

# VIRTUE AND VICE

## Sam Waterston

There's a lot said about virtue and vice, and a lot to say, but if good and evil is a theme of the *Henry* plays and of *Part I and II* in particular, it's not easy to find.

You can go subject by subject.

In the plays' treatment of politics and state affairs, everyone's claims are shaky: Bolingbroke's claim to the throne is not so good, the Richard he replaced, as Shakespeare wrote him, was less evil than weak. His sin, if you can call it evil or sin, is not being good at kingship. In the *Henry* plays, good and evil as a theme is hard to find in the affairs of state, except maybe in *Henry V*, where British nationalism is sometimes presented as the same as the Good. [If we were going to discuss *Henry V*, I'd want to say something about our knee-jerk attitude toward Henry V as the example of the great, good leader and king. If you imagine Harry giving the 'Once more into the breach' speech, not to extras on the stage dressed as soldiers, but from the lip of the stage directly into the faces of the groundlings, who knew that, if they were audience members now, in time of war, they themselves would be soldiers, it's not hard to further imagine that those groundlings might be of two minds about a king who wants them to storm a castle and fill the breach up with their own dead bodies.]

On the subject of war in the *Henry IV* plays, though, good and evil don't really enter in. Right pretty much belongs to the winners. There is plenty of courage, honor, and fight on display on both sides of the battle.

And who's right on the subject of succession to the throne of England is held as an open question in both plays, as it was still in Shakespeare's time for those still worrying about it, which was lots of people [Think of Henry VIII's divorces, leaving the Roman Catholic Church, and Mary Queen of Scots threat to Elizabeth's reign]. If picking who was on the good and evil side was your subject and goal as a playwright, would you even pick the story of the Plantagenets, or the English throne, where questions about legitimacy remained very much alive in the time of Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth?

There's plenty of "evil" cunning and cowardice in Falstaff— and realism, too. To the eyes of members of the warrior class in the play, and to aristocrats watching a performance, these are obvious and major sins. Avoiding battle and death are positive goods in Falstaff's eyes, though, and will have looked a lot less awful to the groundlings than to the toffs. The groundlings were nearer in experience to Falstaff's conscripts than to Hotspur and Hal and anyone eager to prove their worth in battle.

Over the years, Falstaff's view of these things has only spread in Western culture. In our own country today, many a person of high degree, and across the whole spectrum of class, hardly bothers to disguise it anymore that they'd rather profit than fight. Saying you had better things to do, getting deferments, or alleging bone spurs, as reasons to keep you out of military service are transparent excuses worthy of Falstaff, but, today, in this country, it hasn't stopped anyone from becoming President or Vice-President, from becoming leaders of the free world. And I bring this up not to drag the discussion of good and evil in these old plays into current events but to underline how similar Falstaff's world view is to the prevailing view today. And Shakespeare would not be in a hurry to say, I think, that one of those views is good and the other evil.

To all appearances, he's content with the idea that your point of view depends on where you stand, that people's morals are very much the product of their circumstances, and how that dynamic works is interesting in a way that absolutes are not.

As far as general questions of morality are concerned, in the Henrys, as elsewhere, Shakespeare's attention goes to the question, less than the answer — for proof you have only to look at the way so many of his plays, having unveiled enormous conflicts and unresolved questions, wrap themselves up suddenly, almost casually, sometimes plain incredibly. The writer seems fascinated by the conflict and almost indifferent to the resolution. He is keenly interested in philosophy and morals for the questions they raise. His interest is in questions that do not resolve, in questions that stay alive. His characters, in contrast, have very strong opinions about right and wrong. Usually, they think they're right and their opponents are wrong. Or that anything goes. Or that everyone's bad, "Well, well, we are all sinners." He was, in other words, interested in humanity as it comes, which includes lots of differing opinions about good and evil. He was, in other words, made to be a playwright.

Shakespeare's views on the question of good and evil show themselves plainly in these history plays really only on the personal level, in how the characters measure up as people, in how truthful, loyal, loving, honest they are, as men and women living in the morally ambiguous and muddied world of claims to the throne, shifting loyalties, and to power struggles being decided by war, where sheer chance matters more than any rules about good and evil.

The marriage of Hotspur and Mortimer leaps off the page. Everyone wants a relationship like that; on top of all the frank talk, obvious affection, resilience, and give and take, the brightness of mind, and the sauciness on both sides, any human with blood in their veins knows that any relationship that sexy has to be good. Harry and his father reconcile: you can feel the good in that, no discussion required. Falstaff and Harry: they do all kinds of shameful things, but we experience their bond as good, and the breaking of it, while it is necessary to the state, and the inevitable result of Hal

coming into himself as a man and a king, we know it is not good, and that Shakespeare wants us to feel the ripping and tearing involved, even though you can't call it bad or evil. That's the stuff of tragedy, as Walter Kerr wrote when reviewing our production at the Delacorte in the 1970's, about the scene of Hal disowning Falstaff in *Part II*. When something is both indigestible to us and inevitable, that's the stuff of tragedy, not morality, and, again, it just goes to show you: Shakespeare was born to be a playwright.