

“Imitating the Son”: A Father Figure for Hal

Prince Hal is given two examples of the kind of man he may grow up to be. One in the merry and jovial example of Falstaff: noble knight, opportunistic survivor, and incorrigible drunkard; the other in his own father, King Henry IV. The latter example, a powerful and rather boring figure with a knack for ruling the kingdom, and keeping people at a royal arm's length. This veritable battle for Prince Hal's "soul" is excellently illustrated in Act 2 Scene 3, in which the two put on a "play within a play" where both Hal and Falstaff take turns describing the aforementioned noble knight. Here Falstaff is unaware that Hal has already made his choice, a choice revealed to the audience in Hal's first soliloquy where Hal reveals his intention to –like a cloud-covered sun – "Being wanted he may be more wondered at / By breaking through the foul and ugly mists / Of vapors that did seem to strangle him." (1.2 636)

Falstaff makes a mockery of the king and his court by so crudely imitating him with base stand-ins for the royal accoutrement. He belittles the manner and speech of the king, speaking sarcastically and superfluously. Falstaff here more than anything is having fun, something he's good at, but he's also telling Hal, "You are a good man Hal, and fun to be around. Don't go ruining all that with notions of glory and royal poise." He entreats Hal as a friend, and drinking companion to see him for his goodness. Falstaff was tremendously popular with British audiences in part because he's a realistic character in a play full of young men hell-bent on glory, and stuck upright with honor. Falstaff will pretend to be dead in order to survive a battle, something many real people would -- and have -- done.

Hal's response serves to chide his portly friend in a way that doesn't offend on the surface, but is deeply offensive in the undertone. When it is Hal's turn to play King Henry IV he tells Falstaff how he really feels about him. Hal plays the man he needs to be rid of: fat, drunken, villainous, devoid of honor, beastly, a whoremaster. Hal is sincere when he charges Falstaff as an "Abominable misleader of youth," (2.4 660) for he's the youth being misled. Hal doesn't dislike Falstaff, but he has no respect for him, and doesn't value him as a person. This pretense of play does a lot of rhetorical work in the text to help us understand that Hal isn't just a good guy. He's a playboy tourist in the lives of the iniquitous, with no real intent of befriending them. They are pawns in his royal game, to be played and discarded at his whimsy. Just another day in the life of a prince.

Understanding how little Hal's baser friends mean to him also helps to understand why he can banish Falstaff in Henry V. In fact the last lines of the "play" foreshadow exactly this!

FALSTAFF. No, my good lord, banish Peto, banish Bardolph, Banish Poins, but for sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff, and therefore more valiant being, as he is, old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry's company, banish plump Jack and banish all the world.

PRINCE. Ido; I will (2.4 660)

Again the truth is spoken in jest. This reinforces the idea that he truly means everything that he is saying. This explains his speech at the beginning of the book, to give up his rogue's life for the favor of his father in royal court. To be King is Hal's true ambition, and Falstaff has no ambition but to be drunk, and fed, and happy with his friends. Maybe Hal really does enjoy his life more with Falstaff, but his father's call is not to be ignored. Maybe all the insults and the needling are a way to distance himself from the separation he knows has to occur. Falstaff is a drunkard and whore-monger, but he is also freedom: freedom from society, from the "time o' day", freedom

from taking abstractions like “honor” or “king and country” too seriously. This ultimately is a play about choices. What do you want, and what are you willing to do to get it?