch at his father's bedside. Observing his father's crown, he philosophizes about it as a symbol of care and anxiety. Noticing his father in a stupor, he concludes that he is dead, and he lifts the crown and places it on his head, reflecting still further about the responsibilities that the crown encompasses. After he leaves the room, the king awakens, sees the crown on his son's head, and immediately assumes that Prince Hal is anxious to see him dead. In a touching speech, he speaks to Prince Hal and reproves him for being impatient to wear the crown; he accuses the prince of having no love for his father and laments that the prince's years of unruly behavior have culminated in such a conclusion.

Prince Hal convincingly asserts his love and respect for his father; he says that he wishes him to live for a long time yet. Obviously affected by Prince Hal's love for him, the king admits that he came to the throne by "bypaths and crooked ways," and he implores God to forgive him for deposing an anointed ruler (Richard II). Prince Hal promises that he will defend the crown against all the world.

For some time, everyone has expected total misrule and chaos when Prince Hal would finally become King Henry V. Especially concerned has been the Lord Chief Justice of England, who had, only a short time before, banished Falstaff and, upon the late king's order, briefly imprisoned the prince. Contrary to all expectations, Henry V approves of all of the actions of the Lord Chief Justice and bids him to continue to serve the crown in his present capacity. The new king then assures his brothers that his life of wild living ended with his father's death, and he is now a completely reformed prince. To the surprise of all present, the king begins to personify immense magnanimity and dedication to duty. It is to be recalled from the very beginning of the two-part chronicle history that Shakespeare has prepared the way for this important order and justice; at last, in *Henry V*, Henry becomes the ideal Christian ruler.

With the ascension of Prince Hal to the throne, Falstaff immediately envisions all types of grand rewards for himself, and he also expects high honors for Hal's other comrades from the tavern. Expecting to reap extravagant benefits, Falstaff immediately leaves for the coronation. When Falstaff approaches the king, however, Henry orders the Lord Chief Justice to reprove the old fellow. Falstaff is incredulous and addresses Henry directly, calling "My King! My Jove! I speak to thee, my heart!" In chilling words, Henry answers, "I know thee not, old man." He then lectures Falstaff about his lifestyle, admonishing him to reform, and if amends are made, then Falstaff can return by slow degrees to the king's favor.

Everyone is amazed, and all approve of Henry's actions. At the close of the play, we learn that Henry has called for the assembly of Parliament and that he will soon lead an invasion into France to claim it for England, as we will see in the first act of *Henry V*.