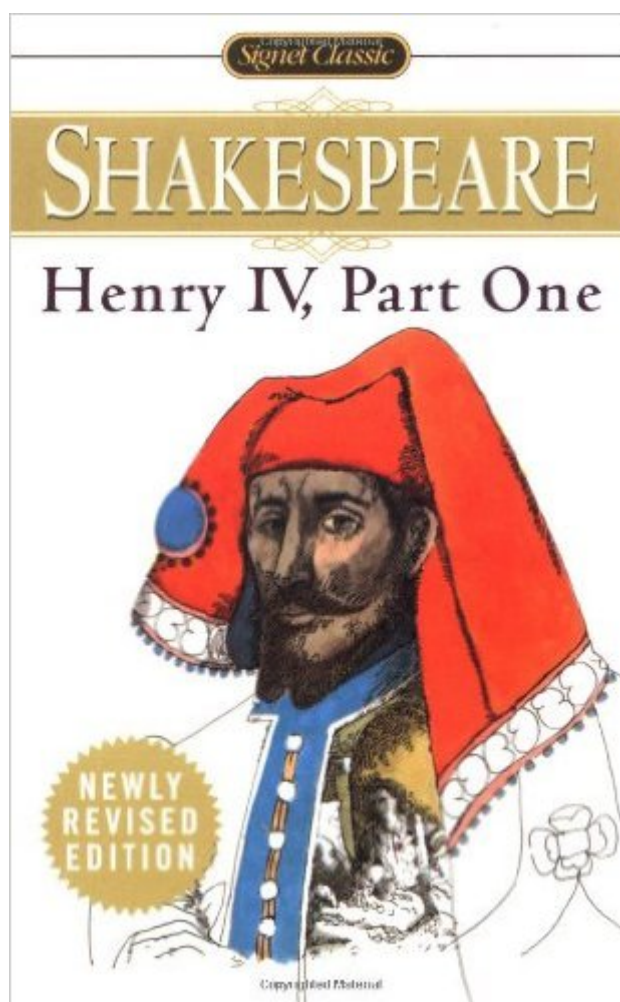


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Henry IV, Part 1 (Signet Classics)



Synopsis

This edition of Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part 1 uses a variety of approaches to Shakespeare, including historical and cultural studies approaches. Shakespeare's text is accompanied by an intriguing collection of thematically arranged historical and cultural documents and illustrations designed to give a firsthand knowledge of the contexts out of which Henry IV, Part 1 emerged. Hodgdon's intelligent and engaging introductions to the play and to the documents (most of which are presented in modern spelling and with annotations) offer a richly textured understanding of Elizabethan culture and Shakespeare's work within that culture.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The lengthy title for the 1598 printing was "The History of Henrie the Fourth, With the Battell at Shrewsburie, between the King and Lord Henry Percy, surnamed Henrie Hotspur of the North, with the humorous conceits of Sir John Falstaffe". Surprisingly, Hal, Prince of Wales, (later Henry V) was not even mentioned in this verbose title although many would consider him to be the central character. This play is clearly the dramatization of a struggle for a kingdom, but it is equally the story of Hal's wild and reckless youthful adventures with Falstaff and other disreputable companions. Shakespeare did not write his plays about English kings in chronological order, but these plays do have a historical unity. It is helpful (but not essential) to read the tetralogy Richard II, Henry IV Part 1 and 2, and Henry V in chronological order. Whatever route you take, I highly recommend buying a companion copy of Peter Saccio's "Shakespeare's English Kings", an engaging look at how Shakespeare revised history to achieve dramatic effect. A wide selection of

Henry IV editions are available, including older editions in used bookstores. I am familiar with a few and have personal favorites: The New Folger Library Shakespeare is my first choice among the inexpensive editions of Henry IV. "New" replaces the prior version in use for 35 years. It uses "facing page" format with scene summaries, explanations for rare and archaic words and expressions, and Elizabethan drawings located on the left page; the Henry IV text is on the right. I particularly liked the section on "Reading Shakespeare's Language in Henry IV" and Alexander Legget's literary analysis (save this until you have read the play). The fascinating article "Historical Background: Sir John Falstaff and Sir John Oldcastle" adds a religious dimension to the play that I had not previously noted. The Bedford Shakespeare Series provides an excellent study text (edited by Barbara Hodgdon) titled "The First Part of King Henry the Fourth". It is a little more expensive, is about 400 pages, and provides a broad range of source and context documentation. It would be excellent for an upper level course in Shakespeare. The context documentation is fascinating and informative; it ranges from the Holinshed Chronicles to Elizabethan writing on Civic Order to detailed cultural studies of London's diverse populous. Other chapters address the OldCastle controversy and the "Education of a Prince". I also like the Norton Critical edition (edited by James Sanderson), "Henry the Fourth, Part 1", particularly for its extensive collection of literary criticism. The essays are divided into two parts: 1) the theme, characters, structure, and style of the play and 2) a wide variety of interpretation directed toward that roguish character, Sir John Falstaff.

When rating Shakespeare, I am comparing it to other Shakespeare. Otherwise, the consistent "5 stars" wouldn't tell you much. So when I rate this book five stars, I'm saying it's one of the best of the best. As a matter of fact, it isn't unusual for Shakespeare's "histories" to be more interesting to the modern reader than either his comedies or his tragedies; they fit the modern style that doesn't insist that comedies must have everything work out well in the end, or that tragedies must be deadly serious with everyone dying at the end, as was the convention in Shakespeare's time. Thus, this book has a serious plot, real drama, and blood and destruction, yet still has many extremely funny scenes. And as Shakespearean plays go, it's a fairly easy read, although in places the footnotes are still necessary. The only caveat I will make is that one needs to remember not to consider Shakespeare's histories particularly historical; they have about as much historical accuracy as the Disney version of Pocahontas. Treat them as excellent stories based (very) loosely on history, and you'll do fine. It's a real shame that the language has changed so much since Shakespeare was writing that his plays are no longer accessible to the masses, because that's who Shakespeare was writing for. Granted, there is enough seriousness to satisfy the intelligentsia, but there is

generally enough action and bawdy humor to satisfy any connouisseur of modern hit movies, if only they could understand it, and this book is no exception. Unfortunately, once you change the language, it's no longer Shakespeare, until and unless the rewriter can be found who has as much genius for the modern language as Shakespeare had for his own. I don't think I'll hold my breath waiting.

Shakespeare's "Henry IV Part I" shows King Henry IV dealing with complex problems: England is in the midst of civil unrest, as the Percy family, angered by their treatment after unwittingly helping Henry IV ascend to the throne, threatens to depose the monarch. At home, Henry IV is despairing over the development of his son, Henry, Prince of Wales, heir to the throne. Prince Henry consorts with thieves, rogues, and scoundrels - his scandalous personal relationships seem to threaten the King's peace of mind more than the state of his kingdom. Aside from these larger concerns that frame the play, "Henry IV Part I" deals more with Prince Henry than it does with the monarch of the title. Throughout the play, Prince Henry is seen more amongst the rabble commoners than attending to matters of state. He is guided in his licentiousness by the enormously funny (pun intended) Sir John Falstaff, whose schemes and drunkenness are more innocent and endearing in Part I than they become in Part II. Falstaff's reckless and conceited behaviour casts a shadow over the entire play, symbolic as it is of Prince Henry's moral dilemma and of the precarious state of the nation. Falstaff instantly calls to mind Kenneth Grahame's magnificent Mr. Toad from "The Wind in the Willows," and is Toad's direct literary forefather. Falstaff is the most interesting and dynamic figure in "Henry IV Part I" and certainly the most memorable character in the play. Prince Henry discovers that his responsibilities outweigh his fondness for Spanish wine, and is called to lead the King's army against that of the arrogant 'Hotspur' Percy, himself a rising political force. Their confrontation, brilliantly scripted and enacted, is central to Shakespeare's entire Lancaster-York saga, and should be read closely and with special attention. Of the two parts of "Henry IV," Part I is by far the best and most flawlessly executed. The King's problems provide an adequate backdrop for the development of Prince Henry; 'Hotspur' is an excellent antagonist (with the whole Percy family offering a great contrast with that of the King); and Falstaff performs his role without dominating the play, as he tends to in Part II. Shakespeare does not need my praise or endorsement, but his "Henry IV Part I" blows me away. It is absolutely fantastic.

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