
Plot Construction Through Juxtapositioning Characters

Shakespeare's genius in character and plot development is exemplified in two of his most complex history plays, *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Part I*. With these sequential plays, Shakespeare vividly develops characters and sets up complicated plots by juxtapositioning people with others. Specifically, he first creates a binary opposition between Richard and Bolingbrook in *Richard II*, and then, recalls the plot and carries out an almost mirror image character contrast with Hal and Hotspur in *Henry IV, Part I*. However, in typical Shakespeare fashion, the seemingly mirror-image binaries of Richard/Bolingbrook and Hal/Hotspur break down with Shakespeare's character complexity.

A major reason why these character parallels do not perfectly hold up is because of the marvelous character of Falstaff. Absent from *Richard II*, Falstaff is introduced in *Henry IV* to create intricacy and ambiguity regarding likenesses among these characters. Falstaff significantly complicates the Hotspur-is-to-Bolingbrook-as-Hal-is-to-Richard II assumption because Falstaff has so much in common with the King. Therefore, as opposed to Hotspur's becoming the Bolingbrook persona, it is the drunken and disorderly Falstaff who becomes the character most parallel to the King. However, the King associates himself with Hotspur, who, as his name suggests, is a relentless warrior. The King puts forth a sense that Hotspur will act as Bolingbrook did in *Richard II*, by challenging the Prince's right to the throne; he feels that Bolingbrook's rivalry with Richard is reflected in Hotspur's position as Hal's challenger.

In the first scene of *Henry IV, Part I*, King Henry immediately sets up a binary opposition between the Prince and Hotspur. The King aligns himself with Hotspur, whom he would prefer to have as a son instead of Prince Henry. Upon hearing of Hotspur's successes in battle, Henry IV compares Hotspur to his son. He declares, "w[h]ilst I, by looking on the praise of [Hotspur], / [s]ee riot and dishonor stain the brow / [o]f my young Harry" (I.i.84-86). This opposition between Hal and Hotspur is emphasized in the following scene, where we find Prince Hal in the tavern with the drunken Falstaff, while his rival, Hotspur is preparing for a rebellion. These first two scenes set up a contrast between Hal and Hotspur that seems to recreate the Richard/Bolingbrook binary. Hotspur appears to be like Bolingbrook, in that he will fight for what he feels is owed to him, and Hal acts like Richard, in his reveling with base tavern buddies.

Prior to battle, the King continues to perceive a similarity between himself, as Richard's challenger, and Hotspur, as Prince Henry's challenger. He articulates to Prince Henry that the battle against Hotspur is a reflection of his and Richard's rivalry: "As thou art to this hour was Richard then / When I from France set foot at Ravenspurgh; And even as I was then is Percy now" (III.II.94-96). Even though the King is threatened by Hotspur's advancements, he admires

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

his grit, and envisions a strong resemblance between the valiant young Hotspur and himself. But if King Henry is looking for the person that most resembles him, he should go to the taverns and ask for Sir Jack Falstaff. Sharing many character traits, Falstaff and the King make an interesting parallel; the similarities between Falstaff, the "King of Misrule," and Henry VI, King of England, are shown in many ways throughout the play, negating the King's vision of himself in the character of Hotspur.

The play oscillates between the grave and ominous world of the King and the fast-paced and comical world of Falstaff. The King leads the serious aspects of the play, while Falstaff heads the comedy. Falstaff's comic scenes provide a flipside to King Henry's world, revealing similarities between the two. Both Falstaff and the King live, to a great extent, by the sharpness of their minds: Falstaff as a criminal, and the King as a politician. What separates them is their outward appearance and their self-images. While Falstaff seems to be able to accept himself for what he is, the King appears to be tied up in his image as a great ruler, and thus will never admit to being anything less. Accordingly, King Henry sees himself in the brave and honor-seeking Hotspur, and of course would never align himself with the likes of Falstaff. However, as the play progresses the many connections between King Henry and Falstaff become clear.

The first and most obvious similarity between the King and Jack Falstaff is the fact that they are both guilty of thievery. Falstaff admits to being a robber of purses; the king is also a thief, but instead of robbing purses from travelers, he stole Richard's crown. In this way, Falstaff's line of business represents a mirror image of Henry IV's theft of the crown. In fact, Falstaff seems to compare himself, as a thief, to King Henry. Falstaff tries to convince Hal to join him in a robbery, and Hal claims, "Who, I rob? I a thief? Not I, by my faith." (I.ii.129). To this, Falstaff cleverly replies, "There's neither honesty manhood, nor good fellowship in thee, nor thou cam'st not of the blood of royal if thou darest not stand for ten shillings" (I.ii.130-132). Here, Falstaff is implying that, since the King stole an entire empire from Richard II, certainly his own offspring can engage in some petty highway robbery. The King, probably unconsciously, echoes Falstaff's reference to the theft of Richard's kingdom, when he tells the Prince of his triumph: "I stole all courtesy from heaven, And dressed myself in such humility that I did pluck allegiance from men's hearts" (III.ii.50-52). Stealing "courtesy from heaven" obviously alludes to Henry's stealing the throne of a divine monarch. The language of stealing in the King's remarks reminds us of the thief in Falstaff, who shows up in the following scene to again create a similarity between Henry IV and Falstaff.

After finding out that the King is readying for battle, hoping to kill off the Percy rebels so that he will not have to repay his debts to them for helping him seize Richard II's throne, we move back to the tavern for some comedy. There, we find Falstaff engaged in a similar contest - he is picking a fight with the tavern hostess, Mistress Quickly, in order to evade her demands that he pay his tab. The Hostess herself calls Falstaff on this game-playing when she says, "You owe

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

me money Sir John, and now you pick a quarrel to beguile me of it" (III.iii.63.63). There is a strong parallel between the way in which the King is avoiding his debt to the Percys (i.e., engaging in a war against them) and Falstaff's comical method of squirming out of his large tavern bills. Interestingly, just as the Prince will ultimately save his father's life on the battlefield of the King's contest, Hal rescues Falstaff from his fight with the Hostess by paying his bills for him. He also pays back the money from their highway robbery, which irritates Falstaff, who says, "O, I do not like that paying back! 'Tis a double labor" (III.iii.171-172). Falstaff's comments further the connection between Henry and Falstaff, since these words clearly reflect the King's sentiments toward the Percy's claims. Here, Falstaff seems to be articulating what the King feels regarding his obligations to the Percys, yet would never admit, and their similarities concerning the notion of debt is emphasized.

The cowardly acts of both Falstaff and King Henry on the battlefield further exhibit their similarities regarding honor and obligation. The King shows his lack of courage by having his followers disguise themselves as King Henry so that he could avoid danger in his own battle. Similarly, Falstaff fakes his death after being attacked by Douglas, so that he too would be safe. Again, the King in no way resembles the intrepid Hotspur; in fact, he is portrayed as the polar opposite of Hotspur and a parallel character with Falstaff. While Hotspur lives for honor, Falstaff and the King fail to display any, and, again, it is Falstaff who comically articulates the uselessness of honor: "Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honor hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honour? A word" (5.1.131-133). By the King's uncourageous actions in the battle, it would seem he feels the same way Falstaff does about honor, as he too chooses to avoid danger as opposed to seeking honor in battle. However, as one might expect, it is only the King's comedy double, Falstaff, who brazenly speaks up against fighting for honor.

The idea that Falstaff says things that Henry IV likely feels but would not admit to himself or anyone else is played out in the comical scene where Falstaff pretends to be Henry IV. When Prince receives word that he is to meet with his father, Falstaff suggests that Hal practice his responses to the King's expected reprimands, and the two engage in a lively rehearsal. Falstaff first assumes the role of Hal's father, which allows Falstaff to comically defend his own reputation. He states, "there is virtue in that Falstaff. Him keep with, the rest banish" (II.iv.408-409). This is not something the King would ever say, as Hal points out when he asks Falstaff, "Does thou speak like a king?" (II.iv.412). However, the exchange helps to establish Falstaff as the comical parallel to the King, suggesting that there is a side to the King that Henry IV would never reveal.

Another interesting parallel between the King and Falstaff stems from the speculation that Shakespeare himself played King Henry in the original stage production of Henry IV, Part I. It is possible that, if the actor playing the King was Shakespeare himself, a connection can be made

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

between the King's character and Falstaff, since the wordplay between the name of the King's actor and the name Falstaff is parallel: Shake/spear, Fall/staff. One can see that the name Falstaff undeniably resonates with the name of the playwright, Shakespeare, who, apparently, was also the actor playing the King. Thus, by this clever name parallel, Shakespeare makes a subtle alignment between King Henry IV and Falstaff. Again, this connection between the King and Falstaff serves to weaken the relationship between King Henry and Hotspur.

While there are similarities between the Bolingbrook/Henry IV vs. Richard II contest and the respective Hotspur vs. Hal rivalry, the character of Falstaff brings question to the doubling of these characters, particularly since Falstaff serves as the most appropriate double for the King, so that aligning the King with Hotspur seems unfitting. Adding complexity to characterization through his comical action, Falstaff is a crucial character in Henry IV, Part I, and it is through the character of Falstaff that we see the parallel between Hotspur and Bolingbrook breaks down.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. Henry IV, Part I, ed. M.A. Shaaber, Penguin Books (NY: 1985).

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)