

## SUBVERSION OF DOMINANT SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRUCTS IN KING HENRY IV: A POSTMODERNIST-DECONSTRUCTIONIST STUDY

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| ARTICLE INFO   | ABSTRACT  |
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| <p><i>Article History:</i><br/>Received: 12 Aug 2019<br/>Revised: 20 Oct 2019<br/>Accepted: 12 Jan 2020<br/>Available Online: 02 Mar 2020</p> <hr/> <p><i>Keywords:</i><br/>Glory, Honour, Duty, Ambition, Nobility, Shame, Factor.</p> <hr/> <p><i>JEL Classification:</i><br/>O11, J35</p> | <p>The “seeming” “color” of the dominant narrative in Shakespeare’s play, King Henry IV is to strengthen and reinforce the conventional socio-cultural constructs like duty, honor, glory, nobility, war, peace and patriotism as absolutes, but this apparent dominant narrative is subverted and undermined by the existence of alternative micro-narratives, which challenge and expose the reality of these absolutes as socio-cultural constructs invented by the status quo and the dominant ideology. These alternative micro-narratives highlight the inherent contradictions involving these socio-cultural constructs and human subjectivities, thereby showing them as split and dispersed, their alleged unification, as merely a pack of myths and lies. The current study means to show that the text of the play manifests postmodernist and deconstructionist perspectivism, pluralism and multiplicity. This applies both to the text and the subjectivities of the characters. The study is to be undertaken in the light of postmodernist and deconstructionist theoretical framework.</p> |

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The current study, like Wilson (1968) and Jenkins (1957) do, believes in the structural unity of the two parts of the play and means to treat it as a single play. Generally, the play *King Henry IV* is thought to be about the education and reformation of Prince Harry, culminating in the banishment of Falstaff for his evil deeds and for the inculcation of, and the strengthening of the socio-cultural constructs as the established “truths”. Apparently, the play projects the traditional values and constructs like patriotism, duty, glory, honour, nobility and patriotism. The dominant narrative means to present the nobility as the embodiment of honour and patriotism. They mean to die for the glory and honour of their country and religion. The nobility and knights hold their lives not more than instruments for the larger cause of the country and religion. The current study means to show that the presence of alternative micro narratives actually questions all these socio-cultural constructs of honour, glory, nobility, duty and patriotism. The subversion of socio-cultural constructs takes place at two levels. At the first level, the study means to show that in spite of the apparent reinforcement of the socio-cultural constructs of honour and glory, the same is actually subverted through the contradictions in the subjectivities of the main characters. At the second level the “absolute truths” are shown to be not more than mere words and stories (Saussure, 1974).

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The play *King Henry IV* has been critiqued by countless celebrated critics from different angles. But like any great work of art, it still is open for a re-reading. A brief summary of the previous readings is presented below to establish a context and justification of the current study. Krieger (1979), in his study, has examined the play from a Marxist perspective. He has focused upon the classes and class structure, represented by the primary world of court and the secondary world of tavern. Krieger thinks that Prince’s stay at Eastcheap affords him an opportunity to interact with lesser classes. His focus upon the implications of responsibility, in the sense of a role in history, and indulgence of the lesser people in the play, only reinforces the socio-cultural constructs of glory and honour. Krieger overlooks Falstaff’s contribution towards the subversion of social-cultural constructs and instead emphasizes the allegiance of Falstaff to the central monarchy, against rebels, thereby suggesting his support to the status quo. He only focuses upon the aspects of decadence and gluttony present in the character of Falstaff. His reading of the play and its main characters is mainly conventional and univocal. However, Krieger’s reading of the class division at the tavern, conventional, class-based role performance and Hal’s treatment of the lesser people is fine. His reference to the objectification of soldiers in the war is extremely limited, and his reading of Hotspur, King, Falstaff and Prince is partial. His focus upon the representation of the feudal and the divine- right systems of monarchy in the play is good.

Bradley's critique of the play (1909), especially that of Falstaff is very elaborate and detailed. He endorses the rejection of Falstaff by the Prince, but not the manner, in which it is effected. He associates Falstaff with mainly eating and drinking. Bradley appreciates his pure sense of humour. In his view, graver issues of life, are beyond the ken of the ludicrous, wily and liar Falstaff. Bradley endorses the socio-cultural constructs as truths, because that was not yet the age of questioning them. In the view of present study, Falstaff is far ahead of his age, including his own creator. The present study regards Falstaff from a totally different angle with a totally different understanding of this character. The learned critic finds the Prince finally transforming himself into a wise, just, stern and glorious King. Reese, (r.p.1975), in his remarks as editor, thinks this play really to be about the education of a prince. Reese also thinks that the play reinforces the traditional and conventional socio-cultural constructs of honour and duty. Reese associates Falstaff with fantasy world and the learned editor regards him merely the victim of his own eloquence and imagination. The present finds this, only a surface reading.

Auden (1970), does make an attempt to look for the overt and the alternative meaning of King Henry IV, by referring to the point of view of the villagers who free themselves from conscription through bribery, but just falls short of questioning it. He still endorses the socio-cultural constructs of honour and glory. For Auden, Falstaff is perceived, overtly, as the "God of Misrule", an unworldly man, a drunken old failure. For Auden, he is a man, who through his ability to generate laughter and as an image for the justice of charity, is very endearing. He views Prince as a man of glory and worldliness at its best, for his dedication to larger public causes. Knights (1959), calls King Henry IV part II a "tragi-comedy of human frailty" for the presence of "imaginative vision", "shaping imagination", "imaginative wholeness" and "double-ness" in it. His focus of study is on aesthetic accomplishments of the playwright. He is full of praise for the organic equation among imagery, verse and prose. He also has focused upon the role of time and the attendant pattern of hope and disappointment in the lives of the characters of the play. Charlton (r.p.1977) has critiqued the play primarily to explore Shakespeare's idea of comedy and to establish the similarity of this play to Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth, the source material, Shakespeare exploited to create King Henry IV(Shakespeare,r.p.1975). Charlton has also referred to other critics like Bradley and Stoll. Charlton's focus is on the education and reformation of Prince Henry and his rejection of Falstaff, once he himself becomes the King. Charlton, like many other conventional critics, judges Falstaff by the prevalent socio-cultural standards. This is how Falstaff is found delinquent and only a figure of fun and laughter. The present study means to show that Falstaff is the principal character of the play who challenges the prevalent socio-cultural constructs.

Wilson (1968)'s critique of the play is again from the perspective of the education of the prince and his initiation into the "truths" of glory, honour and duty towards one's country. His main concern is with the political dimension of the play, the circumstances of the ascension of King Henry IV to the throne. He regards Falstaff as the fountainhead of both evil and comedy. He also refers to the unpopularity of Falstaff among women and its immense popularity with men and soldiers. Jenkins (1970) has critiqued the play mainly from the structural perspective. His view of the play regarding its two parts is in-between that of Johnson (1970) and of Wilson (1970). He thinks this play to be both one play and two plays at the same time. Like other critics he also believes the play to be about the reformation of Prince and his initiation into the code of honour and chivalry and his establishment of justice with his rejection of the devil Falstaff. Unlike Bradley (1909), he also endorses the public manner of rejection of Falstaff, like Wilson does (1970). For Jenkins, Falstaff is a metaphor of cowardice and evil. Falstaff is viewed as a sinner and tempter. Jenkins also believes the rivalry between Hotspur and the prince to be a structural issue. The present study means to show that like true postmodernist metaphor Falstaff constantly revises his position and questions the establishment with its certainties and absolutes and is only for the "surface".

Bevington in his introduction to Henry IV Part II (Shakespeare, 1980), has focused upon the completion of the education of Prince and his emergence into political role. Falstaff is mainly viewed as the "tutor" and "feeder" of the riots of Prince, and as a metaphor of hedonism and irresponsibility in general, therefore his rejection by King Henry V. On the whole, this critique focuses upon the apparent narrative of the play. Barber (1970) is not different from already given critics. He has examined the play from the perspective of rule and misrule. Falstaff stands for misrule, while the reformed Prince is metaphor of rule. Barber calls Falstaff a "de facto buffoon", a "Lord of Misrule" or a "holiday lord". The above given brief literature review has established the context and the justification of the present study, especially due to the obsession of the learned critics with what Derrida calls as the logocentrism or the metaphysics of presence.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study is based upon the analysis of the selected text in the light of an eclectic theoretical framework consisting of postmodernism and deconstruction. The study is especially indebted to Derrida (2016) for its mode of reading and interpretation, in which text is shown to consist of multiple strands, thereby challenging the metaphysics

of presence from within (Culler, 1983). The brief literature review given above has amply shown that almost all the learned, celebrated critics have focused their attention upon the apparent, over-arching metanarrative, with its overt and obvious emphasis upon the initiation of the Prince into the socio-cultural hierarchies and the rejection of Falstaff as the embodiment of evil and frivolity. This confirms the all-out pervasiveness of these totalities (Tredell, 1987). The present study means to identify and highlight the submerged alternative micro-narratives, which challenge and undermine the apparent reinforcement of socio-cultural constructs, thereby exposing them as merely foundationalist assumptions (Jameson, 1984).

The current study means to gather support for the project from the play King Henry IV itself. Lines like, “out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety” (II .i) suggest in a metaphoric way the task of the present project. The study means to break through the “foul and ugly mists of vapours” of apparent dominant narrative that “strangle” the invisible submerged alternative micro narratives underneath the obvious and apparent dominant narrative. The study means to bring these alternative micro narratives to surface and to show the plurality and the multiplicity of the text. The major proposition of the study is that the existence of alternative micro narratives challenge and undermine the dominant narrative of Shakespearean play King Henry IV(1975) which seems to project and reinforce the socio-cultural abstractions like honour, glory, duty, nobility as absolute truths and totalities (Leotard, 1984). The second proposition of the study is that subjectivities of the major characters are also multiple and pluralistic, dismantling the myth of unified subjectivities. The text of the play is to be shown manifesting pluralism, multiplicity, perspectivism and relativism. A few research questions subordinate to the two main propositions are designed to keep the study focused and on track:

- Does the apparent, dominant narrative of King Henry IV reinforce the socio-cultural constructs and hierarchies like honour, duty, nobility, patriotism and glory as absolute truths and totalities, as the instances of metaphysics of presence?
- Does the presence of alternative micro narratives question and subvert the apparent, dominant narrative of the celebration of the metaphysics of presence of honour, glory, duty and patriotism, showing these truths to be not more than social- cultural constructs?
- Does the presence of alternative micro narrative strands show the selected text to be split, dispersed, plural and questioning and subverting the proffered the socio-cultural hierarchies and the metaphysics of presence as not more than language games and fictionality?
- Do the contradictions present in the subjectivities of major characters dismantle the myth of unified and single subjectivities?

#### **4. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

##### **4.1 The reinforcement of socio-cultural constructs by the apparent dominant narrative**

The play opens with a resolve and a promise on the part of King Henry IV, for peace and end of civil war, which has destroyed the country. With stability achieved, he means to undertake Crusade to free Jerusalem, as a true soldier of Christ, given to duty and larger religious and national causes and glory. This surface phenomenon is underpinned by the underlying structures of honour and glory, which enjoy the status of absolute truths (Saussure, 1974.). Further, the King as the custodian of honour and duty, is deeply mortified at the riot and dishonourable conduct of his elder son and crown prince Harry. King finds his behavior unbecoming of a noble man with reference to the established “truths”. Similarly, King, as the seeming metaphor of grace and honour, is full of praise and appreciation for the courage, valour and loyalty of Harry Percy. For the obvious preference of renown and glory by Percy, King calls him “the theme of honours’ tongue”(Shakespeare,1975,I.i.80), who apparently is determined to pluck “bright honour from the pale-faced moon”(I. iii. 200). Seemingly, nothing is dearer to the heart of the King than the honour, duty, nobility and chivalry. This is why the King, instead of striking Douglas unaware, gives him a chance to defend himself against him. He apparently reinforces all the chivalrous norms and values.

Apparently, all the lords fight for duty, honour and glory. The rebellious nobility and the lords resist the King in the name of honour. Harry Percy stands up to the King to retrieve his own honour and the honour of his house. Lord Worcester, Archbishop of York, Northumberland all oppose the King for a possible threat to their honour. Worcester condemns his nephew Harry Percy when he suggests of poisoning Prince of Wales for his dishonourable thoughts (I. iii). Archbishop of York presents his resistance to the King as his religious duty and sanctions it with religious references. Harry Percy and Harry Monmouth oppose each other in battle for glory and honour as their ultimate objective. Harry apparently seems to be more wounded by the impending loss of glory than the loss of his “brittle” life (Shakespeare, 1975, V.iv.76-90). Prince John also seems to reinforce the socio-cultural constructs of valour and

chivalry. All this shows that the apparent dominant narrative reinforces the socio-cultural constructs of honour, glory, duty and nobility.

Most of the critics, as the above given literature review has shown, go by the apparent dominant narrative and maintain that the play is about the initiation and reformation of Prince Henry into the chivalrous codes of honour, duty and glory. The rejection of Falstaff and the conquest of honour and glory by the Prince through the defeat of Harry Percy at the battle of Shrewsbury constitutes the dominant narrative. The dominant narrative seems to reinforce the social cultural constructs of honour and glory. The whole royal house seems to manifest the chivalrous values of honour and nobility, especially through the ransom free release of Douglas. King's promise of an era of peace and harmony, the liberation of Jerusalem is the manifestation of the dominant narrative. His own subjectivity also seems to be single and unified. The dominant surface narrative of the play seems to establish the power of status quo along with its socio-cultural constructs as absolute truths.

#### 4.2 The subversion of socio-cultural constructs by alternative micro narratives

The application of deconstructionist approach reveals the text to be consisting of multiple strands, many of these strands are at odds with the apparent, seeming dominant narrative. These micro alternative strands actually subvert and undermine the apparent and dominant strand of narrative, which seems to propagate and perpetuate the conventional socio-cultural constructs of honour, glory, duty, patriotism and nobility. Very much like what happens in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* (Shakespeare, r. p. 1997), King's talk of apparent reinforcement of socio-cultural constructs, gets disrupted by subversive alternative narratives. Instead of a rein of order and peace as the dominant narrative means to establish, the alternative micro narratives tell a story of constant strife and insurgency. The King contrary to his promise of love and regard towards his peers and lords, humiliates and insults them, betraying the pluralistic nature of his subjectivity. He accuses them of treachery and disloyalty, as his deliberate policy and strategy. The apparent nobler purpose of march towards Jerusalem gets replaced by internal strife and civil war. It also explodes the myth of Crusades as merely a cover and strategy to consolidate the power of the medieval European Christian rulers. The alternative micro narratives also establish him as a usurper and "king slayer".

The plurality of King's subjectivity reveals him as man of policy and cunning and not a man of honour and chivalry, with one, single-dimensional subjectivity. He deliberately, as part of his policy, calls Mortimer a traitor, who is taken prisoner while fighting against the rebels, and refuses to pay ransom for him, because the king feels threatened and vulnerable by Mortimer's prior place in the hierarchy. He, very conveniently forgets his previous vows and promises of honour and virtue and his resolve to fight against the common enemies of Christ and the country. All this shows the contradictory strands of his subjectivity, along with his own false nobility. Eastcheap, contrary to the point of view of Rees (1975) as affording an opportunity to the young prince for his education and reformation, is the postmodernist metaphor of the rejection of boundaries, hierarchies and reference points. It provides the Prince and Falstaff an opportunity to live by their own personal values. These activities expose the reality of the constructed nobility. It represents postmodernist pluralism, perspectivism and the stress upon social contexts instead of single causal explanations. Instead of waging war to free Jerusalem, they are wasting their time in drinking and looting their own people, like common thieves. Honour as the absolute truth has been the main social-cultural construct driving mankind on to the battlefronts. The ancient Greeks waged war under the leadership of Agamemnon to redeem the honour of Menelaus (Aeschylus, r. p., 1972). The mother of Achilles let him go to Troy for the sake of honour and glory, knowing it full well that she would not see her boy again. Falstaff dismantles this construct like no one else would have done it. For him honour is not more than a word and fictionality (Shakespeare, 1975, V. i. 126-139. ) . Contrary to the belief of the mother of Achilles, he contends that dead cannot hear it. It consists only of words and is not more than air.

Unlike the views of Rees (1975), the present study means to highlight the plurality of the subjectivity of Falstaff with multiple submerged stands and present him as the main metaphor of postmodernist alternative micro-narratives and word play. Falstaff questions all the conventional socio-cultural constructs both by words and deeds. As the captain of his army he should have set an example of commitment to "duty" and "glory" but he can see through the dominant ideology and the reality of socio-cultural constructs and in the true postmodernist sense parodies them and their status as universal absolute truths (Jameson, 1991). Through his skeptical reasoning he offers a challenge to dominant socio-cultural constructs and exposes their reality as mere words and constructs. In a postmodernist sense, he regards warriors as not more than "food for powder" and not more than flesh to fill the pits (IV.ii.60). His postmodernist reference to his soldiers as only mortal men, is misunderstood by Rees as "callousness". Falstaff, the metaphor of subversion and "surface" is very much like Wilfred Owen, in his representations of the "glory" in war and honour. Falstaff rejects and dismantles the oldest construct of honour as not more than "air" and jumble of words, (V .i. 126--139), just like Owen does in "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1965). Instead of strengthening the construct of



glory, he considers his soldiers only fit targets for gun powder and accepts bribe to spare men from conscription and war duties. From the perspective of these people, it would have been the best ever bargain (Auden, 1970). He also comes up with his own definition of valour and life. Unlike the mother of Achilles, he believes dead cannot hear songs of honour and glory sung for them (Aeschylus, r. p., 1972).

His postmodernist rejection of all reference points makes him a sinner and a rogue by the conventional standards. His crime of addressing the anointed King as “my boy” in King Henry IV Part Two, is a subversion of sanctioned and embodied power. Like a “lunatic”, he means to dissolve the boundaries between the high and low and fails, and as a consequence, is duly punished by the establishment. He lives by his own personal, private standards, which are constantly revised. He also exposes the reality of men belonging to gentry like Master Shallow as being nothing but cheat and liars by the same standards. Interestingly, Rees, for his own implication into the dominant socio-cultural constructs and the dominant ideology, criticizes Falstaff for questioning these constructs and finds him coward, “self-indulgent” and lazy. Judging by the constructed truths, which function as reference points, with supposed independent positive presence, he accuses him of being shameless. The role performance by Falstaff and Prince Harry alternatively of the King (II.iv.) is the ultimate metaphor of language creating the reality and of perspectivism and relativism, as suggested by Leotard (1984). Prince’s contention that he is a factor for the present glory of Percy, is what Derrida (2016) means by metaphysics of presence, which problematizes certainties and totalities and shows that the present reality is only differential and relational. This confirms the postmodernist position that reality is subjective and personal and its rejection of external reference points. It establishes the constructed nature of reality only as a consequence of language games, along with all other socio-cultural constructs. With the change of position a new but contradictory perspective emerges. The absolute conformity of both Harry Percy and Harry Monmouth to these constructs of honour and glory confirms their position of totalities as suggested by Leotard (1984).

Harry Percy, before his death, like Macbeth (Shakespeare, r.p.1997), experiences the trauma of the real and can see through the hollowness of these “proud” socio-cultural constructs of honour and glory (Shakespeare, 1980, V.iv.76—90). Even the Prince himself is totally disillusioned with “ill-woven ambition” and all its tall but false claims. One is reminded of the absurdist definition of life by Macbeth, in the Shakespearean play of the same title, “Life is a brief candle...” (1997). The current deconstructionist reading finds the Prince Lancaster as a treacherous man, making false pledges (Henry IV Part Two, IV, ii. 59). He reveals the true colour and nature of nobility and honour. He does not “maintain” his solemn vows and pledges and through treachery and fraud arrests Archbishop and lord Mowbray, the rebel commanders when they have already scattered their forces at the signing of a peace treaty. Prince Lancaster by his conduct subverts the chivalrous code of honour by sending yielded prisoners to gallows. Almost the whole of nobility is nothing but a bunch of intriguers, schemers, plotters and conspirators. They indulge in scheming and conspiring against each other, exposing the reality of nobility. Lord Douglas prefers his life to honour and flees from war.

King himself becomes the postmodernist metaphor, before his death, when he regards the subjective, imaginary reality, which “shapes in forms imaginary”, the condition of his kingdom under Harry after his death (Shakespeare, 1980, Henry IV Part Two, IV. iv. 59). It is also a fine instance of language creating the reality. King also views Harry as the mocker of “form”. He further dismantles the sanctity and the reality of the socio-cultural constructs. He exposes the myth of the glory and the lie behind undertaking wars and conquests in the name of duty, glory, honour and patriotism. Similarly, the rebel knights who claim apparently to oppose the King for honour and dignity, actually indulge in dishonourable deeds, intrigues and schemes. King and Harry Percy see the true reality of life towards the end of their lives. King in Henry IV Part Two (Shakespeare,r.p.1980), exposes the true worth of crown, when he begs for “partial sleep” which a sea boy enjoys and is denied to the King (III. i. 4-31) and himself dismantles all the constructs of glory, honour and of the glorification of war and warfare (Shakespeare, r.p.1980) Henry IV Part Two, III. i. 46-56). Lady Percy in Henry IV Part Two rejects the war when she forbids Northumberland from going to war and by cursing the god of war itself as the “hideous god of war” ( II. iii. 35). The play ends with the brand new identity of King Harry, therefore proving the postmodernist notion of the fluid nature of identity.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The exhaustive analysis and interpretation of the play in the light of selected theoretical frame work, has addressed the hypotheses and the research questions of the study and has shown that the text of the play consists of multiple strands. The apparent dominant narrative presents the play to be only about the honour, glory, duty and nobility and the initiation of the prince into the social cultural hierarchies and his reformation, which climaxes into the Prince’s rejection of Falstaff, as the fountainhead of evil. The presence of alternative micro- narratives challenge and undermine the totalities and hierarchies celebrating the socio-cultural constructs of honour, glory, duty, nobility as absolute truths. These “truths”, including the reality of the Crusades, are shown to be not more than constructs, stories,

perspectives and fictions in the service of status quo. The current study has dismantled the myth of unified, single metanarrative and subjectivities.

The study has also shown that Falstaff, contrary to the general perception of being only the fountainhead of fun and evil, is actually the strongest metaphor of postmodernist notions of pluralism, perspectivism and the rejection of foundationalist assumptions. He has exposed the notion of honour and nobility to be not more than fictionality and a language game, a mere jumble of words. Similarly, the pluralistic strands of the subjectivities of Percy and Prince also challenge and question these foundationalist assumptions and the metaphysics of presence. The study has shown that the presence of alternative micro narratives actually challenge, subvert and undermine the socio-cultural constructs of honour, duty, glory and nobility. The character of Falstaff anticipates postmodernist skepticism towards traditional concepts. The study has shown that the text of the play consists of multiple strands, and these strands not only maintain their individual identity, they contest and challenge each other. The study has also shown that the subjectivities of the characters are split and dispersed.

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