

Power and leadership in shakespeare's histories



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Throughout William Shakespeare's histories, he explores the concepts of leadership and power, and how the nobility utilize the concepts for political ascendancy and maintaining power as a monarch. In Shakespeare's plays, Henry IV Part I and Richard III, the contrasting characters of Prince Hal and King Richard demonstrate striking similarities in their pursuit and use of power and leadership. Although Prince Hal is destined to be a good king, and Richard a bad king, the two approach power and leadership quite linearly.

Hal and Richard both take similar approaches in rising to power, using leadership roles to deceive, and instilling effective leadership in battle, but each have different motivations that ultimately lead to a good king, Hal, and a bad king, Richard. The two kings pursue power and leadership in similar ways, but Shakespeare implies that their ultimate fate rests in their motivations, Hal driven by glory and fun, Richard by greed and paranoia.

The first similarities between Hal and Richard are apparent in the way each pursues political ascendancy. Initially, Hal and Richard reject the idea of being king because of the implied "work" and "care" the job would entail. As Hal contemplates being king, he states, "If all the year were playing holidays, / To sport would be tedious as work;" (1. 2. 197-198). Hal does not want the responsibilities of being king because he doesn't want his noble status to turn into work, which would result in less fun in his life. Similarly, as Richard discusses the offering of the throne, he states: Alas, why would you heap this care on me?

I am unfit for state and majesty.

I do beseech you take it not amiss,

I cannot nor will not yield to you. (3. 7. 204-207)

Richard pretends that he doesn't want to be king because of the implied "care" the job takes, and that he is unfit. Richard desires to appear honorable in denying the throne, but is actually acting upon his greed for the throne. Additionally, Hal and Richard are similar in that they want to appear as if the throne is not on their agenda. Each plans to have a glorious transformation from someone not wanting to be king that subsequently rises to the throne. Hal demonstrates his intention when he states: 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 offense a skill,
Redeeming time when men think least I will. (1. 2. 206-210)

Hal wants his faults and wrongdoings as Prince to make his transformation into a noble king glorious and triumphant. Analogous to Hal, Richard implements the same strategy when he utters, "From all the impure blots and stains thereof, / For god doth know, and you may partly see, / How far I am from the desire of this" (4. 1. 234-236). As Richard implies that he doesn't desire the throne, his transformation into a king will seem more honorable since the people desired his ascent. This is apparent when immediately following his statement, Buckingham proclaims, "Then I salute you with this royal title - / Long Live King Richard, England's worthy king!" (4. 1. 239-240). Although both Hal and Richard ascend politically in similar fashions, Hal is driven by a rise to glory for glory's sake, and Richard is driven by greed for himself. These motivations ultimately drive each character into becoming good and bad.

As Hal and Richard each gain more power through leadership and political ascendancy, they abuse their skills as powerful leaders to deceive others. In each play, Hal and Richard deceive other characters through manipulation of trust implied in their leadership roles. First, when Falstaff and the other thieves are pursued back to the house after the robbery, Prince Hal deceives the Sheriff by utilizing the implied trust of the sheriff in Hal as a leader. Hal states: The man, I do assure you, is not here,

For I myself at the time have employed him.
And, sheriff, I will engage my word to thee
That I will by tomorrow dinnertime
Send him to answer thee, or any man...

(2. 4. 495-499)

Hal gives his "word" to the sheriff, and his leadership roles deceives the sheriff into trusting him. Hal deceives the sheriff to maintain unconnected to the robbery he helped plan/play out. In turn, Richard uses the trust invoked by his leadership role to deceive Prince Edward and eventually lock him up in the tower of London. Richard tricks Prince Edward when he says:

Those uncles which you want were dangerous;
Your grace attended to their sugared words
But looked not on the poison of their hearts.
God keep you from them, and such false friends.

(3. 1. 12-15)

Richard fools Prince Edward into believing that they are true friends because Edward trusts Richard because of his leadership role. However, Richard only wishes to lock Edward in the tower of London to stabilize his kingship, which

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he does later in the scene. Definitively, Hal uses his leadership role to deceive and is motivated by his enjoyment of illegal activities, and contrastingly Richard is motivated by power and the paranoia of losing power.

While Hal and Richard deceive various characters throughout each play, they each employ similar tactics when motivating their men for battle. Both Hal and Richard use an "us" versus "them" mentality when calling to their men. When Hal prepares to depart for battle he yells, "The land is burning; Percy stands on high; / And either we or they must lower lie" (3. 3. 203-204). Hal infers to him and his men as "we" because he wants them to feel on the same level as him, like a brother.

At this point Hal is focused on killing Hotspur and capturing glory. Likewise, as Richard prepares for battle he cries, "Inspire us with the spleen of fiery dragons. / Upon them! Victory sits on our helms" (5. 3. 351-352). He uses the word "us" in similar manner to Hal in hopes that his men will follow him to victory. However, Richard is not focused at this point, and it is clear his actions are being driven by paranoia as just before battle he yells, "Off with his son George's head!" (5. 3. 345). Richard was just abandoned by Lord Stanley and his paranoia drives him to believe that killing George will solve his problem. Clearly, both Hal and Richard use leadership to motivate their men to follow them into battle, however each has different motivations behind their pursuit.

Conclusively, William Shakespeare utilizes Hal in Henry IV Part 1, and Richard in Richard III, in order to convey that all monarchs have similar means and tactics in pursuing power and using it for their own desires.

However, Shakespeare implies that the profound motivations behind their pursuit and use of power and leadership will ultimately determine whether a monarch is good or bad. Hal, driven by glory and “ more innocent” fun (than Richard), becomes an essentially good king, and Richard, driven by greed and paranoia, develops into a bad king.