In Shakespeare’s play *Henry IV Part 1*, the concept of honor plays a key role in the actions of different individuals throughout the play. However, honor is perceived differently by each character, which in turn leads them to very different courses of action. Three particular individuals who take honor into account differently throughout the play are Prince Hal, Hotspur, and Falstaff. For Hotspur, honor relates to feelings of duty on the battlefield and reputation, while Hal thinks of honor as something that relates to virtuous behavior: he works on redeeming his own image by striving to achieve honor through his behavior. Unlike both Hotspur and Hal, Falstaff has a very different idea of the meaning and importance of honor. While Hotspur and Hal both recognize honor as something that is important and admirable, Falstaff views honor as only a word that stays with people who have died and does not stay with the living; therefore Falstaff wants nothing to do with the word honor. Throughout the play, honor is thought of in many different ways and some characters view honor as important while others do not see an importance in the meaning of honor. The idea of honor changes between each individual and in this way the theme of honor does not have one specific meaning, but instead has meanings specific to each character’s interpretation of the word honor.

According to King Henry, Hotspur is “the theme of Honor’s tongue,” (1. 1. 80) which means the king thinks of Hotspur as the perfect example of a man of honor. The king describes how Sir Walter Blunt informed him of Hotspur’s battle with Archibald and how Hotspur ended up taking prisoners, which was considered “an honorable spoil/a gallant prize” (1.1. 74-75). Therefore, the king views Hotspur as honorable because he is
successful in battle, is fearless, and spends his time with royalty, unlike the king’s own son who spends his time in a tavern. King Henry also believes that Northumberland, Hotspur’s father, is blessed to have such a son. Hotspur himself thinks that taking action against the king, who he believes cast aside those who helped him to the throne, is a way to redeem honor. Hotspur discusses a plan to overthrow the king with Northumberland and Worcester and this plan involves fighting and defeating the king’s army on the battlefield, and in this way honor and battles relate to each other. Hotspur explains how they have been discarded and shamed by the king they helped, and he goes on to say “yet, time serves wherein you may redeem/ Your banished honors and restore yourselves/Into the good thoughts of the world again, / Revenge and jeering and disdained contempt/Of this proud king, who studies day and night/ To answer all the debt he owes you” (1. 3. 184-189). According to Hotspur, the honor that was lost through the king’s ill treatment of him, Northumberland, and Worcester can be redeemed after the king is defeated and dethroned. Also, it is clear that Hotspur is determined to go to great lengths to redeem his honor when he explains how he will “pluck bright honor from the pale-faced moon, / Or dive into the bottom of the deep, / Where fathom line could never touch the ground, / And pluck up the drowned honor by the locks” (1. 3. 207-210).

Through Hotspur’s conversation with Owen Glendower and the way Hotspur ridicules him, it is apparent that Hotspur does not think highly of the way Glendower exaggerates how important and powerful he is. For example, when Glendower says “I can call spirits from the vasty deep” Hotspur replies, “Why, so can I, or so can any man, / But will they come when you do call for them?” to which Glendower responds, “Why, I can teach you, cousin, to command the devil.” And it becomes clear that Hotspur grows impatient of Glendower’s embellishments and thinks it’s more honorable to tell the
truth when he says “And I can teach thee, coz, to shame the devil/ By telling truth. Tell
truth and shame the devil” (3. 1. 55-61). When Hotspur learns that his father is not
going to join them in battle, and Glendower and his forces have been delayed, he does
not give up hope of still being able to defeat King Henry and Prince Hal’s forces. Instead,
Hotspur thinks about the positive aspects of Northumberland and Glendower not
helping in the battle: he explains how the absence of his father “lends a luster and more
great opinion, / A larger dare, to our great enterprise” (4. 1. 81-82). Hotspur views the
absence of his allies as more of a challenge; if he is able to defeat the king’s army he will
be rewarded with even greater honor. Also, even dying in battle is seen as a way for
Hotspur to gain honor by being brave and heading into a battle in which they have a
very great disadvantage. For example, when Hotspur learns that Glendower will not join
them, and the king has thirty thousand soldiers, he realizes his army does not have
much chance but does not back down from the fight and says “Forty let it be, / My
father and Glendower being both away, / The powers of us may serve so great a day. /Come let us take a muster speedily./ Doomsday is near. Die all, die merrily” (4. 2. 138-
142). Hotspur’s idea of honor is about redeeming his reputation through revenge on the
battlefield by dethroning the king who he believes cast him aside after he helped him to
the throne in the first place. In this way, Hotspur seems to base honor on respect and he
believes it can be won through battling and defeating one who has taken that respect
away.

While the king thinks of Hotspur as the ideal image of honor, the king’s own son,
Hal, is viewed very differently because of where and with whom he spends his time.
King Henry describes how he would rather have an honorable man as a son, like
Hotspur, instead of someone who he believes is dishonorable. King Henry makes this
idea clear when he says, “Whilst I, by looking on the praise of him, / See riot and
dishonor stain the brow/ Of my young Harry. O that it could be proved/ That some night-tripping fairy had exchanged/ In cradle-clothes our children where they lay, / And called mine ‘Percy’ and his ‘Plantagenet’! / Then would I have his Harry, and he mine” (1. 2. 83-89). Prince Hal’s own father does not view Hal as honorable and wishes that it could be proved that he was really Hotspur’s father because Hotspur and Hal were switched at birth. The prince spends most of his time at a tavern where he plays jokes and steals, which is not something a person of honor would do. It is clear that the prince knows that what he is doing is wrong because he admits that he has had “loose behavior”; however, he wants to redeem himself so he can become honorable. Prince Hal explains how he wants to change and gain honor by repaying those he has dishonored when he says, “So when this loose behavior I throw off/ And pay the debt I never promised, / By how much better than my word I am, / By so much shall I falsify men’s hopes; / And, like bright metal on a sullen ground, / My reformation, glitt’ring o’er my fault, / Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes/...Redeeming time when men think least I will” (1. 2. 215-224). Hal is planning to surprise everybody who looked down at his actions by redeeming himself, which is something that is not expected.

After deciding to redeem himself, Hal talks to his father, King Henry, about his plan to defeat Hotspur in battle and gain honor. Hotspur says, “I will redeem all this on Percy’s head, / And, in the closing of some glorious day, / Be bold to tell you that I am your son, / When I will wear a garment all of blood/ And stain my favors in a bloody mask, / Which, washed away, shall scour my shame with it” (3. 2. 137-142). Also, when Hal says, “This gallant Hotspur, this all praised knight, / And your unthought-of Harry chance to meet. / For every honor sitting on his helm, / Would they were multitudes, and on my head/ My shames redoubled! For the time will come/ That I shall make this northern youth exchange/ His glorious deeds for my indignities” (3. 2. 145-151) it is
clear that Hal thinks he can rid himself of his shame by gaining honor after defeating Hotspur although he doesn’t simply want to gain honor: he wants to trade his shame for Hotspur’s honor. Hal wants to redeem himself in his father’s eyes and wants his father to be proud of him; he wants to become an honorable person, but Hal’s plan to gain honor is by taking honor from Hotspur, whom Hal believes has done “glorious deeds.” Hal wants to gain honor by taking it from someone instead of trying to do great deeds himself to gain his own honor, which does not make Hal’s plan sound very honorable. However, on the battlefield Hal proves himself to be very brave and a strong fighter, and when he saves his father from being killed by Douglas the king tells him, “Thou hast redeemed thy lost opinion/ And showed thou mak’st some tender of my life/ In this fair rescue thou hast brought to me” (5. 4. 48-50). Therefore, by protecting his father in battle Hal was able to show his father that he was a noble person, and Hal was also able to defeat Hotspur which means that Hal’s plan was successful and he was able to redeem himself from a dishonorable man to an honorable one.

Hotspur and Hal both view honor as something to be strived for; however, Falstaff has a very different idea of the word honor which leads him to steer away from the word. Falstaff is a person who robs, does not pay what he owes at the inn, and misuses his commission as an officer, and in these ways Falstaff is not a character who is considered to be honorable. Before the battle begins between the king and the rebels, Falstaff decides to make money by taking payment from men who do not want to become soldiers and do not want to fight in the battle. Instead of taking real soldiers to battle, Falstaff takes men who are beggars and prisoners and uses them as his army, which is a very dishonorable action, especially since throughout the play honor is viewed as something to be won in battle. Falstaff is not someone who looks forward to fighting in a battle with the chance of becoming killed. It is also clear that he does not
care about what happens to these men he is bringing with him into battle when he says, “Tut, tut, good enough to toss; food for powder, / food for powder. They’ll fit a pit as well as/ better. Tush, man, mortal men, mortal men” (4. 2. 66-68). Falstaff casts the lives of these beggars and prisoners aside and he has no sympathy to the fact that many of them will be killed while fighting in the battle; instead he simply describes them as being food for the guns. Falstaff does not think of fighting in battle as something that is very honorable; he instead sees it as a way of death. Later, Falstaff goes on to explain his own idea of honor even more by describing how honor cannot “take away the grief of a wound” (5. 1. 133) and also is not something that can stay with the living. According to Falstaff, honor is “a word...air. A trim reckoning” (5.1. 135-136), which means that Falstaff views honor as a simple word with no important, concrete meaning. He also describes how honor is something that men who have died have and they do not feel it or hear it, which means that Falstaff views honor as something that is useless to these men. Falstaff does not want anything to do with honor because he believes it is only gained in death, has no solid meaning, and has no use for anyone. Falstaff describes honor as a word that cannot take away the pain of a physical injury and also something that can be thought of differently by various people. Falstaff shows that he has no concept of honor when he claims to have killed Hotspur himself on the battlefield, even though he had just seen Hal kill Hotspur. While honor is not important to Falstaff, it is important to others who assign it a specific meaning.

Hotspur, Hal, and Falstaff are three very different characters in Shakespeare’s play Henry IV Part 1, and while each of these characters perceives the idea of honor and what is honorable in different ways, there are also some similarities in the ways they think of honor. Both Hotspur and Hal are looking to gain honor by defeating another in battle. However, Hal wants to take Hotspur’s honor for himself by defeating him in
battle so he can redeem himself with his father, while Hotspur wants to gain his own honor back by defeating the king whom he believes has taken his honor from him by casting him aside. Hotspur and Hal both think of honor as a type of bravery that can be won by a victory in a battle. Unlike Hotspur and Hal’s idea of honor, for Falstaff, honor is not something that is worth putting one’s life on the line for. The word honor does not hold meaning to Falstaff like it does to Hal and Hotspur, and Falstaff describes honor as merely a word that has no specific meaning and no use to him. While throughout the play the idea of honor seems to be most commonly based on redeeming oneself through battle, not everyone shares this same idea of the word, and in this way the word honor is specific to different individuals and how they perceive the meaning of the word.