
THE HOTSPUR OF THE NORTH

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'I never heard the old Song of Persie & Douglas, that I found not my heart moved more than with a Trumpet,' wrote Sir Philip Sidney in his *APOLOGIE FOR POETRIE*, some time in 1580; a good seventeen years, that is, before the appearance of *HENRY IV Part 1*. He was referring to the border ballad most commonly known in its English version as 'Chevy Chase'. This recounts in a spirited fashion the events leading to the battle of Otterburn, one of the perennial savage engagements of Scot and Englishman, with the marcher lords of Douglas and Percy taking it in turns to raid or harass the age-old enemy across the debatable lands in between. The ballad is a fine example of its kind, presenting in simple, starkly heroic terms the affray which culminates in the death of both James of Douglas and of 'Earl' Percy, with a grim coda assuring all that King Henry IV later avenged his slain captain at 'Humble-down'.

Rousing stuff though it is, the 'old Song' garbles historical fact beyond easy recognition. The Douglas was indeed killed at Otterburn, but Percy — more familiarly known by his nickname of Hotspur 'for his often pricking' — survived the battle, though he never lived to inherit his father's Earldom of Northumberland.

He was in fact taken prisoner by the thrifty Scots who subsequently demanded an outrageous ransom for his release. This was duly paid by his appreciative sovereign — still Richard II since this was in 1388 — and he was later his own avenger at Holmedon, or Homildon, where he had the satisfaction of capturing another Douglas, Archibald the fourth Earl, nicknamed by his own disgruntled countrymen 'the Tyneman' (the Loser). Certainly the Scot was consistently defeated by the English on his own native border, at Shrewsbury, and often later in France where, created Duke of Touraine and a Peer of that troubled realm, he was eventually to perish — in battle, needless to say. We need not quarrel with Shakespeare's lightly-drawn sketch of him which stresses, perhaps, a certain haplessness.

It was not with the historicity of the ballad that Sidney was concerned, however, so much as with its style and sentiment. Even to so refined a Renaissance courtier and critic, the rude stanzas made a powerful appeal. One of the most gifted men in an age spendthrift with talent, a lyrical poet of rare exquisiteness, a humanist and scholar second to none, and perhaps the last exemplar of the old chivalrous soldier-ship of a vanished era, Sidney was

basic Englishman enough to respond to the simpler values and cruder metrics of the ballad form. And if an aristocrat notoriously fastidious in his tastes could be moved, the commonalty of England were stirred to their very souls. Balladry, whether of the older and sterner sort or belonging to the more topical variety, satisfied a need in the public at large nowadays catered for by the entire range of fiction, printed or projected, or variously broadcast, and even supplied the place now filled by music from the austerities of Bach to the vast insensate yammering of the Top Twenty and of Pop Music generally. In consequence, popular heroes fired the imagination: Robin Hood, Edom O'Gordon and — by no means least — Hotspur had become part of the national consciousness.

Shakespeare knew well enough what rich source of interest he was tapping when, publishing his play in 1598, he titled it, '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 Iohn Falstaffe...' As a drawer of crowds, the name of Hotspur was invaluable to an unknown play. Once the crowds had come and seen it, very likely the attraction may have shifted to Falstaff, in his present form created by Shakespeare out of the whole cloth. Certainly it was for more of the fat rogue that the groundlings came to clamour; and even, it was said, the Queen's Grace herself. Though they share the credits in the

title, their creator takes good care not to have the two meet in life: one or the other would have been deflated. With Percy dead, there is a kind of grim relish in having his carcass carted off the stage, just so much 'noble luggage' on Falstaff's well-padded shoulders: the most rashly gallant and the most tardily recreant of knights in one staggering conjunction.

When it came to the distortion of historical event, Shakespeare could be as ruthless as any balladeer. His Harry Hotspur is certainly not history's, even insofar as the character of the original may be assessed from scanty evidence. The chief divergence, however, is in the chronology. Sir Henry Percy had been born in 1364; he was consequently within a few months of his fortieth birthday at the time of his death at Shrewsbury. He was thus three years older than the Bolingbroke he had helped to make king in 1399. A famous jousting, a hard-bitten soldier of considerable experience, having fought the French and the Welsh as well as his marauding neighbours the Scots, he had often displayed that headlong impetuosity that had won him his name; but he had shown too that he could be patient and even wary when, as guardian of the thirteen-year-old Prince Henry, commanding under his ward's official banner the King's forces along the Welsh border, he had managed to contain the guerilla warfare of Glyndwr. (The prince seems to have held him in some affection though it is not recorded that he cared for Worcester,

also for a while his guardian when Hotspur had resigned his charge). Another point where Shakespeare alters his sources is that he has the King summon the Percys to Windsor to justify their recalcitrance. It had been the quarrelsome clan who had indignantly sought out Bolingbroke to dispute his right to the Scottish prisoners taken at Homildon. In a stormy interview, they so far provoked Henry's temper as to have him draw his sword on them, a gross breach of manners; and Hotspur stalked out with the ominous promise: 'Not here, but in the field!' Most important of all, undoubtedly, it was not the sixteen-year-old prince who killed his former mentor. Young Henry indeed had very narrowly escaped being seized in his headquarters at Chester Castle; it was only his father's energetic drive north and west which prevented this, bringing him there just in time to forestall the rebel forces. In the battle that followed, the prince, leading his men uphill against deadly archery, performed very creditably throughout a long and hard-fought afternoon and evening, refusing to 'void the field' in spite of a wound in the face. It was in the face too that Hotspur was fatally wounded: he had imprudently raised the visor of his bascinet to mop his brow, streaming with sweat after prolonged and bloody exertions in the July sunshine. Some anonymous royalist seized his opportunity. Exit Percy.

Filtered through the successive screens of biased contemporary mention, shocked condemnation,

later re-assessment according to an alien scheme of political and politico-philosophical prejudices, further distorted by simplistic moralising and lip-service paid to the Tudor myth of kingship, what survived of the original Hotspur and his vicissitude had in turn to be submitted by Shakespeare to the exigencies of plot and theme. As always, these called for much shuffling of time, event and character. Of the last two, some might be given greater prominence, others yet, reduced. Their order and relationship too might be altered, sometimes drastically. It is clear enough, for instance, why the age of Hotspur should be more than halved, making him coeval with young Hal; even if Shakespeare was not blindly following an error in one of his sources, it fitted in very well with his strategy. The two Harrys, fated to be rivals in the matter of honour, are linked in age as in name by a kind of starter's handicap which makes for a fairer race. The contrast between the two at the opening of the play, laying careful stress on the excellence and honour of the one and on the 'riot and dishonour' staining the other, merely enhances the similarity by way of confrontation; more properly, it underlines the elements in common in order to bring out the diametrical opposition of character and disposition. It very soon emerges that Hotspur, wilful and riotous to the point of revolt, lacks even basic self-control, while Hal shows a chill detachment from the unworthy companions who are believed to be lead-

ing him astray which argues a strong self-possession. Hotspur's concept of honour, if it comes to that, is an essentially selfish, even a childish one. As parodied by Hal, it appears to involve the slaughter of a few dozen Scots before breakfast by way of appetiser, then rather more of the same later. This is burlesque, clearly. Yet even by his own declaration, he will have no 'corrival' in his honour, no 'half-faced fellowship'; he must have it all. One can perhaps see him as the prototype, *mutatis mutandis*, of the mindless athlete eternally jogging in a grubby track suit and plimsoles, impatient of anything that distracts him from his single-minded slog. Single-minded Hotspur unquestionably is; obsessed almost to the point of monomania with alarms and excursions. It is an absorption that incapacitates him from understanding, and far more from appreciating, anyone with interests, tastes, perceptions and aspirations other than his own. His reaction to all such is uniform: a gush of swingeing sarcasms and mocking mimicry, an overkill of contempt and scorn. Whether it is the king's emissary at Holmedon or the king himself at Windsor; whether the reluctant conspirator writing to him at Warkworth, or Glendower intoning diabolical roll-calls at Bangor; a prim confectioner's wife or a perjured king — all are guyed with vigour and relish. It is the least likeable, though not the least amusing, side of his impetuosity. The outspokenness here is not honesty but intolerance, an intolerance stemming from his

innate inability to consider, let alone to show consideration for, other people. At best it is rudeness; and it is for rudeness that Mortimer mildly, and Worcester roundly, berate him. His uncle's summing-up of this aspect of his character is as good as we have any right to expect. Culpable obstinacy, offensive insensitivity to the feelings of others, a total unamenability to persuasion — all these Hotspur shows time and again; he is moreover headstrong, opinionated, self-centred and self-willed, disdainful and petulant: qualities calculated to lose him friends and alienate allies and followers. At a time, and in a social class, which prized courtesy quite as much as prowess, such failings could overshadow even the most dazzling accomplishments. The wonder is that in Hotspur they do not. He remains a popular figure, with charisma enough to draw to his banner a following other than the malcontents, criminals and riffraff who generally form the stuff of rebellion. A byword for chivalry, a spectacularly successful war-captain, and possessed of enormous charm and appeal, he becomes an indispensable asset to Worcester's design; yet these virtues are the obverse side of the coin. Each is the gracious positive aspect of a disturbingly negative impulse. And before all is done, the negatives have doomed the enterprise, and Worcester too. The pattern is unmistakable.

In point of fact, Shakespeare had in some sort used his pattern before, and with an effect not unlike that

obtained in Greek tragedy. No personage could be less like the volatile Percy than the somewhat stodgily virtuous Brutus in JULIUS CAESAR. Nevertheless, in both plays a similar sequence is traceable: a man of considerable worth and prestige is inveigled into, and eventually induced to lead, an already existing conspiracy aimed at the chief authority in their respective states. In each case, this ruler has seized power unconstitutionally, by military invasion, and is now exercising it in a manner which the conspirators at least consider tyrannous and intolerable. In each case, too, the man is drawn in by a close relative, by blood or marriage, a man older, more experienced and far wiler: a Worcester or a Cassius. Manipulated by this slightly sinister figure, the naive victims, neither very intelligent but chosen for their popular appeal and credit with the masses, lend themselves to proceedings the consequences of which they only partly grasp; very soon however they take over the moral leadership and, by their short-sightedness and unwisdom, endanger and ultimately ruin the cause they have taken up. Whether in general policy or in eve-of-battle strategy, both overrule their wiser companions, and both in consequence involve their armies in a battle which they lose. Both perish in the course of that battle, directly or indirectly at the hands of a man whom they had earlier dismissed as of no consequence: a Hal or an Antony. And finally it is this 'unthought of' victor, emerging with glory in battle after

a former career more notable for self-indulgence and loose-living than for responsible behaviour, who generously eulogises the dead man, Hotspur or Brutus. The mixed elements in the life of either in no way detract from the sense of tragic grandeur and pity in their deaths. The parallel cannot be extended without strain, nor is it necessary that it should be; but it forms a useful and not too obtrusive pattern. Nor can Shakespeare be accused of repeating himself, for the dissimilarities are far greater than the above suggests: for one thing, Brutus is the protagonist of his play, Hotspur merely a dynamic subsidiary in his. As affording some insight into Shakespeare's use of dramatic structures, it is not without interest.

What Hotspur has in common with that other vital subsidiary figure, the gross knight peccant, Sir John (in the symbology of the theme, that is), may be summed up in one word already used: Riot. That form of Riot particularly which may properly be called Excess. At its simplest we have an opposed polarity: an excess of energy, blindly directed, an excessive sense of 'honour', military, personal and familial on the one side; on the other, an excess of lethargy, moral every bit as much as physical, an excessive disregard for values of conduct and morality, even an excessive cynicism about the vocation of soldiership in general and the validity of 'honour' in particular. Once more, the similarity is enhanced by the very opposition, and *vice versa*. Hotspur's excesses — if the play on the word may be allowed to

pass — do not take him to disreputable taverns or even to bawdy-houses, nor does his superfluous energy need to expend itself in irresponsible scapegrace pranks — not so long as the supply of Scots holds good, keeping him pleasantly exercised. Nor would his sense of caste in any case have permitted him to scramble in back alleys. He has old-fashioned notions of what belongs to his rank — even his spirited young wife must not swear with the prissy ‘refeenment’ of a middle-class housewife with social pretensions. The honour of his house, particularly, comes very high with him. It is, in some sort, an extension of himself. Assuredly, no jumped-up hypocritical forsworn Bolingbroke is going to get away with slighting the Percys, let alone threatening them. Even a relation by marriage like Mortimer is adopted into the magic circle. He must be immediately and unquestioningly ransomed, at state expense, no matter the circumstances of his capture and his later sojourn with Glendower, now become his father-in-law. And an affronted Hotspur must have revenge, preferably at once, though he should risk his life in the process. What form this revenge shall take is immaterial: a starling taught to repeat ‘Mortimer’, given to the king to keep his anger perpetually as mouldering, or a rebellion which disrupts the king’s peace, entailing rapine, slaughter, upheaval, and even parcelling out the ancient realm of England like so much booty — either will serve so long as the insult is wiped out. It is all very childish; and

very terrible.

And this, in the final consideration, is Percy’s personal tragedy, that he is the very epitome, in small things as in great, of that very concept of Riot which, with its reversed twin, Order, forms the duality which is at the heart of the play, though it is by no means all that the play is about. Prismatically fragmented into its component aspects, Riot is visible as impatience, restlessness, inability to endure obstacles trivial or formidable, rashness, imperviousness to reason, impulsiveness, stubbornness, wilfulness, irresponsibility — a host of related faults which, with many other such, may be summed up as a defect in self-discipline, and leading fatally to a contempt for established society at large and more particularly for authority and the rule of law and custom — for anything but the wishes and whims of the avatar of Riot. Percy, significantly surnamed Hotspur, is precisely that. Opposed to the order and stability that a bleeding England so desperately needs to recover from a recent civil war, he must be suppressed if orderly life and the healing arts of peace are to be revived. True, this enemy of Order, first absolute of which is Peace, is no monstrous bogey, no embodiment of primal chaos or Satanic evil. Rather, he is a very young man, and his spontaneous excess is that traditionally associated with youth, and as such so often indulgently condoned. What arouses sympathy and affection for him is a quality of irresponsible innocence. In him, however, inno-

cence and harmlessness have separated. A great feudal lord, a general of dash and proven worth, a hero with a massive following, his capacity for harm is incalculable. His status requires responsibility. Without it, 'a hare-brained Hotspur governed by a spleen', he becomes a weapon to be wielded by unscrupulous and arrogant magnates in a cold-blooded bid for power. A weapon, but also a victim: the kinsman who abuses his *naivete* at the outset betrays his trust at the end: and the youth is traduced to death.

Hotspur, ineluctably, must die: the several exigencies of the play demand it. Death is implicit in his every function, look at the action as you will. The *beau ideal* of knightly excellence, rival to the princely aspirant to honour, cannot survive defeat by Hal. In turn, Hal cannot redeem himself except in terms of the vow he has sworn, by besting 'this all-praised knight': he is committed. Again, as

the anarchic force menacing the organised state, he must be destroyed if primal order is to be restored. As a propitiatory victim for the aboriginal sin of rebellion, too, raising his hand against the Lord's anointed, he must bleed. But essentially he must die so that the Hal of Shrewsbury may become the Harry of Agincourt; it is the first bloody step leading from the prince who has been a truant to chivalry, to the hero-king who is to conquer the great domain of France; who, if coveting honour, were a sin, would proclaim himself 'the most offending soul alive'. Mere defeat would not suffice, even if one could imagine a Hotspur surviving his own defeat. He has been too vivid a character to live in the half-light; burned too intensely to be allowed to smoke and gutter. And then too, across time, the two Harrys find a final characteristic in common. For, like Henry the Fifth, Hotspur is perhaps 'too famous to live long'.