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Warring Views on Kingship as Seen Through Setting

Conflict between a father and his sons has been a theme of literature as far back as Greek Mythology and the first books of the Christian and Hebrew traditions. The psychology underpinning dreams for oneself and one's offspring is complex and often anguished; perhaps only mirrored in depth by the torment felt by the offspring burdened by the weight of these inherited dreams. Shakespeare used these complex relationships to create mesmerizing and timeless theatre, from *Cymbeline*, *Titus Andronicus* and, of course, *Romeo and Juliet*. *Henry IV, Part One* is another of Shakespeare's contributions in this theme and through the play we see not only the conflict between father and son, we also see the complex inner conflict within both King Henry IV and his son, Prince Hal. In *Henry IV, Part One*, we see contrasted a king and future king, and their differing views of what it is to develop a public persona and to be a ruler of a nation. Both men clearly state their concepts of what makes a king seen as great by his people, but even if they did not, this difference is starkly displayed in their choice of companionship, dwelling, and plans for the immediate future. Edgar Roberts contends that authors use setting to create meaning in much the same sense as a

painter may use background to render ideas (Roberts 119). One manner in which this is accomplished is in the use of setting to “accentuate qualities of character” (Roberts 120). Shakespeare uses setting to clearly differentiate the differences in character between these two men by virtue of contrasting their habits, their choices of comradeship and the settings in which they feel the most comfortable. These contrasts are so polarizing that they become the defining elements of the relationship between father and son.

The duties of kingship weigh heavily on Henry IV, as does guilt arising from the manner in which he acquired the crown. He approaches these duties somberly and seriously, without prevarication. Much of the character of the king can be seen in many of his exit-lines. In Act 1, Scene 1, he plans the next meeting of council, “...on Wednesday next our council we Will hold at Windsor” (1.1.102, 103). In other scenes we read “Our hands are full of business, let’s away” (3.2.179) and “We will not now be troubled with reply. We offer fair, take it advisedly” (5.1.113, 114). We see the king at court, planning to travel to another castle for a meeting of council and making plans for battle--all sparse and somber settings for kingly business. We do not see this king parading through the streets or appearing before crowds of people. This no-nonsense characteristic can be seen as directly arising from his view of what it means to be king, or more specifically, what it means to be in the public eye, which he elucidates for his

son. Henry IV believes that “Had I so lavish of my presence been, So common-hackneyed in the eyes of men, so stale and cheap to vulgar company” (3.2.39-41) then those who had supported him in his bid for the crown would have withdrawn their support. He reminds Harry (as he calls his son), that the former king was “Heard, not regarded; seen, but with such eyes As, sick and blunted with community, Afford no extraordinary gaze, Such as is bent on sun-like majesty when it shines seldom in admiring eyes” (3.2.76-80). In short, this king believes that a king is best withdrawn from public settings and that seeming mysterious is essential to gain the respect of his people. This is the approach that he carries this out, in private places, exposed only to those individuals necessary to conduct the affairs of state and war.

Prince Hal does not subscribe to this view of what it means to be king. We see the prince in settings of riotous conduct; at a tavern or participating in highway robbery. While the king deals with rebels that would claim his crown, his son rebels by denying the responsibilities that come with being heir to the crown. He has surrounded himself not with members of council, but with dissolute troublemakers, to the point that his own father declares “The hope and expectation of thy time Is ruined, and the soul of every man Prophetically do forethink thy fall” (3.2.36-38). While the prince, referred to by Falstaff as “indeed the most comparative rascalliest sweet young prince” (1.2.72), is undeniably appealing on some levels, one questions the motives of the man who gambles thusly with so much to lose. In poignant contrast with his father’s views of

kingship, we learn that this is no mere happenstance when Prince Hal claims his cavorting is purposeful, to shape how he is seen when he ascends the throne. Unlike his father, who believes that majesty shines best “when it shines seldom in admiring eyes”, the prince intends to “imitate the sun, Who doth permit the base-contagious clouds To smother up his beauty from the world” (1.2.176-178). The prince recognizes that the companions and environment with which he surrounds himself is not supportable long-term, given his eventual ascension to the throne, but he chooses to remain in this seedy setting, saying “I know you all, and will a while uphold The unyoked humour of your idleness” (1.2.174, 175). He also claims that his associations are no accident, but part of a plan to make himself seem more kingly. “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” (1.2.192-194).

We also see how the father and son deal with the guilt of an ill-gained crown by the environs that they choose. Not only does the king proclaim in Act 3, Scene 2, that he essentially “owes it” to those who supported him to behave in a kingly manner, he makes it clear throughout the first act that he desires to be participating in the Crusades. Finding “So shaken as we are, so wan with care” (1.1.1), the king longs to lay the fighting aside in England and take up arms “Over whose acres walked those blessed feet Which fourteen hundred years ago were nailed For our advantage on the bitter cross” (1.1.25-27) It appears that the king seeks absolution for the sin of seizing the

crown in fighting for a “holy purpose” in Jerusalem.

The prince experiences, perhaps, a different kind of guilt. Being the heir of a man who ascended the throne by questionable means could be one source of guilt, but this prince seems to carry more guilt over not living up to the standards of a prince, regardless of how he came to this position. While he does remind us that being heir to the throne is a “debt I never promised” (1.2.188), he is clearly aware that his time of riotous living is drawing to an end. He not only assures us that he will reform, he takes seems to take it personally when Falstaff playacts at being king in Act 2, Scene 4 “Dost thou speak like a king?” and has Falstaff play the prince, instead, saying “Do thou stand for me, and I’ll play my father” (2.4.396-397). As part of this playacting, the young prince acknowledges that he has been “carried away from grace” by “That villainous abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan” (2.4.409, 424-425). When Hal finds himself being pressed to promise to continue the relationship that he has with Falstaff, the prince rebukes Falstaff and ominously indicates that the time is coming when their relationship will no longer continue, but that he will, indeed, banish Falstaff. We see in both Act 1, Scene 2 and Act 2, Scene 4, that the prince intends to atone for the guilt that he feels by taking upon himself the mantle of king with dedication. This is a bitter parallel with his father, the king, who desires to atone for his guilt of having taken the throne by taking part in the Crusades.

In Henry IV, Part One, we see setting used as a strong outer indication of the inner battles taking place within both father and son. The father feels guilt for having rebelled against Richard II and seeks atonement in desiring to leave England to fight in the Holy Land. We also see by the carefully structured and controlled environment in which he surrounds himself, that he takes very seriously the need to prove himself worthy of the crown that he now wears. Setting also indicates the inner struggles of the son. Rebelling against the demands that will be placed upon him and the lack of freedom that he will have as king, he seeks solace in a lifestyle characterized by a lack of structure and morality. He revels in the ability to thwart authority as when he obfuscates the sheriff on behalf of Falstaff and more readily commits to committing a robbery than he does to committing to behave in a princely fashion. This is a young man who does not intend to be told what to do by anyone; not those to whom he owes an obligation such as the sheriff or the hostess or by his father. Although he makes it very clear that he never promised to take on the duties of kingship, he clearly feels a need to justify why he has chosen such a dissolute lifestyle. Feeling guilty drives him to both frame his lifestyle in a positive manner and to defend the honor of the crown. It appears that he can deny his father and the duties awaiting him as long as he remains in the tavern or committing robbery at Gadshill. It is when he finds himself brought to the settings in which a prince might more naturally find himself, such as court or the battlefield, that his behavior is brought more into alignment with the general expectation

for his behavior and we see more clearly, the true measure of the man. In the case of the prince, it seems as if he has purposefully chosen his setting in order to allow him to freely set his own course; yet this approach cannot hold out against the inexorable pull of duty and blood. In fact, although one may see the settings of the tavern and court as, in the words of Roberts, "accentuating qualities of character" for both the prince and the king, in truth, the setting does more than "accentuate" the characters--it defines them. One can hardly envision King Henry IV without seeing a sparse throneroom or council chamber and one would be hard pressed to not invariably "see" Prince Hal carousing in the tavern and exchanging barbs with Falstaff. It is the fact that these characters are, to a large degree, personified by their settings, that makes the transition of the prince to the battlefield and princely responsibilities all the more striking. It is also these deliberate contrasts that make the play so captivating.

Works Cited

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