

Literature Insights
General Editor: Charles Moseley

William Shakespeare: Henry IV Parts 1 & 2

C. W. R. D. Moseley

*‘Falstaff, this aged
whoremaster and
drunkard, this
gluttonous coward,
thief, extortioner
and murderer...’*

Publication Data

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Published in 2007 by *Humanities-Ebooks.co.uk*
Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

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ISBN 978-1-84760-040-0

William Shakespeare:
Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2

C. W. R. D. Moseley

A Note on the Author

Dr Moseley is Fellow and Tutor of Hughes Hall, Cambridge, and Director of Studies in English for that College and for St Edmund's College. He teaches Classical, mediaeval and Renaissance literature in the English Faculty of the University of Cambridge, and has written many books and articles, not all in his specialist fields. He has lectured and taught frequently in the United States and Europe. He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London and of the English Association. A member of the Society for Nautical Research, he has travelled widely in the Arctic, and is a member of the Arctic Club.

In this series, of which he is General Editor, he has so far written Insights on Shakespeare's *Richard III*, and *The Tempest*, as well as a companion to our Shakespeare Insights entitled *English Renaissance Drama: a Very Brief Introduction to Theatre and Theatres in Shakespeare's Time*, which he hopes you will enjoy and find useful.

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Introduction

Elizabethans expected plays to amuse and divert them. If they did not, their authors and the companies they worked for did not make a living in a very cut-throat market. In the new permanent commercial theatres of the later Elizabethan period, attitudes to drama and expectations of its [conventions](#) had been formed by centuries of religious and ritual drama – the Mystery and Morality plays. And although by definition what we see on the stage is not ‘the real thing’, but a representation, neither that nor its amusement value prevents theatre being a highly self-conscious and serious intellectual pursuit, recognized as such by audiences and playwrights, actors and critics. The profundity of Shakespeare’s concerns and their analysis in his plays may be unusual in degree, but those concerns are shared by his fellow-dramatists.

This book deals with only one (large, two-part) play,¹ but that play is very much part not only of one man’s work with a particular group of actors, but also of a general theatrical culture which was one of the only two mass media of the period, to which everyone, more or less, went and to which nobody could not have an attitude. (The other was sermon.) I therefore RECOMMEND STRONGLY THAT THIS BOOK BE READ IN CONJUNCTION with my *English Renaissance Drama: a Very Brief Introduction to Theatre and Theatres in Shakespeare’s Time* (hereafter *Very Brief Intro.*) in this series. What follows is based in some degree on the assumption that it will be.

Those familiar with what we know about Shakespeare the man and the background of Elizabethan culture can skip Chapters 1 and 2 and go straight to the discussion of the play, always bearing in mind the close connection in that society between theatre and politics: theatre provided one of the few spaces where the undiscussable could be discussed through a fable and a large number of people at once could in the ritual space of the theatre face the problems of the real world transmuted into fiction. No wonder the authorities were so nervous of the theatres, and keen at the same time to use to their own purposes. The audience’s interest in history at all suggests not

¹ There was quite a fashion in the 1590s for two or even three part plays, performed (so it seems) on consecutive afternoons. The commercial advantage was that the audience came twice, paying each time. There were, as we shall see, artistic bonuses too.

mere curiosity about the past—which could be much more easily satisfied than by a play—but rather an attempt to understand the nature of the political and moral issues that beset them in their own time by, so to speak, isolating them in the test-tube of history. This was an age, after all, when the relationship between the ruled and the ruler was of passionate and overwhelming interest—to the point where death itself was not too high a stake; when the obligations of the one to the many (and vice versa) were problems not merely of morality but of politics too; when a sense of distinctive nationhood was fostered by insecurity at home and trouble abroad; when, finally, men and women were hesitantly but to at least some extent consciously mapping out the sort of society they felt to be just and to strike the right balance between the things that are of Caesar and those that are God's. The old image of the body politic acquires a new force; it is made up of its many members, but how are those members to agree together in a common purpose? The body politic's distempers in the past may suggest a better understanding for those in the present.

Shakespeare's vision of English history is no unthinking acceptance of any Panglossian myth that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds as long as a Tudor finally gets the throne. He is very aware that Tudors too are fallen beings who judge wrongly and destroy things of value: the dignity he gives Wolsey in his fall and the heroic patience and pathos he gives Queen Catherine in *Henry VIII* make that clear, and his endorsement of Henry Tudor at the end of *Richard III* looks pretty perfunctory. Even his political victors and heroes are flawed. He shows a Bolingbroke who never knows peace, mental or political, after Richard II's death; the opposition to him would literally dismember the body of England to satisfy their own desire for power; his son Hal is aware almost to despair of the huge moral burden the king must bear as a ruler as well as of his inherited burden of guilt and injustice. Shakespeare is exploring, it seems, the very nature of rule and of political relationships in the body politic. One of the greatly interesting aspects of the plays dealing with historical material lies in the way that material opens up the issues of order and harmony in a state, which are all very well when outlined theoretically—as they are by Ulysses, whose speech I quote below. But, alas, the theory rarely accords with the observed practices of men.

As will be clear, I discuss this play from the perspective of its place in a sequence. It would therefore be wise for readers of this book to know *Richard II* and *Henry V*, as I shall have to refer to them frequently.