

Harry — Is that Potter, Percy or Plantagenet?

A Note on Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* in the Transitional Novels of J. K. Rowling

Kathryn Jacobs, Texas A&M University, Commerce

Abstract

Ever since Rowling began writing, scholars have discussed her novels as new manifestations of an old genre, the British schoolboy book. And this is largely true of the first three Harry Potter books. Beginning with *Goblet of Fire* (2000), however, Rowling largely abandons these conventions, and adopts a new model: Shakespeare's multi-play historical epic. Writing now for a general audience, she introduces for the first time a politically and socially complex world that simply does not fit into the alternating cycle of boarding school and vacation. Two plays in particular changed the way Rowling saw her own epic: Shakespeare's *Richard III* and that pivotal play of Shakespeare's *Henriad*, *1 Henry IV*.

Since the first appearance of Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in 1997, scholars have successfully shown that Rowling's first three books are essentially new manifestations of the old British school story — a genre born in the nineteenth century and at least sporadically popular ever since.¹ The problem with these studies, however, is that none of them shows any interest in Rowling's later books. And while it does take time for scholarship to wend its way through the editorial process, it has now been six years since the appearance of *The Goblet of Fire* (Rowling 2000). It looks then as if there may be another reason for the scarcity of scholarship on both *Goblet* and its successor, *The Order of the Phoenix* (Rowling 2003). Most Rowling scholarship, after all, is written by those with a vested interest in children's and adolescent literature. And her later books simply do not qualify.

In fact, beginning with *The Goblet of Fire*, Rowling largely abandons the conventions of the British schoolbook (Rowling 2000). Boarding-school novel conventions that Rowling progressively abandons include: the disappearance of Harry from Chapter One of *Goblet*; the increasing displacement of climactic scenes away from the boarding school and on to a larger

world; the diminution of the importance of school scenes; and the development of a politically and socially complex society unknown in the early books. In place of the English school story, Rowling takes as a model Shakespeare's multi-play historical epic, the *Henriad*. Writing now for a general audience, she introduces for the first time a world that simply does not fit into the alternating cycle of boarding school and vacation — always the sum-total of the British boarding-school experience. She had earlier appropriated two plays in particular, Shakespeare's *Richard III* and, occasionally, *Macbeth*, but *Goblet* chiefly reprises that pivotal play of Shakespeare's *Henriad*, *I Henry IV*.

Until the thirty-third chapter of *Goblet*, there are no obvious signs of Shakespearean influence beyond the appearance of a rock group called "The Weird Sisters" — bearded women (Rowling 2000, 391). Upon first reading, the allusion to *Macbeth* seems a passing joke, noteworthy only insofar as it shows that Rowling is now thinking of Shakespeare. In the climactic chapter, however, the reader discovers a more serious analogue to Shakespeare: the entire encounter with Voldemort is modeled almost entirely on the dream-sequence of *Richard III*. In this scene (5.3), the ghosts of Richard's victims — all those he has murdered on his way to the throne — troop one by one through the dreams of the opposing generals, Richard and Richmond. To Richmond, they breathe words of encouragement and aid. But to Richard, the same ghosts breathe curses and even promise to fight against him under Richmond's banner. This, of course, is exactly what happens in the comparable scene of *Goblet*. Again, a troop of murdered ghosts returns one by one (this time summoned by a wand). To Harry, as to Richmond in Shakespeare's play, they offer encouragement and aid. Exactly what they say to Voldemort we do not know, but there is no doubt about the nature of the messages that are "hissed" directly into his shocked face (Rowling 2000, 667). Given Voldemort's personal resemblance to Richard (physical deformity, a trail of blood, tortured egoism, and an inability to take seriously his youthful opponent), there can be little doubt that Rowling is borrowing this portion of her plot and dramatized conflict more or less directly from *Richard III*.

In itself, however, a one-time adaptation of this sort leads nowhere. Rowling had a plot difficulty, and *Richard III* solved it. The "Weird Sisters" show the direction of her thought, but nothing more. Systematic influence did not appear until her next book, *Order of the Phoenix* (Rowling 2003). By this time, Rowling's preoccupation with Shakespearean history in general and *I Henry IV* in particular suggests a recurrent motif very different from the isolated Shakespearean moments in its predecessor. Even in *Richard III*, the mythic figure of Richmond (as filtered through Shakespeare) possesses a peculiarly British form of historical inevitability that Rowling seems to have coveted in *Goblet* for her Harry. (Those who doubt this should remember that it was she who insisted that all the major roles in the movies be filled by British actors, an unusual step in major features directed towards the American market.) But if the myth of the populist hero is

first introduced in *Richard III*, *1 Henry IV* is all about how such a hero came to be in the first place. It is no wonder, then, that we find in *Phoenix*, not the wholesale adaptation of *Goblet*, but a pervasive Shakespearean influence scattered throughout — more self-conscious, more playful, and more conceptual.

Hogs and Boars

Rowling announces the newfound importance of both *Henry IV* plays early in *Phoenix*, through the introduction of a hitherto unknown tavern called "The Hog's Head" (Rowling 2003). Regardless of any Shakespearean allusion, this is an excellent name for a tavern, since the large casks traditionally used to carry wine or other liquors long bore that name (OED sb. 1 and sb. 2). It is not however a word most readers are likely to know now, since it is archaic, unless they come to it via Shakespeare, who uses it often in the two parts of *Henry IV*. And it just so happens that Rowling has a long and well-known habit of using names as classical or literary signifiers. For example, an undercover werewolf is named "Remus Lupin," *Lupin* from the Latin "wolf," and *Remus* for the mythological child whom wolves raised. Similarly, Sirius Black's name reveals his transformation into a black dog, the Malfoys' shows bad faith, and so on. So it seems likely that at least some readers will remember "loggerheads amongst. . . hogsheads" in *1 Henry IV* (2.4.5) or Falstaff's own transformation into "a huge full hogshead" in *2 Henry IV* (2.4.62-63).² Even those who do not, however, will almost certainly remember the famous Shakespearean tavern where so much of the action of these plays takes place: The Boar's Head.

It is hard to read "The Hog's Head" as anything other than a deliberate, comic echo of "The Boar's Head." Such a suspicion is, moreover, confirmed when Rowling describes the sign above the door of the Hog's Head as bearing "a boar's head" rather than a hog's (Rowling 2003, 335). She even draws attention to the boar by making it not a stylized drawing, but an actual head — one that drips blood on would-be patrons if they are not attentive. Altogether then, Rowling positively insists that we notice her parodic re-creation of yet another boars-head tavern full of hogsheads, where yet another unpretentious hero-in-progress eventually evolves into a celebrated people's king.³

Why, we may ask, does Rowling point insistently and openly to *1 Henry IV*? Perhaps it is her indirect way of acknowledging a debt, without necessarily singling out the particular passages of that play to which she owes the greatest debt. Certainly, having drawn attention to *1 Henry IV* in the book itself, she uses her website to single out the portion of the book most indebted to Shakespeare. This time, however, while selecting out the central prophecy of her book for readers' consideration, she backs away on the other end: it is *Macbeth*, the play she has already glancingly referenced in *Goblet* (via "the Weird Sisters"), rather than the *Henriad*, that exerts the greatest influence on the

story. On her website, where she answers the question, "What is the significance of Neville being the other boy to whom the prophecy might have referred?" she compares her prophecy to "the one the witches make to Macbeth" and calls Neville "the boy who was so nearly king" (Rowling 2005). It is only by putting these two hints together — the acknowledgment of *1 Henry IV*'s influence on *Phoenix* and the admission of Shakespearean influence over that portion most central to the plot — that it becomes apparent how much the story owes, in terms of both structure and content, to two passages of *1 Henry IV*.

There is no need to describe here all the ways in which Rowling's prophecy resembles Shakespeare's, or to trace the differences among Shakespearean prophecies, from the dire predictions of the *Henry VI* plays to the benedictions over the infant Elizabeth in *Henry VIII*. In this regard at least, Rowling surely owes more to the Bible than to Shakespeare. It was Shakespeare, however, who repeatedly used prophecy to link together otherwise independent literary works — exactly as Rowling does in *Phoenix* (Rowling 2003). For instance, in *3 Henry VI* Shakespeare anticipates the victories of the Earl of Richmond over Richard III by using a prophecy made over a non-verbal child (4.6.67-76). And in *Richard II*, more prophecy makes the errors committed by this Richard the cause of all the evils Shakespeare has already depicted in his earlier tetralogy (see *Richard II*, 3.3.87-100 and 4.1.136-44). And it is Shakespeare who first introduces the decidedly non-biblical variations we find in *1 Henry IV*. Gone, for instance, is the claim of divine inspiration. There is more equivocation: conditional prophecy, inverted prophecy, deliberately false prophecies, and the use of negative constructions within prophecy. The remainder of this paper examines these variations and the ways in which Rowling adapts them in *Order of the Phoenix* (Rowling 2003).

"It may not have meant you at all"

Rowling's readers will easily remember one of the most striking features of her prophecy: the sudden appearance of a second child equally qualified in terms of the prophecy. That Harry himself must have been the subject of prophecy many readers guessed long before its revelation in the *Order of the Phoenix*. But that, as Dumbledore says, "It may not have meant you at all" (Rowling 2003, 841), that two baby boys fit the prophecy equally well — this was surprising. Which of them was the one intended? Given Harry's star billing (and the accumulated evidence of the preceding books), readers still tended to assume that he was the one intended. Yet the question of identity could not help but raise at least passing doubts. Perhaps Harry was not singled out by fate. Perhaps that destiny — and the status that goes with it — belonged by rights to Neville. The ministry at least had doubts on the matter, or it would not have put a question mark next to Harry's name when

recording it. Ultimately, of course, this question goes nowhere. But that did not stop Rowling from raising the question. Nor did it stop her from referring to Neville, as we have seen, as "the boy who was so nearly king" (Rowling 2005).

In *1 Henry IV*, Harry Percy was the boy who was "nearly king." This becomes clear in the very first scene of the play, when he, too, figures as a surprise alternative son. He is certainly behaving like a king's son. Could he have been the one intended all along? Who is the real prince? Would the king raise the issue at all without reason? Here as in Rowling, this chain of reasoning ultimately goes nowhere. But that does not stop Shakespeare from complicating the issue either — in this case, by making his Henry IV invite his (probably astonished) courtiers to prove that his own child had been exchanged for Percy's at birth:

That some night-tripping fairy had exchang'd
In cradle-clothes our children where they lay,
And called mine Percy, his Plantagenet!
Then would I have his Harry, and he mine. (*1 Henry IV*, 1.1.87-90)

If, however, Rowling borrows the confusion of doubled babies from the start of *1 Henry IV*, she takes the rest of the prophecy from Act 5 — specifically, from the prophetic words that Prince Harry addresses to his alter ego on the field of battle, just before redeeming himself by killing Percy. This is the famous "twin stars" passage, and while the language is naturally far from Rowling's, it is difficult for anyone steeped in Shakespeare to read her version without thinking of it:

Percy: If I mistake not, thou art Harry Monmouth . . .
My name is Harry Percy.

Prince: Why then I see
A very valiant rebel of the name.
I am the Prince of Wales, and think not, Percy,
To share with me in glory any more.
Two stars keep not their motion in one sphere,
Nor can one England brook a double reign
Of Harry Percy and the Prince of Wales. (*1 Henry IV* 5.4.50-67)

In the prince's mind, at least, he and Percy are not personal enemies so much as opposed forces of nature — stars that might easily coexist, if only they did not share a single orbit. Simply put, there is room for only one of them. But it is worth noting that the "two stars" metaphor explains not only

their incompatibility, but their co-existence up until now. Logically, there can be no conflict as long as the stars remain on opposite sides of their orbit. On a circle, however, it is only a matter of time before opposites meet. And when they do, one must obliterate the other, or both will be destroyed.

This anticipated collision is exactly what Rowling so carefully describes, without the Shakespearean metaphor. In the passage below, capitalization and ellipses are hers:

THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES . . .
BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH
MONTH DIES . . . AND THE DARK LORD WILL MARK HIM AS HIS EQUAL, BUT
HE WILL HAVE POWER THE DARK LORD KNOWS NOT . . . AND EITHER MUST
DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER
SURVIVES. . . . (Rowling 2003, 841)

Notice that Rowling explains abstractly what is implied by Shakespeare's metaphor — a prose echo of Shakespeare's "two stars" in "one sphere." Like Shakespeare's two Harrys, these opposites are simply not capable of surviving each other's presence; they are mutually incompatible in a way that excludes mere personal antipathy. In this abstract version, the idea of natural forces is conveyed, not by imagery, but by diction, through the word "power" (clearly a natural power, since Harry knows nothing about it). The care Rowling takes to avoid even the slightest ambiguity (for example, the explanatory "for neither can live . . ." clause) suggests an author laboriously spelling out overtly what metaphor would suggest obliquely. There is only one problem with Rowling's analysis: it does not explain how Harry and Voldemort have somehow managed to coexist for almost sixteen years now, the prophecy notwithstanding. To supply this omission, we must turn, not to Rowling's prose, but to the metaphor she translates. Like Shakespeare's two Harrys, Rowling's pair has been moving on opposite sides of one orbit: now, the collision approaches.

Rowling does not, however, only "translate" Shakespeare's image; she also invites comparison by structurally paralleling Shakespeare's words. This can be seen on the sentence level when Rowling, like Shakespeare, doubly negates linked opposites in matching negative clauses, Rowling's "not . . . neither" clauses paralleling Shakespeare's "not . . . nor." It is also apparent in what she (like Shakespeare) does not say. Historically, people seek prophecies to know who will emerge as victor in the conflict to come. Pre-battle boasts like the Prince's also tend to focus almost exclusively on the odds of victory or defeat. But neither Rowling nor Shakespeare seems more than vaguely interested in this question. Instead, they are both exclusively concerned to define the nature of the conflict — narrowing possible outcomes, while leaving the final one open.

Conclusion

Finally, the same sort of structural parallels are evident when we examine the dramatic function of each encounter. Take, for instance, the line of the Rowling prophecy that suggests a weakness in the Dark Lord: Harry "will have power the Dark Lord knows not." Evidently, Harry's antagonist underestimates him — something he does in all Rowling's books. But Shakespeare's Prince Harry just as clearly has powers that Percy "knows not" — and Percy too clearly considers his opponent a warrior of no consequence. As late as Act 5, Percy is still convinced that the Prince is unworthy of serious consideration. "Thou art enamor'd of his [the prince's] follies," he says dismissively to his cousin Vernon, when the latter tries to set him straight (*1 Henry IV*, 5.2.70). For that matter, Percy would not understand the strengths of the "madcap prince" if he did recognize them. Military discipline and courage, Percy appreciates. But he has no notion how to evaluate men whose natures differ from his own and is wholly blind to the limitations of his own strengths.

Despite their obvious strengths, then, Percy and Voldemort are both quite unable to assess their opposites — and this limitation is, if not constitutional, at least an ingrained feature of their characters. It is also an ingrained feature of Shakespeare's Richard III, who goes so far as to make a speech to his army that mocks the opponents before them. If Rowling explicitly refers both to *Richard III* and *1 Henry IV* in her two middle books, this may be because the conflict she imagines is an amalgam of both plays: the Percy/Prince relationship superimposed upon the less developed opposition between Richmond and Richard. From *Richard III* she took the static but powerful antagonist pitted against an inexperienced but evolving protagonist who is also his antithesis. From *1 Henry IV* she took the populist hero with the common touch, equally comfortable in the boar's head tavern or the inner sanctum. In Shakespeare, the king's council and bedroom serve as the "inner sanctum" respectively of *1* and *2 Henry IV*. In Rowling, Dumbledore's much-guarded office serves a similar function. That Harry knows the password without being told and is party to several "councils" with luminaries of the Ministry suggest that he belongs there. In fact, by *Phoenix*, Harry may well be said to serve as Dumbledore's "heir." Henry IV spends his entire reign trying to unify the kingdom, a job that his son and heir, Harry, will have to finish. Dumbledore has devoted his life to defeating Voldemort — a task that Rowling's Harry will likewise have to complete on his father's — and his kingdom's — behalf.

Notes

1. See especially Rollins (2001); also Smith (2003) and Pinsent (2002).
2. All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2d edition (Shakespeare 1997).

3. Sarah Mendelsohn has already noted that Harry conceptually resembles a king in progress (2002).

Online Resources

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