Time and Timelessness in 1 Henry IV

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"The word time (excluding derivatives) has forty-one appearances in the first part of Henry IV."¹ In light of this fact, it is not surprising that Shakespeare delineates the major characters of this history play primarily through their attitudes toward time.² King Henry, for example, aspires to a timeless world in hopes of transcending political time, which, he believes, requires him to act unscrupulously. At the beginning of the play, Henry is grateful for the peaceful interlude between periods of "civil butchery" begun by Richard II’s murder and his own questionable ascension. Henry’s proposal that his opposed countrymen march "in mutual well-beseeming ranks . . . all one way" to the Holy Land, where supposedly sanctified battles can be fought, is of course designed to divert attention from his doubtful right to rule. Such an activity would also channel English aggression into courses non-threatening to the King. Henry’s plan, however, reflects more than the policy that he practices, though not always effectively.

By journeying to Jerusalem, Henry could place his guilt for Richard’s murder within a timeless realm:

Therefore, friends,
As far as to the sepulchre of Christ—
Whose soldier now, under whose blessed cross
We are impressed and engag’d to fight—
Forthwith a power of English shall we levy,
Whose arms were moulded in their mother’s womb,
To chase these pagans in those holy fields,
Over whose acres walk’d those blessed feet
Which fourteen hundred years ago were nail’d
For our advantage on the bitter cross. (1.1.18-27)³

In this speech, Henry gradually focuses upon the timeless event of his culture—the Crucifixion. Time exists only so that mankind can obtain grace and be saved. Because all events in history find their true meaning in the Crucifixion and Resurrection, they point backward or forward toward them, are redeemed by them, and charged with a value superior to those given by their places in a succession of moments.⁴ The timeless quality of the Crucifixion is suggested by Henry’s references to time in his Jerusalem speech. The King moves from the present ("whose soldier now . . . We are impressed"), to the time when his soldiers were conceived ("Whose arms were moulded in their mother’s womb"), and further back to "fourteen

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hundred years ago," when "blessed feet... were nail'd" to the cross. The speech is teleological in nature, indicating that events subsequent to the Crucifixion derive their meanings from it. According to King Henry, English soldiers were created in the fifteenth century in order to wage a holy war for possession of that ground that was (and is) the scene of redemption. Henry's argument moves back through time and history and then abruptly returns to the present, invested with a spiritual truth: those blessed feet were nailed for our advantage to the cross. The moment, any moment, gives way to a timeless destiny which invests it with value. The guilt-ridden King, who committed crimes at moments in his career, appears to have found sanctuary in timelessness.5

His triumph, however, is only rhetorical, his traveling only imaginary. "But this our purpose now is twelve month old," he states in his next breath; "and bootless 'tis to tell you we will go" (I.i.28-29). Political unrest at home forces Henry to delay his pilgrimage. For example, Henry asks Westmerland to describe the Council's planning of his crusade (I.i.30-33). Westmerland explains that, in the midst of deliberations, a messenger burst in with news of Mortimer's capture, the Welsh victory over Henry's army, and the unspeakable desecration of the English corpses. "It seems then that the tidings of this broil," Henry concludes, "brake off our business for the Holy Land" (I.i.47-48). The untimely occurrence of political and military deeds, expressive of mankind's fallen state, usurps the plan to enter the timeless realm. A second instance of the disruption of the timeless soon occurs. We learn that Hotspur is withholding the prisoners due to the King because Henry has failed to ransom Hotspur's brother-in-law, Mortimer: "And for this cause a while we must neglect/Our holy purpose to Jerusalem" (I.i.101-02). Hotspur—and the theater audience—later learn that Henry's reluctance to pay the ransom stems from Richard's naming Mortimer his royal heir. Mortimer's being held prisoner in a far-off country is convenient for Henry. Thus the defiant Hotspur, by retaining the captives, compels Henry to deal directly with the results of his own usurpation. It is this defiance that causes Henry to abandon his plans for a crusade. Henry seeks peace from the Holy Cross; yet, ironically, peace becomes impossible when Hotspur's challenge dates from the young man's victory on "Holy-roud Day" (I.i.52).

Gradually in 1 Henry IV a moral principle related to time emerges. Political time, which reflects the need to act decisively—at the recognized instant when men and fortunes are either made or lost—repeatedly intrudes upon the timeless realm. The timeless worlds of salvation and innocence, which fallen mankind can imagine and yearns to enter, remain unrealized because immediate, often vicious actions must be taken to fend off enemies or to consolidate ill-gotten gains.