

Henry IV, Part One

INTRODUCTION

THE play described in the 1623 Folio as *The First Part of Henry the Fourth* had been entered on the Stationers' Register on 25 February 1598 as *The History of Henry the Fourth*, and that is the title of the first surviving edition, of the same year. An earlier edition, doubtless also printed in 1598, is known only from a single, eight-page fragment. Five more editions appeared before the Folio.

The printing of at least two editions within a few months, and the fact that one of them was read almost out of existence, reflect a matter of exceptional topical interest. The earliest title-page advertises the play's portrayal of 'the humorous conceits of Sir John Falstaff'; but when it was first acted, probably in 1596, this character bore the name of his historical counterpart, the Protestant martyr Sir John Oldcastle. Shakespeare changed his surname as the result of protests from Oldcastle's descendants, the influential Cobham family, one of whom—William Brooke, 7th Lord Cobham—was Elizabeth I's Lord Chamberlain from August 1596 till he died on 5 March 1597. Our edition restores Sir John's original surname for the first time in printed texts (though there is reason to believe that even after 1596 the name 'Oldcastle' was sometimes used on the stage), and also restores Russell and Harvey, names Shakespeare was probably obliged to alter to Bardolph and Peto.

Shakespeare had already shown Henry IV's rise to power, and his troubled state of mind on achieving power, in *Richard II*; that play also shows Henry's dissatisfaction with his wayward son, Prince Harry, later Henry V. 1 *Henry IV* continues the story, but in a very different dramatic style. A play called *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, entered in the Stationers' Register in 1594, was published anonymously, in a debased and shortened text, in 1598. This text—which also features Oldcastle as a reprobate—gives a sketchy version of the events portrayed in 1 and 2 *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. Shakespeare must have known the original play, but in the absence of a full text we cannot tell how much he depended on it.

The surviving version contains nothing about the rebellions against Henry IV, for which Shakespeare seems to have gone to Holinshed's, and perhaps other, *Chronicles*; he draws also on Samuel Daniel's poem *The First Four Books of the Civil Wars* (1595).

1 *Henry IV* is the first of Shakespeare's history plays to make extensive use of the techniques of comedy. On a national level, the play shows the continuing problems of Henry Bolingbroke, insecure in his hold on the throne, and the victim of rebellions led by Worcester, Hotspur (Harry Percy), and Glyndwr. These scenes are counterpointed by others, written mainly in prose, which, in the manner of a comic sub-plot, provide humorous diversion while also reflecting and extending the concerns of the main plot. Henry suffers not only public insurrection but the personal rebellion of Prince Harry, in his unprincely exploits with the reprobate old knight, Falstaff. Sir John has become Shakespeare's most famous comic character, but Shakespeare shows that the Prince's treatment of him as a surrogate father who must eventually be abandoned has an intensely serious side.