

Sir John Falstaff's influence on Prince Hal in 1 Henry IV



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In Shakespearean histories, there is always one individual who

influences the major character and considerably advances the plot. In I Henry

IV by William Shakespeare, Falstaff is such a character. Sir John Falstaff is

perhaps the most complex comic character ever invented. He carries a dignified

presence in the mind's eye; and in him, we recognize our internal admiration

and jealousy of the rebellious dual personality that we all secretly wish for.

The multi-faceted Falstaff, in comic revolt against law and order, in his role

as father figure to Prince Hal, and ultimately, in his natural ability to

discern and adapt to any situation, emerges as the most complex and paradoxical

character in drama.

Frequently, in literature, the sun represents royalty, or in this case

the king, who strives to uphold law and order. Rhetorically, the moon,

symbolizes instability, not only because it does not remain the same size to

one's eyes as time passes, but because it reigns the ebb and flow of the

tides.

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Therefore, as a knight guided by moonlight, Falstaff is a dissenter against law

and order. This conclusion finds support in his witty tautologies and epithets.

Falstaff is invariably aware that Hal will one day become king, and when that

happens, robbers will be honored in England by Letting us be indulgence

Diana's foresters, gentlemen of the shade, monions of the moon; and letting

men say we be men of good government, being governed as the sea is, by our novle

and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal (I, ii, 25-30).

Falstaff's final dismissal of law and order culminates with a comic plea to the prince, urging him to have nothing to do with old father antic the law? Do not

thou, when thou art King, hang a thief (I, ii, 62-63). We see a similar

epithet in the next act, send him packing (II, iv, 301), in which Falstaff

again denounces responsibility, law, and order. Despite his lack of care for

order and responsibility, the rebel dormant in readers applauds Falstaff's

defiance of the establishment of his defense. Falstaff seems to appeal to the

average reader, for he relates to them, just as a twentieth-century American

would relate to ————. With this in mind, when examining Hal's one line response after Falstaff said, "Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world," the prince says: "I do, I will." Therefore, playing the role of king in this spontaneous exchange, the prince embraces law and order, because he has the consecrated obligation to fulfill, one that affects the lives of all Englishmen.

The relationship between Falstaff and Prince Hal is an unusual one. The two frequently exchange spontaneous, good-natured insults and the reader comes to see that in reality, they are not unfitting for each other. Prince Hal is Falstaff's surrogate son; and for the fractious Prince himself, Falstaff is a second father, a parent he neither fears nor respects. He is one on whom he executes all his whims, even persuading Falstaff to emulate a parental role, while he kneels at Hal's feet and pretends to listen to his reprimands. In looking at the following passage, we see Hal's description of Falstaff as a gluttonous derelict who has no sense of responsibility for either himself or others.

Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon, that thou hast forgotten to demand that truly which thou wouldst truly know.

What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? (I, ii, 2-7)

Time, a symbol of the ordered life, could not concern a man who spends his days drinking sack, eating, sleeping, and frequenting brothels.

Finally, Falstaff's natural ability to perceive or know how to react in a situation is ultimately, what makes this character so complex. Wit is often an

insubstantial substitute for pleasurable sensation; emanating from trivial spite

at the cost of others. Falstaff's wit emerges from a copiousness of good humor

and good nature. He would not be in character, if he were not so fat as he is; for there is the greatest awe in his imagination and the pampered self- of his physical appetites. Shakespeare represents Falstaff as a liar, a braggart, a

coward, a glutton, etc., and yet he is not offensive, but delightful; for he is all these as much to amuse others as to gratify himself. As such, Falstaff uses

his wit to redeem himself from embarrassing or complex situations and is always

successful in doing such. The audience virtually forgets the conflict because they are so enamored with his wit. Fundamentally, he is an actor in himself almost as much as upon the stage, and we refuse to object to the character of

Falstaff in a moral point of view. The unrestrained indulgence of his own ease,

appetites, and convenience, has neither malice nor hypocrisy in it. We only consider the number of witticisms in which he puts in conflicts, and do not trouble ourselves about the consequences resulting from them, for no mischievous

consequences ever result.

The secret of Falstaff's wit is for the most part a masterly presence of mind, an absolute self-possession, which nothing can disturb. His retorts are instinctive suggestions of his self-love; inherent evasions of all that

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threatens to interrupt the career of his triumphant joviality and self-absorption. His natural aversion to every unpleasant thought or circumstance,

of itself makes light of objections, and provokes the most exorbitant and lewd

answers in his own mind. His indifference to truth does not hinder his

reputation, and the more unexpected his contrivances are, the happier he seems

to be rid of them, the anticipation of their effect acting as a stimulus to the

liveliness of his character. His wit is contagious and those around him tend to emulate his extraordinary talent for his ingenuity.

Falstaff ultimately trains Hal and molds his reputation such that he

undoubtedly becomes the most beloved king of that era. Hal's popularity enables

him to consolidate power and unite the country against the older aristocracy.

Hal is a man of the people through theft, wit, and exposure in the streets of

London. Through Falstaff's friendship, Prince Hal rises from the gutter and

overcomes familial oppression to become a hero who absorbs the spirit of London.