# Reading and Watching *Henry IV, Part One:* Connection and Understanding

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Is Shakespeare's work meant to be read or watched? Given that his plays were originally written for the stage, it can be argued that they were never intended to be read, but rather accompanied by actors, props, staging, body language, and more of the nuanced intricacies that create an immersive theatre experience. But with his work appearing in print as early as 1594 (Mowat and Werstine), it is also true that reading Shakespeare's plays without a performance has always been a viable option. Because reading and watching Shakespeare's work have been popular since his time as a playwright, both can be considered viable ways to experience his stories. Reading is a more personal experience that allows the text to be fully analyzed. Watching a performance, alternatively, creates a stronger emotional connection for the viewer. It deepens the script's meaning through visuals and the delivery of certain characters and scenes. Performances form a human connection that makes the story more engaging, while reading allows for a more detailed study and deeper understanding. This duality can be observed in the case of *Henry IV, Part One*.

Typically, a stage production creates a more engaging experience as opposed to reading, especially in terms of emotion. In *Henry IV, Part One,* this experience can be observed through the themes of death and tragedy present in the climactic battle. Performing this battle on stage shows the scale of the fight, the intensity of the violence, and the tragedy of death, especially considering the absence of stage directions in the

printed play. The battlefield is written as a place of death, a kind of "doomsday" (4.1.134) of violence on a massive scale. Prince Henry describes it as a place "where stained nobility lies trodden on / And rebel's arms triumph in massacres" (5.4.12-13). Once the battle is over, he urges Lancaster to join him in searching the field to "see what friends are living, [and] who are dead" (5.4.153), implying that the area is riddled with the bodies of those they once cared about. Readers can infer the scale of death through context and the characters' descriptions, but due to a lack of visuals and the dialogue-heavy format, the intensity of the violence is lost. They must rely on stage directions and their own imaginations to form the scale of the battle, which incites less emotion. In a performance, directors have the chance to show the intensity and chaos of the battle. Using audio cues like music or sounds—or the lack thereof—can create atmosphere and tension. A director may, for example, exclude music in the fight between Prince Henry and Hotspur to emphasize the sound of their struggle. This makes the scene more engaging and memorable. To show audiences the chaos of battle, a stage performance might also utilize extras, or even stylized effects like moving shadows to compensate for a limited number of actors. Stages also have the opportunity to display the presence of death. On the page, readers only "see" the characters who are speaking. Once a character dies and has no more spoken lines, they tend to disappear from the reader's mind. Meanwhile, a live production can choose to keep corpses of slain characters on stage, creating a grim environment that stresses the tragedy of the scene. It also reminds audiences of what could happen to the surviving characters, increasing tension. Performances that use more experimental staging can highlight death's presence even further with uses of props like red fabric as blood, screens as a backdrop, or creative lighting.

Props and staging are not the only way a performance amplifies this scene's violence: character's body language and emotional delivery are also key. Seeing a character's reaction to the loss of their friends—such as when Prince Henry finds Falstaff's "corpse" in Act 5, Scene 4—adds emotional intensity that is not present when a reader must imagine the delivery on their own. Audiences are more likely to emphasize with characters when they have a visual indication of their emotion. Inferring that a character *might* be crying because of the emotion of their lines does not have the same weight as seeing an actor break down on stage. Watching the emotion played out in real time connects to audiences' humanity. Regardless of their specific strategies, stage productions can provide sensory cues that physically display the presence of death and the emotion of the final battle. Not only is this a more immersive experience, possibly being more accurate to Shakespeare's vision of the climax, but it also helps audiences emotionally connect to the story on a level that reading the lines and stage directions cannot compare to.

Another benefit of live performances is their ability to endear characters to the audience—even morally corrupt characters like Falstaff. A performance does not change how a character is written, but it does alter how the audience understands them and their morally questionable actions. In "How Audiences Engage With Drama: Identification, Attribution and Moral Approval," the authors argue that a playwright's original text "takes precedence over both the director's influence and the way the actors present the characters on stage." Teasdale et al. add that the manner in which a line is delivered does not change what is actually said. This is in a way true, as the printed text of a play is the most accurate portrayal of Shakespeare's original intentions. However, body language, vocal tone, and general portrayal can connect readers to a character more than only

reading their lines can. Falstaff demonstrates this concept best in *Henry IV, Part One.* Despite being dishonest and selfish, he is one of the most memorable characters in the play. Audiences tend to approve of characters when they identify with them (Teasdale et al.), even when their actions are morally questionable. Falstaff utilizes comedy to endear himself to viewers; this is translated more effectively on stage. Performances allow the use of comedic tools like line delivery, silences, and body language, which elevate the potential humour of a comedic line. For example, in Act 5, Scene 4, Falstaff wakes up after faking his own death and delivers a monologue defending his dishonest deeds. He then stabs Hotspur's body—defiling it—to benefit himself. This moment is undeniably morally wrong, despite the witty and comedic tone of the lines. When reading this scene, audiences lose the comedic aspects that soften Falstaff's actions, such as physical comedy. This risks characterizing him as unlikeable and ending his presence in the play on a sour note. Stage productions, on the other hand, can employ comedic tools to make the scene more palatable. Perhaps Falstaff initially tries to carry Hotspur's body but fails because of his body and age (a common joke in the play), then settles for dragging Hotspur behind him. This would turn Hotspur's body into a comedic prop—a dark way to end his story, but also a way to soften the blow of his death. When Falstaff recounts his fake story to Prince Henry and Lancaster, their physical reactions, such as facial expressions and tone, may enhance humour even further, which is not possible when one only reads the lines. Falstaff can therefore turn the grim aftermath of the battle into a comedic sequence, creating a moment to breathe after the intensity of the climax. This makes him likeable. Without the use of visual and audible comedic tools, Falstaff is not as endearing—which lessens audience connection.

Another issue with only reading *Henry IV, Part One* is the vagueness of certain lines, which makes it unclear how a character is meant to be understood. Without the emotional cues of a live performance, lines can be interpreted in an array of ways, muddling their meaning. Performances eliminate this confusion by providing a straightforward representation of the characters and making them more cohesive. An example of this in action is the moment between Lady Percy and Hotspur in Act 2, Scene 3. On the page, their lines may seem very harsh, with Hotspur declaring he does not love Lady Percy, her threatening to break his finger, and him answering her concerned question of what carries him away from her with "Why, my horse" (4.2.69). With only the printed lines as guide, readers might have difficulty interpreting the nature of their relationship—is their marriage one of love, or toxicity? Is Lady Percy teasing Hotspur with her threat of violence, or is it made from desperation and anger? Does Hotspur genuinely not love Lady Percy, or is that said in a moment of weakness, fueled by his fear for the battle to come? A stage production must answer these questions, and as a result confirms how Hotspur and Lady Percy should be perceived. Even though the lines are the same, an actor's delivery of those lines can shift the entire dynamic of the scene, shaping the identity of the character. The performance of a character, therefore, does change who they are, even if the lines are the same: the delivery shapes audience perception more than the actual line itself.

Despite the positives of watching a play performed, there are admittedly advantages to reading. A play's text gives viewers the freedom to interpret the story in their individual way. It encourages personal engagement and can form more meaningful connections between text and reader (Medina et al.). Reading Shakespeare's work pushes us to develop our individual interpretations, deepening understanding and broadening the meaning of

the play. As established, the written lines of *Henry IV, Part One,* require conscious interpretation when it comes to character representation. However, a performance gives viewers someone else's idea for a character and does not allow them to decide how *they* see them. A reader, on the other hand, can formulate their own idea of characters. This is much more personal, because it forces readers to create a unique and individual vision of the story—instead of one influenced by the actors' portrayal. For example, they may see Falstaff as humorous not because of a comedic performance, like a viewer would, but because of the wordplay in his lines. Reading also gives an opportunity for deeper analysis and study of passages. A reader can linger on certain lines they find poignant, flip back to a previous scene to consider a parallel reference, or highlight repeating keywords. This experience creates a connection between the reader and text while fostering a nuanced understanding of the layers within the story. Arguably, performances do not form as deep of a relationship. Scenes come one after another without a moment to reflect. Lines are spoken over each other. This is more natural, but does not necessarily encourage further analysis. Reading also allows editorial notes and translations to aid in understanding lines. For example, *Henry IV Part One* has multiple references to Roman mythology. Before the final battle, Mars, the god of war, is predicted to be "up to his ears in blood" (4.1.117). Understanding this reference lets readers grasp the stakes and intensity of the upcoming battle, which heightens tension and incites more emotion. Prince Henry is also compared Mercury (4.1.106), the messenger of Roman gods who escorts the dead to the underworld. Henry is now a major threat who will deliver the souls of his enemies to death. This analogy highlights his transformation into a leader and warrior. When explained, these mythological references increase the tension before the final battle and add to the

development of the characters. Other editorial notes defining outdated words or references also increase the reader's understanding of the text. By reading a play, we can gain a better appreciation of Shakespeare's work. While it is perhaps not as emotionally engaging as watching a performance, it gives the viewer a more personalized experience and encourages analysis. However, reading does not have the same level of human connection as viewing a performance, as it still lacks the visual cues, scope and spectacle, and the more humanized portrayal of characters. Deeper analysis of a text is beneficial for studying purposes, while performances are more engaging and create a stronger connection.

Viewing performances of Shakespeare plays, such as *Henry IV, Part One,* humanizes the playtext by engaging with the audience's emotions, making morally questionable characters more endearing, and answering the questions the vagueness the playtext might create. Performances build off the source material by developing what a mere script cannot express. In contrast, reading the source material creates a more personal experience and encourages richer analysis. It is more beneficial for literary study, but it does not form as strong of a human connection. Both reading and viewing *Henry IV, Part One* have their merits and are therefore viable options for experiencing Shakespeare's stories; they work together by filling in the gaps the other leaves. Performances add a human and emotional touch. Reading adds depth and layers. Viewers must choose which works better for their particular needs and learning styles. Together, both reading and watching Shakespeare provide an opportunity for all audiences to connect with his work and appreciate its depth and storytelling.

Works Cited

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