The violence of 2 Henry IV is, ultimately, confined to the tavern. That of Richard II and 1 Henry IV belongs to the court. In all cases the style of the violence serves an important political purpose. The violence of the tavern serves to remind the audiences, readers, and spectators, who are also citizens and subjects, that unlawful violence must be contained and subject to lawful violence, which is the instrument of authority. The violence of the court, of the rich and powerful, is or is transformed into axiomatically lawful violence. 1 Henry IV is a demonstration of how lawful violence is shaped into an enabling instrument of authority, how it is legalized and made to supply a social need. Indeed, as I shall argue, the narrative of the play concentrates in large part on glorifying physical violence as a necessary force of morality. It needs to be said that the play does this in conformity with the secular and sacred historical traditions from which it issues. An underlying irony of 1 Henry IV is the contingent knowledge that though the dominant authority possesses and asserts – as always – the right to define the value of violence and the social good, this throne has recently been gained by usurpation; the play covers a situation where Hotspur and his allies are challenging the legitimacy of that very power of ideological appropriation on behalf of Mortimer, whose claim to the throne is clearly stronger than King Henry’s. The presence of this irony is a constant challenge to the official politics of the court.

Initially the violence of 1 Henry IV has an unclear focus. The king’s admiration of Hotspur is admiration of his prowess as a warrior. There are several good fighters on the rebel side, including Glendower, and several people are praised for their soldierly ability. But all of this fighting leads to disorder and confusion. However, in the story of Prince Hal is concentrated the socially useful idea
of the possibility of violence being good – moral, legitimate, and, even, sacred. That story moves us from a situation in which violence is seen to be undirected, illegitimate, broken and random, to a situation in which its purpose has been discovered and its agent purified.

The ending of Richard II is crucial for this narrative. The stunned, unhappy conclusion of that play with the king’s futile effort to expiate his act of violence is an essential effect for the beginning of 1 Henry IV. The sense of hopelessness in Richard II is followed by an observable attempt at the beginning of the next play to harness violence. The play commences in bloodshed and confusion. King Henry’s first speech is a mass of artificial optimism, concealment, contradiction and manufactured irony.

So shaken as we are, so wan with care,
Find we a time for frightened peace to pant,
And breathe short-winded accents of new broils
To be commenc’d in stronds afar remote:
No more the thirsty entrance of this soil
Shall daub her lips with her own children’s blood,
No more shall trenching war channel her fields,
Nor bruise her flow’rets with the armed hoofs
Of hostile paces.

(1.i.1–9)

For him the only available means for rectifying this situation is the means of violence. Throughout the play on all levels, violence and force are valorized. They are the enabling instruments of power. The play is full of stirring tales of the use of violence, of cowardice in the face of it, of facing violent death and fleeing from it. But all these interspersed narratives and the initial confusions of the play swirl around a rather still centre. Prince Hal is the secret, unknown and undiscovered agent of violent destruction. His greatest weapon is surprise, the fact that he is undiscovered. His story, largely separated from that of the intrigue of the court, is a story of emergence into the sunlight through the ritualization and sanctification of a widely perceived and presented need to impose order on society through the demonstrable possession of a superior capacity to exercise violence.

The value, indeed the need, of ritual purification through violent action, is an obsessive and haunting theme of King Henry’s