

Marcia Eppich-Harris
Assistant Professor of English
Marian University
meppich-harris@marian.edu
SAA, 2014

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” (Luke 15:25-32)

“A Brave Judge”: Hotspur’s Role in the Prodigality Narrative

Parables as a genre are meant to be a sort of blitz-didacticism – a lesson learned in a flash. The Prodigal Son parable is a fine example. It shows that a loving, fatherly God will freely grant reconciliation to those who ask for it. However, the Prodigal Son parable ends just when the story could get interesting. We assume that the Prodigal’s redemption is absolute – a happily-ever-after tale that needs no sequel or further consideration. Lesson learned, moving on. But what are the implications of the son’s conversion? What happens to the elder brother? What has this reconciliation done to the father’s relationships with both of his children? Life is more complicated than parables. The world is full of stories of people who have relapsed after a conversion, or who have become disillusioned over time. One who becomes “good” does not always stay good, nor do people who are honorable

always maintain that honor. Sometimes, as Falstaff says, “detraction will not suffer it” (*1H4* 5.1.131).

One might argue that to look for implications beyond the margins of the parable is a fool’s game and that it misses the point of the story. Yet I would argue that expanding upon the implications of the Prodigal Son parable is exactly what Shakespeare does in his second historical tetralogy. Prodigality narratives abound on the early modern stage, and in Shakespeare, specifically, we have multiple plays in which Prodigal Sons figure, even if they are not the focus (*Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew, The Merchant of Venice, All’s Well that Ends Well, Measure for Measure, King Lear, The Tempest*). Shakespeare’s most particular interest in the Prodigal Son, though, manifests in the scheming of Prince Hal, who manipulates his situation in order to gain the most from it. In truth, if we allowed ourselves the distance to consider the integrity of the Prodigal in Luke’s gospel, we’d find that the original Prodigal Son was also a schemer, and was more concerned with saving himself from starvation than he was in true repentance: “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants’” (Luke 15:17-19). Is the Prodigal Son sincere in his repentance? Luke does not address his sincerity, but certainly, there is reason to doubt it. Ironically, sincerity is necessary if true repentance can be achieved in the parable, but it is never clear that the Prodigal is sincere.

In a larger political sphere, repentance of one's sins cannot be done too carefully, but as Prince Hal shows, heartfelt sincerity is unnecessary beyond the point of convincing one's audience that it exists. After his confrontation with his father in 3.2 of *1 Henry IV*, Prince Hal demonstrates this very point: "I am good friends with my father," Hal says, "and may do anything" (*1 Henry IV* 3.3.166). We assume this "anything" means "anything with impunity." However, Hal's sense of freedom to "do anything," post-repentance, is short lived, as is the repentance itself. Even as king, Hal cannot resist playing tricks when he has time, as he does with Fluellen and Williams in 4.8 of *Henry V*. According to Machiavellian principle, Hal plays his role of repentance just right. In Book XVIII of *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes: "Everyone sees what you seem to be, few perceive what you are..." (135) For Machiavelli "appearances" and seeming to have a particular quality – like integrity or faith or a reformed soul – is more useful than "actually" having it. As we can infer, political sins frequently cannot or will not be sincerely repented without a loss, and we see this play out in Shakespeare's works. In *Hamlet*, Claudius, famously, cannot pray for forgiveness because he still has the crown and the queen for which he murdered his brother. In the second tetralogy, Henry IV cannot repent Richard II's murder because to take full responsibility for the act would be tantamount to declaring himself illegitimate. Especially when the king is a sinner -- who is to judge him?

In *1 Henry IV*, the most outspoken judge of the king is Hotspur. What's interesting about Hotspur's role as judge is that it highlights an oft-neglected facet of the Prodigal Son story -- that of the older, upright son. In the triangular relationship

of prodigality, Henry IV acts as father to his unnaturally twinned "sons," Prince Hal and Hotspur. Though taking poetic license to do so, Shakespeare makes the men closer to the same age, and foils their characteristics -- Hotspur is honor's champion; Hal is the pretend prodigal. Both are in close relationship to the man who is the nation's ultimate judge -- the king. Yet, both Hotspur and Hal demonstrate at some point in the series that the king is illegitimate. (As king, Hal bemoans his father's sin of usurpation on the night before Agincourt.) Both men also know that the sins of the king need to be mitigated somehow, but how they go about addressing the problem has everything to do with how they fit into the Prodigal Son parable. In *1 Henry IV*, the older son, Hotspur, sits in judgment of the father figure, Henry, despite having no legitimate authority of his own to realize a penalty. In the parable, the older son also judges the Father, and similar to Hotspur, what is at issue is perceived unfairness. The Elder Son tells his Father that it is unfair to favor the Prodigal and to neglect the Elder Son who has been righteous all along. Certainly, he is jealous of the younger son, but not without cause. That said, it is true that the father acts outside the bounds of equity. He brushes off the complaints of the Eldest Son, saying that the Younger Son who was dead had risen; he had been lost, but now was found. The conclusion of the parable, which assumes that the Elder Son will simply accept whatever the father says, is fairly short sighted; especially since the Elder Son learns by example that to rebel, then repent, can eventually lead to winning the father's love and approval. But as Machiavelli would say, repentance need not be true to be effective on the political stage.

The narrowed vision we have about the Prodigal Son parable extends to the intense focus we give to the Prodigal himself. Biblical scholars note the lack of interest that many commenters have in regard to other characters in the Prodigal Son parable, particularly in the Elder Son. For instance, according to Mikeal C. Parsons, theologians like Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine write off the Elder Son in the parable for a myriad of reasons. For Jerome, the Elder Son refers to the old religion – Judaism – and its unrepentant rejection of the new religion – Christianity (Parsons 150-1). For Ambrose, “the Elder Brother is the self-righteous Christian who envies the sinner’s reconciliation” (Parsons 151). Charles Pastoor points out that for Ambrose, “... the parable offers instruction by both the positive example of the repentant younger son and the negative example of the elder son” (9). Augustine mainly ignores the Elder brother, which Jill Robbins claims “inaugurates a critical tradition that does not read the elder brother or reads him as outside” (quoted in Parsons 152). The alterity of the elder brother is stark in Luke’s gospel, and may be represented by the conservative assertion of Karen Swallow Prior: “Yes, we want grace, but in the recesses of our hearts, if we are honest, we want it doled out with justice” (56). Hotspur, as the symbolic elder brother, is willing to do just that.

From his first meeting with Bolingbroke in 2.3 of *Richard II*, until the beginning of *1 Henry IV*, Harry Percy (Hotspur) is a character that we could easily dismiss, just as theologians dismiss the Elder Son. Not long into *1 Henry IV*, though, Hotspur becomes more important than Northumberland and Worcester, who in *Richard II* played crucial roles in the usurpation. Hotspur is the picture of chivalry – the “theme of honour’s tongue” (*1H4* 1.1.80). In contrast, when we first hear of

Prince Hal near the end of *Richard II*, Hal's prodigal behavior is described by his soon-to-be rival:

Harry Percy: My lord, some two days since, I saw the Prince,

And told him of these triumphs held at Oxford.

King Henry: And what said the gallant?

Harry Percy: His answer was he would unto the stews,

And from the common'st creature pluck a glove,

And wear it as a favour, and with that

He would unhorse the lustiest challenger. (*Richard II* 5.3.13-9)

Hal's master plan to "redeem time" is already well underway in this scene, and Hotspur's reputation as the worthier gentleman seems obvious. Additionally, contrasting Hal's reported answer above to Hotspur's introduction of himself to Bolingbroke makes the differences between the men all the more clear:

Harry Percy: My gracious lord, I tender you my service,

Such as it is, being tender, raw, and young,

Which elder days shall ripen and confirm

To more approvèd service and desert. (*Richard II* 2.3.41-44)

Hotspur's better judgment and reputation as an honorable man will be tested later, but in this early scene, he does appear to be the perfect servant to the soon-to-be king. At first glance, Hotspur's value in the play in which he figures most, *1 Henry IV*, is that he foils Prince Hal; however, his ultimate value is that he judges the behavior of both Prince and King. Hotspur bases his authority to judge upon the fact that he and his family helped Henry to the throne. However, Shakespeare positions Hotspur

in such a way that his authority finds its roots in the narrative of Hal's biblical predecessor, the Prodigal Son.

The problem with Hotspur's judgment is not whether he is right or wrong when he decides to rebel against Henry. Rather, the decisions that he makes become ridiculous in light of the forces he's up against. Like the Elder Son in the Prodigality parable, Hotspur can only present anger in a way that appears to be tantrum-like in quality. The Elder Son's refusal to join the party for his brother echoes in Hotspur's refusal to hand over his Scottish prisoners. Hotspur's anger manifests in absurdity, fantasizing about teaching a starling to say "Mortimer" unceasingly to annoy and perturb the king (*1H4* 1.3.222-3). In the parable, the Elder Son points out to his father that loyalty and service should be acknowledged, just like Hotspur assumes that Mortimer will be ransomed based on Hotspur's reputation alone. Neither men are correct as far as their narratives are concerned. In the parable, the Father asserts that the Elder Son is blind to the gifts he has around him, but most especially, the son is blind to the fact that the "unwarrantedness" of the celebration is its entire point. The Prodigal Son doesn't deserve to be celebrated, because he is a sinner, but he is celebrated nonetheless because of God's grace. Hotspur, on the other hand, is right that his service to the king has been impeccable; however, he is blind to the fact that he cannot use his service as leverage to gain favors from a politician. In fact, as an upstanding Machiavel, Henry has no choice but to be guarded against the Percy family. As Machiavelli notes, "He who attains the principality with the aid of the nobility maintains it with more difficulty than he who becomes prince with the assistance of the common people, for he finds himself a prince amidst many who feel

themselves to be his equals, and because of this he can neither govern nor manage them as he might wish" (108).

Henry's inability to manage Hotspur continues throughout the play, but even more revealing of his character, Hotspur is also unable to manage himself. When he meets with Glendower and Mortimer in 3.1, Hotspur is barely able to contain his frustration with and disdain for Glendower, despite Mortimer's admonishment. Hotspur is right – Glendower is an old superstitious buffoon. But Hotspur's lack of decorum in this case puts him in a position worse than buffoonery – that is, he is a caricature of bad manners. His impatience with his allies does nothing for his cause, except harm it. Later, in 5.2, Worcester decides to hide Henry's offer for clemency before Shrewsbury because Worcester feels that his own life will be in jeopardy, whereas Hotspur's behavior can be explained away with the "excuse of youth" (5.2.17). With Worcester's decision fades any chance of grace for the "hare-brained" Hotspur (5.2.19). Yet even without Worcester's bad judgment, Hotspur's rambling response to Sir Walter Blunt in 4.3 puts him in a bad position – one that grace cannot overcome. Here, too, like the Elder Son, Hotspur feels unrepentant because he feels so assured that there is nothing for him to be repentant about. Instead, by his judgment, Hotspur is absolutely in the right, Henry is in the wrong, and the rightful heir to the throne is Hotspur's brother-in-law, Mortimer. If anything, Hotspur's greatest regret is helping Henry to the throne in the first place. That, Hotspur feels, is his only error, and from a certain point of view, he's correct.

But Shakespeare doesn't allow for a tidy conclusion about right and wrong when it comes to the Lancasters and their throne. Shakespeare complicates the

question of the right to rule by making the honorable Hotspur an outrageous distortion of the chivalric.¹ As Henry IV's judge, Hotspur fails to convince us that the Lancasters should fall because Shakespeare trivializes Hotspur's character. Hotspur is undermined time and again through tantrums, fantasies, and overall erratic behavior. Similarly, in the Prodigal Son parable, the Elder son is undermined through his refusal to participate in the celebration of his brother's return. Problematically, many Christians can relate to the righteousness of the Elder Brother's position – do they not deserve God's grace if they are forever faithful and obedient? Or are the elect comprised of outright sinners who can wriggle their way back into favor, whether their repentance is sincere or not?

These questions are important to consider because of the ubiquity of the Prodigal Son parable in early modern drama. We need to think about the implications of the father's favor in regard to not just the Prodigal, but the Elder Son as well. We also have to take into account that this parable is very much about the concept of Christian judgment and that, if truth be told, we are all found wanting in the eyes of God. According to the parable, it is only through grace that anyone achieves salvation. What is frightening is that by ignoring the implications of the parable we also ignore the fact that grace appears to be granted arbitrarily, or worse, that it can be granted to whomever is the most convincing Machiavel. In the

¹ Beaumont's 1607 play *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* quotes Hotspur's speech on "Pluck[ing] bright honor," when the Wife tells Ralph to "show the gentlemen what thou canst do; speak a huffing part" (LINES). The *OED*'s definition of huffing as "Puffed up, conceited, boastful; blustering, swaggering, hectoring, bullying," dates back to 1602, citing Thomas Heywood's *How Man May Chuse Good Wife* as the textual origins. Parodying Hotspur's speech in *Burning Pestle*, Beaumont lampoons Hotspur's character foibles, transforming the chivalric into the ridiculous.

case of Hotspur, his downfall is precipitated by poor judgment – both in his critiques of Henry IV, and in his actions. Like the Elder brother, Hotspur deserves more attention because the implications of his role are so vastly underappreciated.

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