

What you are in the dark: a character analysis of prince hal



In the 16th century, Niccolo Machiavelli stated on "The Prince" that leadership came mostly from theatrics. That is to say, to be a good leader one must first be a good actor, or at the very least be convincing enough to get the loyalty of the people. In a time where the political situation of his kingdom was so precarious, when the people were so divided and opposed to one another, it is no surprise that King Henry IV was so concerned with the apparent lack of leadership within his son. He was, however completely unaware of the manipulative and sly nature of Prince Hal, who had a plan of his own in order to achieve the people's love. While his character may appear to undergo severe character development, Prince Hal (And the future Henry V) was rather acting the different roles both his subjects and his father needed him to take, being then one of the most static characters in the entire tetralogy. Through Prince Hal, Shakespeare explores the idea of a Machiavellian prince, one more focused on the theatrics of politics in order to achieve what he desired.

Throughout Henry IV Part I and Part II, the reader "sees" Hal grow into the future King, the one meant to unite all of England. When he is first introduced, he is (according to his father) a rake, an ungrateful brat, who hung out with the worst kind of people a Prince could hang out with. His closest friend is, after all, the most corrupt and amoral character in the entire tetralogy. He is shown to be gambling, planning a robbery, hanging out with prostitutes and drinking with his foolish friends on a tavern. This makes for a dramatic contrast with the Harry the reader meets on "Henry V", the King who inspires his soldiers with his rousing speech to go "once more unto the breach". It would seem like character development will have

its hands dipped into the very soul of the Prince, to make him honorable and worthy of following. It will seem that way to everyone, inspiring even to those who can see the wild Prince turn into a worthy King, if it wasn't for the following speech:

I know you all, and will awhile uphold/
The unyoked humor of your idleness./
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,/ Who doth permit the base contagious
clouds/
To smother up his beauty from the world,/ That, when he please
again to be himself,/ Being wanted, he may be more wondered at/ By
breaking through the foul and ugly mists/ Of vapors that did seem to strangle
him./ If all the year were playing holidays,/ To sport would be as tedious as to
work,/ But when they seldom come, they wished-for come,/ And nothing
pleaseth but rare accidents./ 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/ Than that which hath no foil to set it off. I'll so offend, to
make offence a skill,/ Redeeming time when men think least I will. (1. 2. 202-
224)

Here, Prince Hal starts demonstrating how not only is he not the dishonorable man the world thinks him to be, but rather that he is playing the role in order to look even better as a King. While this is incredibly manipulative, Prince Hal has various reasons that validate this manipulation: His father is an usurper, and there is civil unrest on the country. He needs the loyalty of his people, needs them to trust him and value him so they will not try to dethrone him once his time comes. By making himself look bad

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now, his “redemption” will then give hope and amaze all of his subjects. It is this speech that causes all of Hal’s character development to look nothing more than the unmasking of a very clever, very intelligent young man. It also brings up the most Machiavellian aspects of Henry’s personality, as this act that he is putting on is but a little part of his grand plan.

Everything about Hal from this point on becomes the subject of intense scrutiny as there is no way to tell what is the reality of the situation and what is the lie of it. Perhaps the most real moment, the most authentic act on Henry’s part, happens but on the very last part of Henry V, when he realizes that Catherine does not speak English and his only answer is a simple “Oh”. His actions, his relationships, the personality that he displays are all questionable, for they may or may not all be what Prince Hal wants the audience to see.

There is a comparison to be made, between both Hotspur and Henry IV with Prince Hal on that instance. It is claimed multiple times in narrative (in Richard II for Henry IV and in Henry IV Part I for Hotspur) that both Henry’s have the potential to be good monarchs. They are decisive, strong leaders, with a clear moral code and more importantly, honor. The people know they would be good Kings, and don’t hesitate to say so. By contrast, Hal is a rake, a childish young man, a shame to his father, and the people and the King have the ever-growing concern of what may happen once Hal becomes King. The plays then show us how Hal becomes a much more effective leader than his father, and a much better King. This then goes to show that Hal’s strategy was effective: While his father’s (and Hotspur’s, but his would cost him his life) authenticity was not enough to carry him through his reign, Hal’s <https://assignbuster.com/what-you-are-in-the-dark-a-character-analysis-of-prince-hal/>

machinations are enough to not only make him dear in his people's memories, but also a great King. This emphasizes yet another Machiavellian characteristic in Prince Hal: The duplicitousness of his character, which allows him to triumph.

Prince Hal also dishonors his good name and creates a great rift between his father and himself in order to achieve the appearance of a depraved young man. He admits once during Henry IV Part II that this distance causes him great pain, as he wishes he could weep for his father and yet he knows he will be seen as a hypocrite if he does. In the same manner, he knows what the people think of him, knows of their distrust and of their fear. He does not cry, neither does he openly wield his grief. This demonstrates that Hal is willing to take all of the consequences that his actions have brought and that they will bring, as long as they bring him what he needs, which is the people's loyalty and respect. He is Machiavellian in this too, deciding that the "ends justify the means".

Prince Hal will forever be a subject of debate among scholars. He could be wicked and manipulative, as well as noble and intelligent. There is no way to come to an absolute conclusion, as to do so would be to diminish his complexity. He is clever and manipulative, and yet he still feels deeply for his people and wants to do good by them. He infuriates his father, and yet he loves him with all of his soul. He is a warrior made for battle, and yet he demonstrates great rhetoric. It is possible then, that while Prince Hal is but the very definition of a Machiavellian Prince, he is also a noble and worthy man.