

Elaborating on Shakespeare

A Study of the Assimilation and Rejection of Shakespearean Character Elaborations

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Introduction

Umberto Eco begins one of the sections in his essay “On Some Functions of Literature” with the matter-of-fact statement: “Characters migrate” (8). Character migration is, in other words, not a new notion to the literary world at large, and yet there seems to be curiously little interest in either the process of migration itself, or the implications inherent in its realization. But anyone taking the time to examine these “migrations” at a closer level should immediately be struck by the many interesting questions and issues that arise in conjunction with the phenomenon. As Eco states, “certain characters have become somehow true for the collective imagination because over the course of centuries we have made emotional investments in them” (10). He goes on to describe how characters or “literary entities [...] exist like a cultural habitus, a social disposition” (11). Eco, willing to take this premise to its logical conclusion, confronts the reader with the following intriguing proposition:

Just imagine that you are avidly reading *War and Peace*, wondering whether Natasha will finally give in to Anatoly's blandishments, whether that wonderful Prince Andrej will really die, whether Pierre will have the courage to shoot Napoléon, and now at last you can re-create your own Tolstoy, conferring a long, happy life on Andrej and making Pierre the liberator of Europe. You could even reconcile Emma Bovary with poor Charles and make her a happy and fulfilled mother, or decide that Little Red Riding-Hood goes into the woods and meets Pinocchio, or rather, that she gets kidnapped by her stepmother, given the name Cinderella, and made to work for Scarlett O'Hara; or that she meets a magic helper named Vladimir J. Propp in the woods, who gives her a magic ring that allows her to discover, at the foot of the Thugs' sacred banyan tree, the Aleph, that point from which the whole universe can be seen. Anna Karenina doesn't die beneath the train because Russian narrow-gauge railways, under Putin's government, are less efficient than their submarines, while away in the distance, on the other side of Alice's looking-glass, is Jorge Luis Borges reminding Funes the Memorious not to forget to return *War and Peace* to the Library of Babel. (12)

At first glance this seems excessive, and yet we need look no further than Alan Moore's critically acclaimed graphic novel *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, in which the characters Mina Harker, Alan Quartermain, The Invisible Man, Captain Nemo and Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde,¹ all are brought together in a shared universe populated by a veritable who's who of Victorian literature from Dr. Moreau to John Carter.

The phenomenon is perhaps best accounted for in the following excerpt by Alastair Fowler from his *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, which I choose to reproduce in its full length on account of its thoroughness:

Rather more like genre is the epicyclic or elaborative type: groups of works that exploit the fictive world of some great or popular predecessor (Orlando Innamorato; Orlando Furioso). It is an important type, for it includes such masterpieces as *Paradise Lost*. And it is a numerous type, for there are hundreds of Robinson

¹ Lifted from the works of Bram Stoker, H. Rider Haggard, H. G. Wells, Jules Verne and Robert Louis Stevenson respectively.

Crusoes and Gullivers; scores of elaborations of the Hamlet world; many Alices; and, now, Huck Finns and Jane Eyres. Sometimes the focus is a paradigmatic character rather than a work (Verdi's and Nye's Falstaffs). Where the new work is a sequel to the original (or a "prequel," like Denis Judd's Adventures of Long John Silver) it is common to show specific points of departure from it – moments at which the reader can imagine himself looking, if you will, from the ectypic world through its door into the paradigm. And it is usual for relatively minor characters of the original to become major characters in the elaboration: Claudius or Horatio is the hero of the epicyclic Hamlet, not the prince. In spite of those approaches to "rules," however, the type is not a genre. Elaborations of an original have the latter as their context, rather than each other. Their relations are radial, not circumferential. (127)

From the standpoint of generic definition Fowler, arguably, says all that needs to be said on the matter, and yet both he and Eco, as so many other critics, fail to address a point which to me seems integral to elaboration, namely its attempt to gain authority over the source material. While Fowler posits that the elaborations have their original source material as their context, I would argue that there are instances where the elaborations also are able to reshape and reappropriate the material it is elaborating on. In other words, the characters are not just rewritten in the elaboration, but retroactively in the source material, as the receiver's perception of the character becomes challenged and expanded upon through elaboration.

We live in a world where fan-fiction² is fast becoming recognized as legitimate literature, to the point where the web giant amazon.com has launched its own business model to make possible the publishing of potentially copyright-infringing material.³ Recognizing this, one would think that the idea of a literary entity as a definite personage with a universally accepted embodiment in terms of physical features, traits and back story should find itself in a precarious position. After all, once a character is separated from its original creator and seized upon by the larger public, there no longer seems to exist one dominant authority or vision to determine what constitutes a valid iteration of the character. And yet, this does not seem to be the case, so that even though it is by all means possible to rewrite *Robinson Crusoe* or *Alice in Wonderland* as both Eco and Fowler point out has already been done, such undertakings arguably leave little lasting impression on our contemporary perception of the characters they deal with. For instance, *Dracula, the Un-Dead* (2009), a novel marketed as the "official" sequel to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* by virtue of its being co-written by the original author's great grand-nephew Dacre Stoker, caused little stir upon its release. And perhaps unsurprisingly, yet undoubtedly contrary to expectations on the publishers part, several critics punished the novel for its attempt to align itself with Bram Stoker's original work. Reviewer Amy Gwiasdowski summed it up well in the blog bookreporter.com: "In the end, *Dracula the Un-Dead* is a fast read and exciting in parts, but I think too much is asked of readers of the original in having to forgo old beliefs of who and what Dracula is. It's best to just enjoy it for what it is: another vampire

² Read: the readers' revisionist, preceding or continuative, elaborations of their favorite works of literature.

³ As documented here <http://techonomy.com/2013/07/with-fan-fiction-amazon-continues-remaking-the-book-business/>

story for October.”

While *Dracula The Un-Dead* might be an unfair example on account of the strong suspicion one gets of the novel being little more than an obvious cash-grab leeching off Stoker's original work, I mention it to highlight that even a pulpy potboiler with small or no aspirations to literary greatness encounters in its readers a preformed conception of “who” and “what” Dracula is, and that failure to adhere to this belief will lead to a rejection of the attempted revision. My thesis will examine this process of rejection and assimilation of character elaborations in order to try and shed light on how it relates to our conception of character. By character elaboration, I mean a work expanding or repurposing elements from an earlier original literary source, so that previously established characters are being reappropriated and/or reinterpreted. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan states that “the elaboration of a systematic, non-reductive but also non-impressionistic theory of character remains one of the challenges poetics has not yet met” (29), and yet, by exploring the way in which character elaborations succeed or fail in the public's perception, we might be able to discover more about which attributes define a character, or the nature of a character's “essence,” if you will. Thus, the main question this thesis proposes to investigate is: What happens in the process of character elaboration, how do we account for an elaboration's rejection or approval by its audience and how does this relate to the concept of character as a whole?

The history of character elaboration does not appear to have been successfully chronicled,⁴ and so I will take the time to mention some brief examples to demonstrate that elaboration on characters plays a prominent part in the history of literature. One early and perhaps notorious example is Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda's⁵ elaboration on the character of Don Quijote, written in the wake of Cervantes' first volume of *Don Quijote* (1605). What has made this example so well-known is the fact that even though Avellaneda's elaboration walks a fine line between elaboration and plagiarism, it gained such widespread popularity with the public that Cervantes was compelled to directly address the issue in his second volume:

“Take it from me, gentlemen,” said Sancho. “The Sancho and the Don Quijote in that book have got to be different people from the ones in Sidi Hamid Benengeli's book, because the ones in his book are us: my master is brave and wise, and madly in love, and I'm just a plain fellow with a good sense of humor, and no glutton and no drunkard.” (Cervantes 674)

Other examples include Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742), wherein Fielding directly comments on the characters from Samuel Richardson's *Pamela: Or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) by

⁴ Though we saw Fowler list several examples of works that have been elaborated on like *Huckleberry Finn*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Treasure Island* and *Robinson Crusoe* in his description of the phenomenon.

⁵ Possibly a pseudonym for Lope de Vega or Jerónimo de Pasamonte (Cervantes 765).

creating Joseph Andrews, the brother of Richardson's heroine Pamela,⁶ and Bertolt Brecht's elaboration of the character Macheath, from John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* (1728) and its sequel *Polly* (1729), in *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). And then there are more modern examples like Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) which (implicitly) elaborates on the character of Bertha Antoinette Mason from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) or P. D. James' *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2011) which functions as a sequel to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Finally, elaboration can also be seen to be a prevalent part of mainstream pop-culture, where we encounter various iterations of characters like James Bond, Tarzan and Zorro, who often share little resemblance with their original conceptions in the works of Fleming, Burroughs and McCulley.

For the purposes of this thesis, I have selected three characters from Shakespeare who have been elaborated on, though in slightly different ways. The first two are the virtually indistinguishable courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from *Hamlet*, who occupy a minimal position in the plot, while the third character is the fat knight Sir John Falstaff, whose conception in Shakespeare is realized through no less than four separate plays, and so rests comfortably at the opposite end of the character spectrum from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, insofar as he is a well-defined, prominent character. By examining the elaborations of two minor and one major character we will hopefully be able to compare and contrast the degree to which their original conceptions in Shakespeare have influenced their subsequent iterations, and their rejection or acceptance with the public.

As for what kind of method we can apply in our examination of these elaborations, it gets complicated, since Rimmon-Kenan has already stated that there exists no definite theory of character wherein we can locate the necessary tools by which a character's "essence" can be identified. And yet, in order to successfully contrast and compare between different character iterations we will need a consistent set of terms and categorical distinctions that can serve as a unifying foundation to the discussion. For this purpose I have selected Manfred Pfister's book *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*: a fairly recent and comprehensive attempt at establishing a theory of dramatic analysis, in which analysis of character plays a prominent part. However, while the framework provided by Pfister's model for character analysis will be applied in our initial examination of the characters of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Falstaff, there are some reservations to Pfister's dramatic theory I wish to address.

Pfister makes a firm distinction between dramatic figures and "people or characters from real life" (161).⁷ Pfister's main argument is that the dramatic figure is a structure that is so firmly

⁶ Pamela's role in *Joseph Andrews* is minimal, but it none the less qualifies as an example of elaboration of a previously established character.

⁷ It is worth noting that Pfister uses the term "character" in direct opposition to the way most scholars do, in that he

embedded in the text from whence it came that any attempts to define the figure outside of it seem not just to be futile but actually rather misguided. In Pfister's view the text always defines the dramatic figures and not the other way around:

For unlike real characters who, of course, are influenced by their social context, but who on reaching maturity are able to transcend it, dramatic figures cannot be separated from their environment because they only exist in relationship to their environment and are only constituted in the sum of their relations to that environment. [...] What this means can be illustrated by the following comparison: whilst it is perfectly reasonable to ask in real life what Mr. Smith would do in Mr. Jones's position and vice versa, the question as to how Hamlet would behave in Othello's position and Othello in Hamlet's reflects a complete misunderstanding of the special status of fictional figures and can be no more than a form of unverifiable speculation. (161)

Pfister's point on the artificial nature of dramatic figures is valid, and it is hard to refute his assertion that "the set of information that determines a figure in a dramatic text is finite and closed" (161) or his claim, already mentioned, that any attempts to expand upon the text are at best unverifiable. However, Pfister bases his argument on the notion that there is a definite text or dramatic figure that exists for every one of the text's readers. If this were the case it would follow that if the representation of a dramatic figure on stage were rejected by the people in the audience as a poor interpretation, the blame should in all cases lie with either the actors or the director, since it seems obvious that they must have taken liberties with the source material. That seems to me a rather reductive take on dramatic figures and the power inherent in their representation. Harold Bloom describes the realization of such power rather well when he points out that

in a lifetime of playgoing, one can encounter some sameness among Lears, Othellos, and Macbeths. But every actor's Hamlet is almost absurdly different from the others. The most memorable Hamlet that I have attended, John Gielgud's, caught the prince's charismatic nobility, but perhaps too much at the sacrifice of Hamlet's restless intellectuality. There will always be as many Hamlets as there are actors, directors, playgoers, readers, critics. Hazlitt uttered a more-than-Romantic truth in his: "It is we who are Hamlet." (413)

Bloom touches on the heart of the matter by drawing attention to the fact that the dramatic figures that Pfister claims exist grounded in the text are at all times being defined by the various readers that encounter them. And more importantly, what both Pfister and Bloom allude to, but fail to fully address, is the fact that nearly all of us have some notion of a "core-persona" in the theatrical figure that leads us to reject some Hamlets and approve of others. Bloom's appraisal of Gielgud's Hamlet is measured by how well it compares to Bloom's own Hamlet, and I would suggest that the success of most stagings of famous plays largely depends on how well they are able to establish a favorable comparison between the theatrical figures on the stage and those in the mind of the audience. Thus, Bloom states that "[while] it is true that Shakespeare's persons are only images or complex

applies the term to real people and no one else, whereas the literary entities we would call characters he instead calls dramatic figures. So in order to avoid any confusion, I will align myself with Pfister for the time being and apply the term dramatic figure to the concept that I would rather call "character."

metaphors, our pleasure in Shakespeare primarily comes from the persuasive illusion that these shadows are cast by entities as substantial as ourselves” (280). I would like to argue that Bloom's “illusions” and Pfister's “dramatic figures” can actually be perceived as something akin to living entities, or at least dynamic concepts, on the merit of their continually residing in a public consciousness as part of this or that collective myth.

It is this idea of characters as dynamic concepts that we will explore through our examination of character elaboration. If it is possible to identify any consistent causes for rejection or approval of different elaborations of the same character, one suspects that it could give us a clearer understanding of the nature of that character's “core persona” or “essence,” by revealing which traits or parts of the character that are deemed significant by its audience when they judge the different character elaborations. But, while Pfister's dramatic theory will supply the structural framework for our analysis, there is still the need for a theory that can account for the possibility of a character's realization taking place not just through its conception in the original work or through the readers' stubborn insistence on subjective perception.

Wolfgang Iser offers an answer to this question in the first chapter of his *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* when he suggests that the limitations of literary depiction, “the empty spaces”, actually serve to expand the readers' conception of the material on account of their instinct to fill in the blanks by themselves. Iser explains the concept by drawing comparisons to Henry James' short story “The Figure in the Carpet” in which a critic is struggling with his attempts to concisely define a work of literature that appears to contain some strange elements that are beyond his faculties of perception. “Instead of being able to grasp meaning like an object the critic is confronted by an empty space. And this emptiness cannot be filled by a single referential meaning, and any attempt to reduce it in this way leads to nonsense” (8). Already one should be able to hear the echoes of Pfister's insistence that any attempt to define a dramatic figure outside of its textual point of reference should be seen as “unverifiable speculation,” but Iser insists that this is not the case:

But the formulated text [...] represents a pattern, a structured indicator to guide the imagination of the reader; and so the meaning can only be grasped as an image. The image provides the filling for what the textual pattern structures but leaves out. [...] It brings into existence something that is to be found neither outside the book nor on its printed pages. (9)

It is this “something” which exists neither outside the text nor within its pages that forms the basis of a character. Iser calls it “meaning” and argues that it is not something that exists independently in the text, but can only come into existence through “an interaction between the textual signals and the reader's acts of comprehension” (9). I stress this point as it is integral to understand the way characters take on their identities. If we are to identify a character we need to examine the character

as an embodied interaction between the text and the reader, which is why the response of critics to the characters of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Falstaff will form an integral part of my analysis. Naturally, the extent of this empirical attempt to establish the tradition of any particular character must fall short in a mere thesis, but I still hope to make a case for attempting to show how one could theoretically apply this kind of analysis, which incorporates both comparative structural analysis and analysis of critical reception, to various characters to try and explain how they become grounded in the collective consciousness, and more importantly how it is the nature of their definition by the public consciousness that informs the public's opinion of the respective elaborations as either failures or successes.

There still remains the problem of defining how a character is realized by the responses of the various receivers. I have mentioned the "essence" of a character, or a character's "core-persona," but these are merely placeholder terms to describe the lowest common denominator between the various readings or interpretation of any given character and do not sufficiently explain the process through which this definition is formed. There is arguably no definite way to sufficiently account for this process, but I believe Stanley Fish comes close in his essay "Interpreting the Variorum," where he introduces the term "interpretive communities" to describe how groups of people with corresponding readings⁸ of any given "meaning" form as they are able to hold a discourse on account of the relative sameness of their premises (Fish 398).

This seems to me the most constructive approach to the issue of canonical rejection. After all, since I will be trying to establish that the characters are ultimately shaped by their blank spaces and their possible realizations, it will be impossible to say once and for all that realization A is empirically wrong while realization B is empirically correct. Iser has a great passage to illustrate this:

A typical example of this process is the Milton controversy between C. S. Lewis and F. R. Leavis, which Leavis summed up as follows: "It is not that he and I see different things when we look at *Paradise Lost*. He sees and hates the very same that I see and love." It is evident that they have identical criteria, but draw totally different conclusions from them – the act of comprehension itself is obviously intersubjective, since they have responded to the same thing. [...] How can value judgments be so subjective if they are based on such objective criteria? (25)

Fish's "interpretive communities" seems to be the best answer to this, and I will try to argue that the success of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which is one of the elaborations we will examine, is largely owing to its successfully engaging such a large interpretive community that to a great extent seems to accept Stoppard's work as "a re-creation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the 'stored', material is literally revived, given new life and soul

⁸ Fish talks about how the group of people are "writing" the same text, to describe how they are filling in blank spaces to create a new text, which Fish argues is the accurate description of every individual's interaction with a text.

through having to meet a new situation” (Iser 132).⁹

This is important because some works such as Stoppard's play seem to be given a sort of authority that allows them to retroactively shape our perception of the source material they are lifting from.¹⁰ As Iser describes it “the old conditions the form of the new, and the new selectively restructures the old. The reader's reception of the text is not based on identifying two different experiences (old versus new), but on the interaction between the two (132). And yet, as we will come to see, this is not always the case; some works fail and some works succeed in convincing the readers to reconcile the offered depictions of character x with their previously established definition of the same character.

In the case of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, there are only two known major elaborations of the characters, W. S. Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (1874) and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), and so the first chapter of this thesis will deal with their role in *Hamlet* and their subsequent iterations in these two works. On the other hand, the character of Sir John Falstaff has received a great deal more attention and there exists a multitude of different elaborations of him: some famous examples include, but are not limited to, William Kenricks' comedy *Falstaff's Wedding* (1760), Verdi's opera *Falstaff* (1893) and Orson Welles' film *Chimes at Midnight* (1966).¹¹ If we then take into account that Falstaff's original Shakespearean conception features in the four plays of *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry V* (although he is never shown on stage in this last play) it should be apparent why I have been forced to make a limited selection of works to examine in the chapter on Falstaff.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Falstaff's character is linked to the idea that there might exist two different conceptions of him in Shakespeare. Harold Bloom begins his chapter on *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in his book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* by ceremoniously disavowing its protagonist: “I begin, though, with the firm declaration that the hero-villain of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a nameless impostor masquerading as the great Sir John Falstaff. Rather than yield to such usurpation, I shall call him pseudo-Falstaff throughout this brief discussion” (315). And yet, Bloom is hardly alone in pointing out that there is a noticeable discord between Shakespeare's portrayal of the character in this play and that of the history plays. The effect of which is that many critics and readers alike have shrugged off the John Falstaff of *The Merry*

⁹ Iser is quoting John Dewey.

¹⁰ Take for instance how the iteration of Sherlock Holmes in the BBC's television series *Sherlock* (2010-) identifies himself as a “highly-functioning sociopath”, a diagnosis many modern readers would humorously agree applies equally well to Conan Doyle's original creation.

¹¹ In addition to Verdi's *Falstaff* there are several other operas based upon the fat knight's role in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, such as Antonio Salieri's *Falstaff* (1799) and Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Sir John in Love* (1924-1928). Another curious elaboration of Falstaff occurs in Arthur C. Clarke's science-fiction novel *Rama II* (1989) wherein the fat knight is featured as a talking robot.

Wives of Windsor and refuse to recognize him as the same character as the one in *Henry IV parts One and Two*.

I think it would be interesting to make this issue the central topic of Chapter 2, and examine how the readers actually refuse to acknowledge Shakespeare's authority on the nature of one of his characters; whether on account of the forcefulness of Falstaff's character in the Henriad or some other reason. Furthermore, this could provide a contrast to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are perhaps seen as more loosely defined characters, and in that respect harder to misrepresent in an elaboration. For this reason my selection of works for the chapter on Falstaff will primarily focus on the four plays by Shakespeare featuring Falstaff, rather than any of the fat knight's later elaborations; though I have included one such instance of later elaboration, Robert Nye's novel *Falstaff* (1976), to show how Shakespeare's attempt to elaborate on his character contrasts to a modern undertaking of the same task.

To reiterate, this thesis will examine the development of the characters of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Falstaff from their original iterations in Shakespeare's plays to their subsequent elaborations. Chapter 1 will deal with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the issues that arise when elaboration of very minor characters is undertaken. Chapter 2 will then examine a more complex character, Sir John Falstaff, with a specific focus on how the rejection of Shakespeare's own elaboration in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* challenges the notion of the original creator's authority in the question of defining a character. Having done with this, we will move on to the conclusion where the findings will be summarized and examined in the context of my stated research question. Finally, we will see how the findings in this thesis could form the basis for further research on the phenomenon of character elaboration. It is my hope that this thesis will be able to make a case for the argument that we are all continuously rewriting literary characters by making decisions about which character elaborations we choose to perceive as valid iterations, and that the examination of this process could help to expand our concept of character, as we see which traits are emphasized or ignored in the establishing of a character's "true" nature. And with those words we will move on to Chapter 1.

1 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

1.1 Chapter introduction

In this chapter I propose to take a thorough look at the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the way they are depicted in three different plays from three different centuries. The plays are *Hamlet* (ca. 1600) by Shakespeare, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (1874) by W.S. Gilbert and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966-7) by Tom Stoppard. To clarify, we are looking at a set of characters originally invented by Shakespeare who are later used by two different authors, with almost a full century between them, in a new context. As stated in the introduction, I am under the notion that if we can successfully analyze the discourse surrounding the original Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and their subsequent migration to the two other plays, the results should be able to tell us something about the process of character elaboration and the collective canonization of a character; or put in simpler terms, how a character is redefined through life outside its source material.

The reason we are dealing with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as opposed to for instance Hamlet or Claudius, who also appear in both Gilbert's and Stoppard's work, is that neither of the latter characters are Shakespeare's invention, and as such have already been canonized on the merit of their having their roots in folklore rather than artistic invention. This is a distinction I stress to make early on, as part of my goal is to examine precisely how literary characters whose origins and authorship we are aware of, still are able to transcend from being the property of say, Shakespeare, to become the property of Shakespeare, Gilbert, Stoppard and other potential writers. I realize that this distinction might seem arbitrary at first glance, but if we consider the way in which modern copyright laws go to great lengths to establish what is "available in the public domain" it should be apparent that the question of authorship is extremely relevant.¹²

1.1.1 The origins of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

The first order of business is to locate the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern within the original *Hamlet*, and determine what we know about Shakespeare's invention of them and their role in the play itself. This is not only so that it can be possible to compare their depiction in the three plays, but also so as to enable us to discuss the truly engaging question: why Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Is there anything inherent in Shakespeare's original depiction that rendered them

¹² Though the emergence of the internet and the aforementioned publishing-models for fan-fiction are certainly rocking the boat with regards to the distinction between public and private characters.

specifically apt to appropriation by other authors? After all, Fowler has already hinted in his *Kinds of Literature* that “it is usual for relatively minor characters of the original to become major characters in the elaboration” (127) and Stoppard himself stated that “the play *Hamlet* and the character Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the only play and the only characters on which you could write my kind of play” (Gordon 64). This seems to support the notion that there exists an answer to the question of why Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were selected.

If we are to fully determine Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's status in the works and in the collective consciousness it is best to leave no stone unturned, meaning that it will be necessary to examine not only the characters themselves: their names, backstory and lines in the play, but also some structural analysis of how they fit as mere cogs into the sometimes menacing engine that is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as well as readers' reaction to them and the different ways in which people have filled in the blank spots to complete their image of the pair.

I wish to begin with a blank slate at this point. William Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in the early 1600s based on an existing folklore tradition written down by Saxo and Belleforest, and possibly a previous lost play referred to as the *Ur-Hamlet*¹³ (Thompson and Taylor 45); disregarding the *Ur-Hamlet*, the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not to be found in either Saxo or Belleforest. In their place there are two sinister persons who are either guards of the king or common mercenaries whose purpose in the story is to escort the young prince to England to have him killed (A. Morgan 397). Shakespeare however, seems to have seen an opportunity to expand upon the story and so turned these two rogues into old school-fellows of Hamlet.

In the Arden 3 *Hamlet* the notes to the list of roles helpfully gives us the following details in relation to the naming of the respective characters:

In 1588 Daniel Rogers was sent by queen Elizabeth I to Elsinore to pay her respects to the new King of Denmark, Christian IV, and his report mentions among the members of Christian's court 'George Rosenkrantz of Rosenholm', 'Axel Guildenstern of Lyngbye, Viceroy of Norway' and 'Peter Guildenstern, Marshall of Denmark' [...] Another possible source for Shakespeare is the portrait of the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe which was published in the 1596 and 1601 editions of his collected astronomical letters: the family names 'Rosenkrantz' and 'Guldenstern' appear under coats of arms representing Brahe's ancestors on the arch surrounding the likeness. (143)

The names Rosencrantz and Guildenstern mean “wreath or crown of roses” and “golden star” respectively (143), though there seems to be little connection between the actual meaning of their names and their portrayal in *Hamlet*. Instead, it seems likely that Shakespeare chose the names first and foremost because they seemed typical surnames for Danish noblemen.

¹³ The authorship of *Ur-Hamlet* is uncertain though both Shakespeare and Thomas Kyd have been suggested.

1.1.2 Defining the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*

The size of the roles of the two courtiers are not very large in terms of spoken lines; a count of lines in the Penguin edition of *Hamlet* edited by T. J. B. Spencer, done by Shakespearelinecount.com, puts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at 97 and 53 lines each, which if compared to Horatio with his 292 lines or Laertes with his 205 lines does not amount to very much. It is however interesting to note that even though it is common knowledge that the two parts are virtually interchangeable in terms of character, one of them speaks nearly twice as many lines as the other. That being said, the fact remains that one could very easily redistribute all their spoken lines between the two and not encounter much resistance from the play; no meaning would be lost and the context would remain the same.

This speaks volumes of the degree in which the two roles are entangled; the one is never on stage without the other. In the eight scenes they appear in, namely 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 they share a total of 11 entrances and exits between them. Because of this Pfister specifically evokes them as the prime example of “concomitant figures”, or figures whose “entrances and exits coincide completely” (173).

1.1.2.1 Detailed Analysis of Character

Having established that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern operate as a pair on a fundamental level and that they appear to be virtually interchangeable, the next question to ask is what kind of role does this pair represent? Pfister suggests some useful sets of opposed properties to help define a character as it appears in a play and I propose to use these in my analysis. The paired properties are lifted from Pfister's section on figure conception in Chapter 5 “*Dramatis personae and dramatic figure*” of his *Theory and Analysis of Drama* and are as follows:

Static versus dynamic figure conception
Mono- versus multidimensional conceptions of figure
Personification – type versus individual
Open versus closed figure conception
Transpsychological versus psychological figure conception

What follows is an attempt to apply these terms to an analysis of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

1.1.2.1.1 Static versus dynamic

The first pair of properties, static versus dynamic, concerns the character's capacity for change during the course of the play. Pfister takes care to emphasize that the receiver's perception (the audience or reader) of a static character can change during the course of the play as new information is accumulated about events and characters, but in order for the character to be labeled

dynamic it must “undergo a process of development in the course of the text; their sets of distinguishing features change, either in a continuous process or a disjointed series of jumps” (177). If we take these criteria and look at Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, it does not take much close scrutiny to see that they remain very much the same from their appearance in act 2.2 to their final exit in 4.4.

This is not to say that the events taking place do not give them opportunities for change. In act 2.2. from line 234 onwards¹⁴ we see how Hamlet emphasizes their former friendship and tries to get an honest answer out of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pertaining to their appearance at the court of Elsinore:

HAMLET. Then is doomsday near – but your news is not true. But in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore?

ROSENCRANTZ. To visit you, my lord, no other occasion.

HAMLET. Beggar that I am, I am ever poor in thanks, but I thank you, and sure, dear friends, my thanks are too dear a halfpenny. Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, come, deal justly with me. Come, come, nay speak.

GUILDENSTERN. What should we say, my lord?

HAMLET. Anything but to th' purpose. You were sent for, and there is a kind of confession in your looks, which your modesties have not craft enough to colour. I know the good King and Queen have sent for you.

ROSENCRANTZ. To what end, my lord?

HAMLET. That you must teach me. But let me conjure you, by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love, and by what more dear a better proposer can charge you withal, be even and direct with me whether you were sent for or no.

ROSENCRANTZ. What say you?

HAMLET. Nay then, I have an eye of you. If you love me, hold not off.

GUILDENSTERN. My lord, we were sent for. (2.2.234-58)

¹⁴ All *Hamlet* quotations will be from the Arden 3 *Hamlet* edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor unless otherwise stated.

The example above more or less serves to illustrate all the subsequent scenes between Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Hamlet: Their scenes generally involve the two courtiers acting upon the orders of the royal couple, “To draw him on to pleasures and to gather / So much as from occasion may glean, / Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus / that opened lies within our remedy” (2.2.15-18), and Hamlet dodging their attempts while accusing them openly and in riddles of being false friends. This pattern is never broken, and we see that from their first appearance in the play (2.2.1-39) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern align themselves with the king and queen, and throughout all the events that transpire in the play they remain obedient to the task placed upon them. Their configuration never changes in relation to the power struggle between Prince Hamlet and his parents, and so we can conclude that they appear to be rather static characters.

1.1.2.1.2 Mono- or multidimensional

Pfister describes the distinction between mono and multidimensional as being more or less akin to the usual preconception of 'flat' or 'round' characters. A monodimensional character is a character who is “defined by a small set of distinguishing features” (178); a character whose essence we can describe in very few terms. The gravedigger in *Hamlet* is a good example of such a character; he is a clown (in the theatrical sense of the word) digging graves. No aspects of his character appear to be left out in that description. In contrast we have characters who are multidimensional: “[they are] defined by a complex set of features taken from the most disparate levels and may, for example, concern his or her biographical background, psychological disposition, interpersonal behavior towards different people, the ways he or she reacts to widely differing situations and his or her ideological orientation” (179).

Take Ophelia as an example: Though she has a relatively small part in terms of lines in *Hamlet* we see her displaying a variety of dispositions in a number of situations: affectionate towards her brother, obedient towards her father, loving towards Hamlet and finally mad with despair. If we compare the examples of Ophelia and the gravedigger to the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern it becomes apparent that they resemble the latter more than the former. They are only ever defined by their former friendship to Hamlet and their attempt to win Claudius and Gertrude's favor. We never see them displaying any other dispositions to give us a glimpse of any underlying character or motivation to inform our interpretation of them. In fact, they are never shown to display any sort of introspection, and the motivation for their actions are given voice not by either of them but by the queen: “For the supply and profit of our hope, / Your visitation shall receive such thanks / As fits a king's remembrance” (2.2.24-26). We never hear Rosencrantz or Guildenstern dwell on this subject, and are left to infer by their actions whether they ascribe to this given motive or not.

1.1.2.1.3 Type or individual

Owing to their parity within the play, it should already seem safe to say that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not qualify as individuals. Instead we should try to examine what type they can be said to best embody. Pfister mentions several types from the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, such as the 'country squire', the 'scholar' and the 'courtier' to illustrate how Shakespeare and other playwrights used so-called character portraits or preconditioned dramatic figures to fill particular functions in their plays (179). And Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear to resemble the type of the 'courtier,' since on the surface level of the text, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are only ever seen maneuvering to gain favor with the king and this is the chief defining trait of the 'courtier'.

Later discussion will problematize this relegation of the pair into mere type; Tom Stoppard in particular makes it one of the central themes in his treatment of the characters in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.¹⁵

1.1.2.1.4 Open or closed

At their most basic level the terms “open” and “closed” can be paraphrased as “enigmatic” and “fully explained” respectively (Pfister 180) and Pfister's further explanation is fairly straightforward, stating that:

the figure becomes enigmatic either because relevant pieces of information – explaining the reasons for a figure's actions, for example – are simply omitted, the information defining the figure is perceived by the receiver as being incomplete, because the information contains a number of unsolvable contradictions or because these two factors (incompletion and contradiction) function together. (181)

At first glance it seems obvious that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not qualify as enigmatic characters. They come to Elsinore because they were summoned. They seek out Hamlet because they were asked to and receive promises of future unspecified rewards for their service. This is also the reason they get on the ship bound for England with Hamlet.

One cannot however, ignore the critical debate that has arisen concerning the motivation of the two courtiers, where critics have been able to make claims both for and against the actions the pair undertake in the play. To illustrate the problems that arise in connection with the motivation of the two characters let us briefly take a look at how Pfister defines a closed or fully explained character:

[It is] a closed figure conception in which the figure is completely defined by information that is explicit, [or] one in which it is completely defined by information that is partially explicit and partially implicit. In the first

¹⁵ It should also be noted that in the present day they are perhaps more readily identified as the a type of “pair” or “inseparable duo” in the sense that they are one character function realized by two characters, but as we have discussed this concerns their place in the structure of the play, not the plot.

case, the figure is defined explicitly and unambiguously for the receiver, in the second it is also unambiguous, but in a way that is only implied, thus encouraging the receiver to interpret for himself. (181)

Pfister's need to divide his definition of closed characters into two subcategories is telling, and in many ways this division serves as a poignant illustration of the situation that is the cause of the critical debate surrounding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The first part of his definition is readily acceptable for most people: a closed character is a character whose *being*, in the fullest sense of the word, is accounted for in the text. The second part, on the other hand, is a point of contention, insofar as he suggests that there can be implicit information about a character that is wholly unambiguous.

I do not wish to stray too far into the discussion on textual authority, but this point is relevant to the issue of different readers' perception of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as characters. I have already suggested that their motivation for acting like they do is that of ambition. They act on the command of the king and queen in the hope of gaining favor, playing the part of the 'courtier'. However, the fact that they meet with their deaths in England have led some critics to examine their situation closely in an attempt to determine whether their deaths can be morally justified. We will come back to this debate in the next subchapter; for now I wish to focus on the fact that the debate revolves around what is *implied* about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Whether Pfister wants to assure us that it is unmistakably implicit in the text of *Hamlet* that they are irrevocably wicked or innocent is impossible to know, but it seems that he is in danger of turning the act of interpretation into a schematic approach which affirms unmistakable truth.

And so if we take all this into account, we see that it is difficult to accurately place Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at a definite point on the scale ranging from open to closed; there are proponents skewing towards both sides of the scale. However, seeing as Pfister claims that closed characters are defined explicitly and unambiguously, we should concede that the existence of a serious critical debate concerning their characters rules out the claim that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can be defined unambiguously. This suggests that as characters the pair is more open than closed.

1.1.2.1.5 Transpsychological or psychological

Pfister describes a transpsychological character as one “whose level of self-awareness transcends the level of what is psychologically plausible, whose utterly rational and conscious forms of self-commentary can no longer be accounted for in terms of the characteristic expression of an utterly rational and conscious being” (182). If we take our previous analysis into account, it should be obvious that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not qualify as transpsychological characters. On the

contrary, they are psychological characters with a limited scope of self-awareness, to the point that we never see them comment on their own situation or their actions.

1.1.2.2 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's role in the plot of *Hamlet*

Before we move on to the critical response to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern there still remains the task of designating the size and nature of their role in *Hamlet*. We know that their lines are few, and that one can never appear without the other in the eight scenes they figure in. And yet, as Pfister points out “the length of time spent on stage and the level of participation in the text do not always necessarily coincide with the importance of a figure for the development of the plot” (165). He goes on to admit that those criteria are still valid to the assessment of a character's position in a play, which is why we have already taken the time to analyze those particulars in the roles of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but one need look no further than Shakespeare's own *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* to see that Pfister's initial reservation is valid.

And yet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are no Caesars. Pfister uses the relationship between the different pieces on a chessboard to explain how the various characters of the *dramatis personae* operate in relation to one another. They have different values and their importance in the game is largely determined by the relative freedom each piece is assigned to traverse the board (164). If we apply this analogy to *Hamlet*, it is not difficult to picture Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as pawns with little freedom of movement afforded to them within the scope of the play.

Tom Stoppard describes them as “two guys who in Shakespeare's context don't really know what they're doing. The little they are told is mainly lies, and there's no reason to suppose that they ever find out why they are killed” (R. Hudson et al. 66) and in another interview he calls them “a couple of bewildered innocents rather than a couple of henchmen, which is the usual way they are depicted in *Hamlet*” (Gordon 65). Or to cite Neil Forsyth who champions the more traditional view of their role in *Hamlet*:

They are middlemen, spies and agents of Claudius, the King of Denmark. Their mission is to find out what Hamlet, the prince, is really up to. Since they are former schoolfellows of Hamlet's, they try to play upon, in order to betray, his trust – as he quickly finds out. Then, when Claudius sends Hamlet to England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern act as his attendants, or guards, and bear a letter which instructs the English king to put Hamlet to death – but Hamlet finds the letter on the voyage, and substitutes his own letter which makes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the victims. So both aspects of their role involve betrayal, and they are themselves betrayed – one of the sources of complexity in *Hamlet* being this reversal of intentions. (118-19)

Though these two interpretations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are widely different to the point where it becomes all but impossible to reconcile the two, it is worth noting that the two courtiers are either assigned the role of helpless victims, or the role of Claudius' henchmen. Most if not all interpretations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fall in the vicinity of these camps and what they

have in common is that victims or henchmen, their role in the grand scheme of things is deemed relatively minor.

1.1.3 Receivers' response to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*

Now that we have begun to form a sort of image of the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that are found within the text of *Hamlet*, we should attempt to get some sort of oversight of the potential “blank spots” of the characters, to borrow Iser's term, and see how different receivers have responded to them. Already we have seen in the specific example of Stoppard and Forsyth that though they are minor characters with little depth, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern still find themselves surrounded by ambiguity. It remains undetermined whether they are villains or hapless bystanders caught in the crossfire between Hamlet and Claudius.

In this section I will present a slim selection of critical reactions to this debate; some selected at random, others selected for their poignant observation. My goal in doing this is twofold: First, it will enable us to get a fuller picture of the ambiguity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the possible ways in which the characters can be perceived within the framework Shakespeare provides. Secondly, it will illustrate how certain interpretive communities have been formed that champion particular iterations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and how one of these communities has paved the way for other receivers to embrace Gilbert and Stoppard's elaboration of the two courtiers.

1.1.3.1 Johnson and Bradley

In the 1909 book *Shakespeare and His Critics* by Professor Charles F. Johnson we encounter one of the early affirmations that Hamlet's treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were beginning to trouble some critics. While discussing the critic R.W. Richardson's idea of a moral Hamlet, Johnson makes the remark that:

for though it may be difficult to reconcile Hamlet's conduct in some instances, notably his sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death by means of a forged document with the idea of a passionate devotion to justice, it is evident that violation of the moral law governing the relation of the sexes is profoundly abhorrent to him, and that the knowledge of the guilt of his mother casts him into an utter agony in which the action of his mind is confused, spasmodic, and contradictory. (147-8)

I am not so interested in Johnson's line of reasoning with regards to the psychology of Hamlet as I am with his happening upon the idea of the injustice of the unhappy fate that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern suffer at the hands of Hamlet. While it is hard to establish any first instance of locating this possible moral problem, most criticism dealing with it seems to stem from the early twentieth century and onwards. In Charles Johnson's book which attempts to summarize 300 years of

Shakespeare criticism, only Johnson's contemporary A. C. Bradley is mentioned in conjunction with the problem of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Bradley professes in the same manner as Johnson that "[Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's] deaths were not in the least required by [Hamlet's] purpose" (1905:103), and he also speaks of "the Hamlet that sends his 'school-fellows' to their death and never troubles his head about them more." What Johnson and Bradley seem to realize is that it is in no way a given that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the willing accomplices of King Claudius and Queen Gertrude. Bradley explains this very well in one of his footnotes:

The state of affairs at Court at this time, though I have not seen it noticed by critics, seem to me puzzling. It is quite clear from III.ii. 310 ff., from the passage just cited, and from IV. Vii. 1-5 and 30 ff. that everyone sees in the play-scene a gross and menacing insult to the King. Yet no one shows any sign of perceiving in it also an accusation of murder. Surely that is strange. Are we perhaps to understand that they do perceive this, but out of subservience choose to ignore the fact? If that were Shakespeare's meaning, the actors could easily indicate it by their looks. And if it were so, any sympathy we may feel for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in their fate would be much diminished. But the mere text does not suffice to decide either this question or the question whether the two courtiers were aware of the contents of the commission they bore to England. (1905:137)

We see that these critics are aware of the two radically different ways of interpreting the characters, and as Bradley points out, the text itself remains ambiguous as to which of the readings is the more accurate or truthful. And while in no ways certain, there seems to be a vague suggestion that it is only within modern sensibilities of justice that the demise of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are regarded as a moral problem. It is certainly telling that Dr. Samuel Johnson, who found the death of Cordelia intolerable (155) and who goes to great lengths in his notes on *Hamlet* to expound upon the character of Polonius to cast him in a favorable light (167), does not so much as bat an eyelid when confronted with Hamlet's declaration that "They are not near my conscience" (5.2.57). Though this could also have something to do with the fact that Dr. Johnson in general preferred the Folio versions and may not have been aware of the changes between the Quarto and the Folio. As we shall see, several critics have pointed out crucial changes made from the second Quarto (Q2) to the Folio (F) that greatly influences the receiver's impression of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This could also be some of the reason why there seems to be little in the way of critical discussion on the two courtiers before the 1900s.

1.1.3.2 Kerrigan, Empson and Forsyth

The notion of how changes from the second Quarto to the Folio have a profound impact on the parts of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is backed up by both John Kerrigan and William Empson. Kerrigan in his essay "Shakespeare as Reviser" makes the argument that the Folio is an actual revision by Shakespeare himself where he emendates and changes up things from his original version of *Hamlet* to create a better version of the play, a view shared by the editors of both the

Oxford and New Cambridge Shakespeares (Forsyth 127). Kerrigan then summarizes the differences between F and Q2's depiction of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern which I here reproduce in full:

Yet this passage, 2.2. 337-62, belongs to a sequence of variants affecting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The king's faithful ministers in the prose analogues, they become in Q2 fellow students of the prince and Claudius' gullible agents. The Folio, as one would expect in rewriting, moves further from received story. [...] F Hamlet's friendship with the pair is stressed, not only in the 'ayrie of Children' insert but in added banter (bluntly starting 'Let me question more in particular:') about bad dreams and ambition (2.2. 239-69). Then, in the bedchamber scene, F cuts Hamlet's hostile speech, 'Ther's letters sealed, and my two Schoolefellowes,/Whom I will trust as I will Adders fang'd./They bear the mandat[e]...' (3. 4. 202-10). This omission can hardly be accidental since, while Q2 confirms the prince's suspicions by having Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive after his speech in Claudius' company, F has the king enter to Gertrude alone, leaving the pair to be called for. Harold Jenkins, in his *New Arden*, invokes the 'Adders fang'd' to support Hamlet when, confronted by Horatio's cool reaction to the rewritten commission and their death, 'So *Guyldensterne* and *Rosencrans* goe too't', the prince replies, why man, they did make love to this employment' (5. 2. 56-7). 'Hamlet assumes them to be willing for the worst' Jenkins says, noting 3.4. 202-7, 'and we are probably meant to assume it too and to accept the poetic justice of their end.' This feckless comment is a warning against conflation. For Hamlet's response is Folio-unique and linked to the chain of variants. Stung by Horatio's criticism, and less sure of the pair's complicity in F than in Q2, Hamlet shrugs off blame with a bawdy jest. (Kerrigan 259-60)

Not only do we see Kerrigan protesting the traditional view of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as death-deserving betrayers, represented in this context by Harold Jenkins, but more importantly he points out how the omission of the "Adder's fang'd" speech in combination with Hamlet's crude joke about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern making love to their employment, suggests textual evidence in support of a more lenient judgment of the two school-fellows.

William Empson takes this a step further and argues that the relative innocence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern could be seen as a conscious device to display Hamlet in a more unfavorable light. Pointing to Hamlet's announcement that he sent them to their deaths "no shrieving time allowed" Empson takes this as evidence of a sensation of glee on the part of Hamlet: "I should imagine that Shakespeare both added the detail about no shrieving and cut out all evidence that these characters know of the King's intention. I imagine indeed he felt a certain ironical willingness to make his revenger very bad; he could fit that in easily enough, if it would help to make Hamlet popular" (115). At first glance this might strike us as a rather bold point of view, but Empson mitigates it somewhat by expounding upon his initial suggestion, claiming that Hamlet has a tendency to get carried away whenever he finds himself in a violent situation. This is an interesting observation, and if applied to the unseen events that take place on the ship, it suggests that Hamlet more or less got so caught up in the action of forging letters and fighting pirates that he sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths with a shrug of his shoulders. The consequences of his actions only sink in when Horatio draws his attention to their full extent:

At the words "no shrieving time allowed" Horatio coolly interrupts and asks "how was this sealed?", and Hamlet can boast that Heaven had provided the right seal to carry out this order, and so forth, ending after eight lines with a mention of the fight with the pirates. Horatio returns rather broodingly to the earlier detail:

So, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to it.
On this mild hint Hamlet becomes boisterously self-justifying. They are not near his conscience; it was at their own risk that they came near a great man like himself. Horatio says only:
Why, what a King is this!
[...] [I assume] that he meant “what a King you have become”; it is Hamlet who is now acting like a king, almost too like a king, after a long period when he didn't. (115-116)

Empson's observations, while no doubt objectionable to some, draw our full attention to the extent to which the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern has become a weight on the set of scales that measure out our estimation of Hamlet.

Neil Forsyth also chimes in on the debate on Shakespeare's revision, but interestingly he uses the same evidence to come to a different conclusion. In “Rewriting Shakespeare: Travesty and Tradition” he draws attention to another change from Q2 to the Folio, namely the deletion of the lines in 3.4 which anticipate the ominous end Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are headed for:

Let it work
For 'tis the sport to have the enginer
Hoist with his own petard, and 't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines
And blow them at the moon. O, 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet. (3.4.307-12)

Forsyth argues that these lines show a vengeful Hamlet coolly plotting to acquit himself not only with Claudius but also with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and so “[the removal of the lines] allowed [Hamlet] to be much less ruthless and decisive toward his old schoolfellows” (128). He likewise argues that Hamlet's bawdy joke that “they did make love to their employment” is a conscious attempt on Shakespeare's part “to protect Hamlet from too much blame for their death. [...] and accusing the pair of more dedication to and enjoyment of their task than is evident from the play”.

The two seemingly insignificant courtiers have found themselves at the heart of a very delicate problem where their supposed wickedness or innocence is the crux. But once again the echo of Forsyth's last words “than is evident from the play” reaffirms Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's seeming unwillingness to be conclusively defined one way or another by the audience of *Hamlet*.

1.1.3.3 The “True Friends” debate

There was a roundtable discussion which took place in *The English Journal* in 1943 wherein the topic was the “true” nature of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The argument was initiated by Alice Morgan who suggested that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern could actually be seen to act with the best interest of their friend Hamlet in mind, and that the traditional views of the characters, as either

the murderous lackeys or bumbling, idiot tools of the king, were both erroneous. As she put it “I cannot find one line in all of *Hamlet* that is definite, conclusive evidence that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern acted from any motives other than those of pure friendship” (396). Among her less convincing arguments is her insistence that since it is questionable if Hamlet was sure of his uncle's guilt until the performance of the play, it is equally unlikely that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would know of Claudius' plotting to harm Hamlet (396), which is not so much wrong as it is completely missing the point; it does not address whether the pair is acting in the interest of the king or their friend Hamlet.

Likewise, she constructs a straw man argument when she asks: “Is it logical to think that Claudius, in seeking to harm Hamlet, would deliberately choose these two whom Hamlet considered his friends? How could Claudius be sure that they would not turn against him and side with Hamlet?” (396). For this argument to work one must assume an original murderous intent from the King and the premeditated complicity to this effect by the two courtiers, which I have not seen proposed by anyone, whether accuser or acquitter of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Also, her argument that they never report anything of value to the King to explain Hamlet's madness (397) is hard to see as proof of anything other than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's failure to grasp the situation at hand.

The central point of A. Morgan's argument is however, very compelling and reasonable:

Only the day before, Claudius had expressed the opinion to Polonius that it might be wise to send Hamlet to England to collect neglected tribute, where perhaps the change of scenery would help him forget what was troubling him. Queen Gertrude knew of the plans to send Hamlet to England, and Claudius had discussed the matter with his advisers. Later it became common knowledge among the people that Hamlet had been sent to England because “he was mad and shall recover his wits there,” as expressed by the grave-digger. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern could easily have been given the same excuse as the rest of Denmark, and there is no indication that they knew their commission was a death sentence for Hamlet. Rather, there is some reason to believe that they would never have delivered it after Hamlet escaped if they had known what it contained. (397)

Especially the last claim that the delivery of the letter after Hamlet's escape would have been unnecessary if they knew its contents is a sound piece of evidence in support of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's innocence. A. Morgan does however never completely succeed in refuting the claim that the school-fellows can be seen as the ignorant, ambitious tools of the King. What she does succeed in is casting a shadow of doubt over the certainty of this view, and proving that one must stray equally far into the realms of conjecture to ascertain that the motives of the pair are selfish and immoral.

In reply to this call for a gentler judgment on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a Mr. Robert H. Morgan of The Hill School, Pottstown PA. wrote a brisk reprimand. He calls attention to the importance of contrasting characters in Elizabethan drama and proceeds to make the case for a

comparison and contrasting of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as false friends to the true friend Horatio (566). His most fascinating argument is that while Horatio came of his own volition to court to seek out Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have to be sent for by the King, and that moreover this could be seen as a conscious choice on the part of the King not to approach Horatio in the task of spying for him; instead opting for the two school-fellows who are seemingly of a character more easily bent to the will of the King (566).

At times however, his contrast and comparison between Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Horatio seems somewhat unfair as he fails to acknowledge that Horatio is in the privileged position of having seen the ghost of the King and is subsequently made privy to Hamlet's feigned madness. To his credit, R. Morgan admits that there is no decisive piece of evidence to ascertain Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's knowledge of the contents of the King's letter, but this makes him sound all the harsher when he flatly states that "I see no reason to pity them in death - "friends" who came only when sent for by Claudius, who readily acceded to the suggestion that they spy on their friend for their own profit. [...] If there be any grain of true sterling in their relationship, it is grossly debased by their alloys of self-profit and time-serving" (567).

In their attempts to declare Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as either admirable friends or contemptible villains both A. Morgan and H. Morgan seem to argue for a third option without fully realizing it themselves: that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as mere bystanders, with little or no motivation beyond doing as they are told while attempting to navigate in a plot that is much too large for the two of them. And this in spite of the fact that Professor Walter Raleigh succinctly gives voice to this alternative point of view as early as 1907, when he states that "[Rosencrantz and Guildenstern] are simply ordinary, harmless persons, - finely developed specimens of the genus bore. Their contrast to Hamlet is so great that as we love him we instinctively hate them, which is hardly fair for the great body of the human race" (Johnson 1909:364). We will later come to see that it is this point of view Stoppard adopts in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. But before that we will examine how this notion of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as the ordinary man's gateway to *Hamlet* was exploited with great success much earlier by W. S. Gilbert with his *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*.

As we leave *Hamlet* behind and move on in our discussion it should be noted that we have discovered that there are three distinct readings or interpretations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that hold precedence with most readers of *Hamlet*. The two are either loyal agents of the King, or ignorant, yet ambitious and ultimately self-serving betrayers, or simply clueless, ordinary persons with no motivation or sense of direction. Arguments have been presented in favor of all these interpretations and now in the next sections we will see how Gilbert and Stoppard respectively seize

and elaborate upon the persons of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and suggesting new definitions of them as tricksters or everymen to possibly influence the public perception of the characters.

1.2 W.S. Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*

The first author to seemingly realize the comic potential of emphasizing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as normal people looking in on the larger-than-life situation of *Hamlet* was W.S. Gilbert. In 1874 he wrote a sketch or brief burlesque of *Hamlet* titled simply *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (from here on abbreviated as *R&G*) which relocated the titular courtiers to the center of the action in a travestied version of the staging of *Hamlet's* "The Murder of Gonzago." Though the play is generally regarded as being well received (Wells 59) it has received fairly limited scholarly attention, perhaps owing to its brevity and modest scope. In most instances it is evoked as an example of the transition from Victorian burlesque to musical comedy: "[*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*] is a climax: and it is an end, significantly co-incident with the beginnings of musical comedy" (Wells 60) and "[*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's*] performance nearly twenty years later in 1891 marked a graceful swan-song for Victorian burlesque, by this date almost completely absorbed in comic opera, pantomime, and before long, musical comedy" (Rowell 19). But in the present context our focus will be on Gilbert's refashioning of the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and how the play's definition as "burlesque" or "parody" directly influences its relationship to Shakespeare's authority and the receiver's perception of the two courtiers.

As shown in the previous section, most early analysis of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is primarily concerned with shedding more light on Hamlet. And the same can be said of a lot of 19th century criticism. Whether dealing with Ophelia, Claudius or Gertrude, there is a prevailing sentiment that Hamlet is the locus of the play, and that the other characters exist primarily as different vantage points through which to examine Hamlet. By opting for the title *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, in contrast to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Gilbert is responding to this tendency. In Gilbert's sketch Hamlet is relegated to the role of supporting cast, and his sense of self-importance and hunger for an audience is constantly ridiculed. When Rosencrantz and Ophelia informs Hamlet that they have procured certain play titled 'Gonzago' for the player troupe to perform, Hamlet's first reaction is to blurt out "Is there a part for *me*?" (180). Likewise, the general opinion of the court seems to be that Hamlet takes up too much space whenever he is given the chance; for instance, Gertrude cautions: "That means – he's going to soliloquize! Prevent this, gentlemen, by any means!" (177). The suggestion then, is that Hamlet has been given too much attention, or at the very least that there are other points of interest except Hamlet in Shakespeare's play. And the most effective way of getting this point across is by writing a burlesque wherein the two most

insignificant characters become the titular heroes.¹⁶

It is for this reason that Gilbert's burlesque is worth examining. While in itself a brief, humorous parody of *Hamlet*, it poses an important question when it asks what happens when the court of Elsinore stops to revolve around Hamlet, and more importantly, it explores the possibilities of the situation Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are placed in. It is this last point which is usually brought up when *R&G* is mentioned by modern scholars, as the similarities to Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* are obvious (Bareham 12). However, beyond occasional pauses to remark upon the similar subject matter between the two, there has been written remarkably little on Gilbert's play. The following section will present a brief factual account of the background of *R&G*, and then I will move on to a more detailed analysis of the characters, as portrayed within the play. This analysis will largely be based on my own observations, owing to the lack of available critical material.

1.2.1 About the Play

R&G was originally published as a printed play in the pages of the magazine *Fun* between the 12th and 26th of December (Rowell 19). At this time Shakespearean burlesques were “an especially vibrant, yet controversial form of nineteenth-century popular theater,” as Richard W. Schoch posits in his essay “Shakespeare Mad” on Victorian travesty of Shakespeare (73). He explains further: “[They were] vibrant because of their exuberant humour, and controversial because they seemed to imperil the sanctity of Shakespeare as a national icon.” Originally occasioned as a direct response to the success and controversy surrounding a contemporary production of *Hamlet* by Henry Irving at the Lyceum, Gilbert's play was created to be read and thus it took good twenty years before it was acted out before an audience in 1891 (Rowell 19).¹⁷

The play is not considered to be very representational of Gilbert's stagecraft and holds none of the usual musical antics that Gilbert is best known for. It contains “no low sentiments from lofty mouths, or lofty sentiments from low mouths,” and limits itself to the scope of three tableaux all situated around the staging of the play which co-incidentally lies at the center of *Hamlet* (Rowell 19). The play seems to have been a relative success. Though initially mounted as a benefit performance, *R&G* enjoyed an extended run as part of a triple bill at the Court Theatre the

¹⁶ A similar analogy from contemporary culture would be to make a parody of James Bond titled “Miss Moneypenny” wherein the locus of the plot would be the secretary behind her desk at the MI6 headquarters. This was actually done in Samantha Weinberg's *The Moneypenny Diaries* (2005-2008), a trilogy which chronicles the life of the anonymous secretary.

¹⁷ At least this is the assumption, though it should be mentioned that before the publication in *Fun*, Gilbert had recently read a *Hamlet* burlesque to the Court Theatre company, but this piece was allegedly rejected by them (Stedman 127) and as such it is not unreasonable to surmise that this rejected *Hamlet* burlesque held similarities to the printed piece which appeared in *Fun*.

following year (Stedman 281), and throughout his later life Gilbert staged several performances of *R&G* for charity, which might attest to its popularity with the general public (320). The play is however little known these days, even though Stanley Wells generously identifies it as “the best [Shakespearean burlesque] from a literary point of view” (59).

R&G contains the familiar configurations of Hamlet presented from askew: The play opens with King Claudius telling his Queen that he struggles with recollections of a horrible deed he once committed, but the deed in question is not fratricide. Instead it is the writing of a five-act tragedy in his youth, so laughably bad that “Ere the first act had traced one-half its course / The curtain fell, never to rise again!” (174).¹⁸ Embarrassed and enraged by the mirthful reception his play received, Claudius decreed that the play should never be spoken of again upon the penalty of death. The Queen then reveals that worrying about her melancholic son Hamlet, she has summoned Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “Who will devise such revels in our court – / Such antic schemes of harmless merriment - / As shall abstract his meditative mind / From sad employment.” (175)

Enter Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who pledge to do what they can to obey the royal couple's command and draw Hamlet away from gloomy thoughts. The courtiers are then introduced to Ophelia, the old childhood sweetheart of Rosencrantz. But though their mutual affection rekindles at first sight, there lies an obstacle in the way of their courtship:

ROSENCRANTZ. The Queen hath summoned us,
And I have come in a half-hearted hope
That I may claim once more my baby-love!

OPHELIA. Alas, I am betrothed!

ROSENCRANTZ. Betrothed! To whom?

OPHELIA. To Hamlet!

ROSENCRANTZ. Oh, incomprehensible!

Thou lovest Hamlet?

OPHELIA. (demurely) Nay, I said not so –

I said we were betrothed. (176)

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Ophelia then plot together to have Hamlet stage the King's forbidden play in front of King Claudius in order to remove him from Elsinore. One copy of the play still exists in the Lord Chamberlain's keeping, and Ophelia, being his daughter, can steal it for them. While she sets out to do so, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern encounter Hamlet as he begins his “to be or not to be” soliloquy. The two courtiers continuously interrupt Hamlet throughout his speech with elaborations, answers to his rhetorical questions and subsequent follow-up questions to the extent

¹⁸ All quotations from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* are from George Rowell's 1982 edition.

that an exasperated Hamlet finally bursts out: “Gentlemen / It must be patent to the merest dunce / Three persons can't soliloquize at once!” (179). After this confrontation, Ophelia returns to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with the copy of the King's play and tells them of her horrible encounter in her father's study with “The mouldy spectres of five thousand plays, / All dead and gone – and many of them damned!” (179). The horridness of the lines chattered by these bad plays nearly convinced Ophelia that it would be better to leave the King's play alone, but regardless they decide to move along with the plan. The play is then mentioned to Hamlet, who jumps at the chance to play the role of “a mad Archbishop who becomes a Jew / To spite his diocese” (180). Hamlet proceeds to stage the play in a tableau similar to the “Murder of Gonzago”-performance in *Hamlet*, with the difference being that the King becomes more and more perturbed as he slowly recognizes throughout the performance that the play in question is the very same which he wrote and banned. Furious at this humiliation he resolves to kill Hamlet on the spot, but Hamlet begs for his life protesting: “I can't bear death – I'm a philosopher!” (184). The King decides to have mercy and agrees to have Hamlet banished from Denmark and sent off to England where “They will enshrine him on their great good hearts / And men will rise or sink in good esteem / According as they worship him, or slight him!” (184). Thus, Hamlet is sent on his way, and Ophelia and Rosencrantz embrace on stage before the curtain falls.

1.2.2 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*

Any attempt to compare *Hamlet* with Gilbert's burlesque must first acknowledge that *R&G* pays very little heed to its source material. Ophelia is the daughter of the Lord Chamberlain, Hamlet is the son of Claudius, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are both sons of Polonius; all details of little or no significance to the plot, yet evidence of the relative slightness with which adherence to Shakespeare is considered. This does not in any way prevent the play from being an excellent piece of comedy, but with regards to elaboration and emendation, it must be said that *R&G* appears less concerned with reappropriating and becoming assimilated with *Hamlet* than it does with looking in on Shakespeare's play from the outside.

The question then is to what extent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Gilbert's play correspond with the iterations in Shakespeare, and if they at all can be identified as the same set of characters. To answer this question, I will divide my analysis into two parts:

1. Similarities and differences with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's iterations in *Hamlet* and
2. *R&G's* relationship to the critical debate concerning the “true” nature of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

1.2.2.1 Similarities and differences with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's iterations in *Hamlet*

One could say that Pfister's set of categories for character analysis is ill-suited to deal with a piece of such modest scope as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* since the lines are few, and the scenes sparse. I will however, persist in applying them on Gilbert's play as this will make comparison easier between the subsequent discussion and my previous analysis of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*.

1.2.2.1.1 Static versus dynamic

In Gilbert's play a brisk change appears to take place in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's motivation from the moment when they pledge themselves to the King and Queen, to the following instance less than a page later where they decide to have Hamlet removed so that Rosencrantz will be free to court Ophelia:

ROSENCRANTZ. (kneeling) In hot obedience to the royal 'hest

We have arrived prepared to do our best. (175)

And then one page later

ROSENCRANTZ. We must devise some plan to stop this match!

GUILDENSTERN. Stay! Many years ago, King Claudius

Was guilty of a five-act tragedy.

The play was damned, and none may mention it

Under the pain of death. We might contrive

To make him play this piece before the King,

And take the consequences. (176)

But, though we are shown Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pledge their allegiance to the King and Queen, and by extension promising to do what they can to improve the condition of Hamlet, this happens as they enter on stage and are their first spoken lines. In other words, we have not been shown enough of their actions or words to determine the sincerity of their pledges and their motivation for being at Elsinore, other than the Queen's expressed summons and her description of them as "two merry knaves" (175). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's decision to disobey the King and Queen should only be labeled as a dynamic change if we can ascertain that they are sincere in their intentions when they first appear before the royal couple.

From the onset of the first tableau to the end of the third, the two appear to be a set of rather roguish tricksters of unusual resourcefulness, as evidenced by their brilliant play on Hamlet's grim soliloquizing:

HAMLET. To be – or not to be!

ROSENCRANTZ. Yes – that's the question –

Whether he's bravest who will cut his throat

Rather than suffer all –

GUILDENSTERN. Or suffer all

Rather than cut his throat?

HAMLET. (*Annoyed at interruption says, 'Go away – go away!' then resumes.*)

To die – to sleep –

ROSENCRANTZ. It's nothing more – Death is but sleep spun out –

Why hesitate? (*Offers him a dagger.*)

GUILDENSTERN. The only question is

Between the choice of deaths, which death to choose. (*Offers a revolver.*)

HAMLET. (*in great terror*) Do take those dreadful things away. They make

My blood run cold. Go away – go away! (178)

In this manner they are radically different from their Shakespearean counterparts, and it could lead us to speculate that their trickster-like nature would make their initial reassurances to obey the King and Queen, hollow promises. After all, Rosencrantz admits that one of his underlying motives for returning to Elsinore was to see Ophelia again (176) which would offer him a reason to lie to Claudius and Gertrude. But his surprise at learning of Ophelia's betrothal to Hamlet should be taken as evidence to the fact that Rosencrantz held no preconceived assumption that the appointed royal task would interfere with his romantic aspirations. It is only when Hamlet is identified as an obstacle that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern decide to get him out of the way. One of their original motives, “help Hamlet”, is abandoned when it is found to be in conflict with Rosencrantz' desire to have Ophelia. Seen in this manner it is possible to conclude that Gilbert's iteration of the pair demonstrate a greater capacity for change than the two courtiers in *Hamlet*.

1.2.2.1.2 Mono- or multidimensional

The answer to whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can be said to be “defined by a small set of distinguishing features” (Pfister 178) should be fairly straightforward. We see even less of them in Gilbert's play than we do in Shakespeare's: the two share approximately 80 lines between them in the play bearing their names, and so they are given remarkably little opportunity to display anything resembling complex personas. Though to be fair the same can be said of all the characters in *R&G*, as they are all more or less caricatures of their counterparts in *Hamlet*. And yet, in the dialogues between Hamlet and the two courtiers where Gilbert is echoing Shakespeare more closely, there is a

vague suggestion that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have a more grounded view of reality and more depth to their characters than they are letting on:

HAMLET. (Not heeding them, resumes.) But that the dread of something *after*
death –

ROSENCRANTZ. That's true – *post mortem* and the coroner –
Felo-de-se – cross-roads at twelve p.m. –
And then the forfeited life policy –
Exceedingly unpleasant. (178-79)

and also

HAMLET. This is a well-toned flute;

Play me an air upon it. Do not say
You know not *how!* (*sneeringly*)

ROSENCRANTZ. Nay, but I *do* know how.

I'm rather good upon the flute – Observe –
(*Plays eight bars of hornpipe, then politely returns the flute to HAMLET.*)

HAMLET. (*peevisly*) Oh, thankye. (*aside.*) Everything goes wrong! (179)

In these two instances which interact directly with the source material in *Hamlet*, we see examples of the way in which Rosencrantz (and sometimes Guildenstern) actively subverts and obstructs Hamlet's attempt to dramatize. In both examples Rosencrantz shrugs off Hamlet's melodrama by insisting on evoking everyday life and common responses. What comes after death is not some deep philosophical truth but post-mortem at the coroner and a forfeited life-policy. Likewise, when Hamlet produces a flute to do his “recorder scene” from *Hamlet* (3.2.301-389), Rosencrantz frustrates Hamlet's anticipation by playing a regular hornpipe on the flute, thus robbing Hamlet of the opportunity to continue the scene in accordance with *Hamlet*.

While it would be a stretch to say that these examples are evidence of a complex persona, I would argue that Rosencrantz' reaction in these situations serve to align him with the audience. He can be shown as appealing to reason in his responses and to demonstrate that his world is that of the audience, as opposed to that of Hamlet's. If this is the case Rosencrantz (and Guildenstern) certainly possess more complex personalities than those exhibited by their counterparts in Shakespeare. If Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to function as vessels for the audience to project themselves into the plot of Shakespeare, they must possess an adequate amount of space within their characters. Flat characters on the other hand are poorly suited to the task of serving as an entry point for the spectators, since identification with them is all but impossible, owing to the minimal scope of their personas.

It would seem that much like the courtiers in *Hamlet* it is tricky to decide on an either/or definition of them as flat or round characters. However, what should be apparent is that the general freedom that is allowed them in the confrontations with Hamlet, where they oppose his theatrical language and gestures by aligning themselves with the sentiments of an 18th century contemporary audience, makes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come across as more open in Gilbert's work than in that of Shakespeare.

1.2.2.1.3 Type versus individual

R&G is a burlesque or parody, and in order for it to succeed as one, it must among other things successfully align its characters with those in the source that is parodied. A helpful definition of parody is “the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material” (Rose 52), and in Gilbert's play it is first and foremost the artistic material, the characters and setting of *Hamlet*, which is refunctioned. It follows that in order for this refunctioning to be comic it is usually necessary for there to be some form of comical discrepancy between the original source and the parody (Rose 37). So, in order for the comedic elements of *R&G* to come across, it is important that people realize that the characters of the play are in fact supposed to be the same characters as those found in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Despite this, Gilbert could be said to undermine the very trait with which most audiences are used to define Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, namely their parity. Though the play bears the name of both courtiers as its title, the play could as easily have been named “Rosencrantz,” as Guildenstern is allotted a much smaller role than his comrade, and the plot itself is centered on the possible romance between Rosencrantz and Ophelia. Though their lines are equally divided through the first half of the play, Guildenstern speaks his last line in the middle of the second tableau, while Rosencrantz speaks another 45 lines throughout the rest of the play. Most of these are spoken in the third tableau while Guildenstern is present, which makes it clear that the emphasized attention on Rosencrantz is intentional. This is also the case in *Hamlet* where I have pointed out that Rosencrantz speaks nearly twice as many lines as Guildenstern, but whereas the division of lines between the two characters seems arbitrary in *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz' heavy involvement in the plot of *R&G* necessitates a greater part than his comrade.

All this goes to show that in Gilbert's play there is a movement towards establishing a further separation between the two characters known as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, so that though we hardly learn enough about either of them in his play to consider them as fully-fledged, autonomous individuals, we are still forced to separate the two courtiers in our minds. The fate of the one is no longer necessarily the fate of the other, so that while they retain their status as type, owing to their scheming pursuit of fortune in the true spirit of the “courtier,” it seems that

“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern” have taken a step towards becoming the distinguished individuals Rosencrantz ... and ... Guildenstern.

1.2.2.1.4 Open or closed

Though we have seen how Gilbert's elaboration of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tends to give the characters a greater scope of freedom and sense of individualism owing to their heightened agency in the plot, they are actually more closed as characters than their Shakespearean brethren. The main reason for this is owing to the play's classification as a parody or burlesque, which suggests that it will contain exaggerated characters and motivations that are easy to comprehend. *R&G* was written with the specific intent of being funny and, much like in comedy this means that the general focus is on absurd situations and the comical reconfiguration of known material. Because of this there is no ambiguity surrounding the actions and motives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

If *R&G* can be said to have a definite plot beyond its playful interaction with the configurations of *Hamlet*, it is a romantic plot where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern must work with Ophelia to get rid of Hamlet so that Rosencrantz and Ophelia can become lovers. One can no longer regard Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as two gullible bystanders, out of their depth in a scheme beyond their understanding. In Gilbert's play they are the schemers, and they succeed in deceiving the King, the Queen and Hamlet so that the final outcome of the play is in accordance with their own ambitions. It seems that in *R&G* there can be no debate surrounding their motives or the justness of their final outcome. If anything, proponents of the villain interpretation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's iterations in *Hamlet* could argue that Gilbert has written the ultimate power fantasy of how the events in *Hamlet* would have transpired if the two courtiers had been in charge.

1.2.2.1.5 Transpsychological or psychological

It can be argued that from a meta-perspective Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exhibit a sort of super-textual awareness of their situation within a play in their dealings with Hamlet. The instance where Hamlet hands Rosencrantz the flute is a great example of this, since both Hamlet and the audience will be expecting that Rosencrantz does not know how to play the flute, in accordance with the “recorder scene” in *Hamlet*. He does however know how to play the flute, and as he does so, playing eight bars of hornpipe, there is an implicit suggestion that Rosencrantz has been expecting Hamlet's request (has he been practicing backstage?). After a continuous verbal assault on Hamlet by both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, where they do their best to subvert and sabotage his soliloquizing, this last subversion of expectation could be interpreted as a final theatrical coup de grace, knowingly, by Rosencrantz, before he abandons Hamlet to fulfill his plot with Ophelia and Guildenstern. There are however, no asides to the audience or knowing glances instructed by the

stage direction to further suggest that Rosencrantz' (and Guildenstern's) active undermining of the expectations of Hamlet and the audience is premeditated. Because of this their exhibition of transpsychological awareness never fully transcends the incidental level; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern never fully let on that they possess a heightened level of self-awareness. So we are left to affirm that while they surpass their *Hamlet* iterations in terms of transpsychological awareness, their level of introspection is still limited.

1.2.2.2 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's role in the plot of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*

On a structural level *R&G's* iteration of the two courtiers agrees with *Hamlet* on several points. Perhaps most significantly Gilbert gives them the same reason to enter the plot: responding to royal summons. They are summoned to court by the King in *Hamlet* and by the Queen in *R&G*, which more or less firmly establishes that their function as “courtiers” remains the same in both plays. Furthermore, and perhaps more surprisingly, they seem to retain their function as relatively minor characters within the play, with regards to spoken lines. The first tableau gives the greater part of its spoken lines to the King, the Queen and Ophelia, and it is the same with the third tableau, where Guildenstern has no lines at all and Rosencrantz merely 16. But the second tableau is devoted solely to their antics with Hamlet (the excellent parody of the “to be or not to be” soliloquy and the “recorder scene”), so despite their diminished presence in tableaux One and Three it can be said that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have managed to carve out a greater space for themselves at the center of Gilbert's play.

But *R&G's* status as a burlesque does not require its audience to absolutely conflate the two sets of characters. Instead it is enough that we notice the connection so that we as an audience can notice the various ways in which Gilbert departs from *Hamlet*. The conscious decision to portray Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a way that bears so little resemblance to Shakespeare, does however suggest that *R&G's* influence on our perception of the characters is diminished. To fully answer this question we must examine how Gilbert's choice of genre and strategy of appropriation affects *R&G's* ability to function as an elaboration on Shakespeare.

1.2.2.3 The Critical Impact of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Margaret Rose claims that in its most sophisticated forms “the parody [...] is both synthetic and analytic and diachronic and synchronic in its analysis of the work it quotes, in that it is able to evoke a past work and its reception and link it with other analyses and audiences” (Rose 90). How then can we say that Gilbert succeeds in linking his work with other analyses and audiences? We

have already seen some suggestion in the analysis of the second tableau where we observed how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are aligned with the audience and how they elicit modern responses to Hamlet's Shakespearean theatrics. Within that context, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are cast as regular 'everymen' tasked with the difficult assignment of bringing Hamlet down to earth and stop his silly, melodramatic soliloquizing; the performance of which seems to have delighted contemporary audiences who may have been tired of the monotony of bleak and dreary productions of *Hamlet*.

Gilbert's play could be seen as an attempt to poke fun at the sanctity of Shakespeare as national icon (Schoch 73), and it seems that *Hamlet* was the best target for such a purpose. After all, Ophelia herself says in the play of Hamlet that "men will rise and sink in good esteem / According to as they worship him, or slight him!" (184). The suggestion is that *Hamlet* and the Shakespeare myth has grown out of proportion and that there is a need for some good-natured ridicule to take it all down a notch, and surprisingly the two heroes that find themselves appointed to the task is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Though, the fact that the very presence of their names in the title is a thinly veiled slight to Hamlet means that we should not really be surprised that it is the courtiers that receive the honors. After all, is there a better way of diminishing Hamlet than giving the starring role to the two most insignificant characters in his original play? Those same two characters who Hamlet without a shrug makes sure are killed in Shakespeare, are here allowed to exact their revenge by having Hamlet banished to England and then run off with his girl, Ophelia. Taking all this into account it is easy to see *R&G* as a sublime anti-*Hamlet* where reason and wit are allowed to have their way with the entangled plots of Shakespeare's Elsinore.

And yet in spite of this, Gilbert's play has left little lasting influence. It is a minor play to say the least, and is usually mentioned only in passing by scholars. Because of this it is difficult to draw any definite conclusions as to what extent *R&G* has had an impact on the audience's perception of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as characters, except that it must be very minor.

My suggestion is that a lot of it has to do with Gilbert's lack of adherence to the source material, as it forces the audience to reject either Gilbert or Shakespeare whenever a conflict between the two arises. Already in our introduction we saw how Fowler suggested that most character elaborations take minor characters from established works and make them into major characters in their own works (127). It seems that one of the most obvious reasons for doing so is not because these minor characters are the most interesting ones in themselves, but because owing to their limited nature, they present an opportunity to interact with the original source material without actually contradicting it. By contradicting *Hamlet* to the extent that he does, Gilbert places himself 'outside' Shakespeare, looking in on it, as opposed to attempt to place himself 'inside'

Shakespeare.

Schoch uses this concept of 'inside' and 'outside' to describe interaction with canonicity in Shakespeare and how burlesques opt to ignore canonicity to transcend zones of 'high' and 'low' culture (Schoch 81), I do however, wish to focus more on how this choice of 'inside' or 'outside' functions in relation to characters and our understanding of them. All authors attempting to elaborate on a character find themselves faced with this issue, as they must decide which things can be changed and which must remain the same, for the audience to still be able identify the elaboration with the original iteration. There are not really many things that define Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to begin with, and so we must consider whether the things changed by Gilbert are able to upset our conception of who Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on a fundamental level. If this is found to be the case, then Gilbert's play does not succeed in elaborating the characters.

To help us arrive at a conclusion in the question of what defines Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as characters we will take a step forward to look at Tom Stoppard's elaboration. The relationship between his text and that of Shakespeare's was the point of focus for most of the contemporary reviews upon the initial release of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and so maybe there is something in Stoppard's treatment of the characters that can shed further light on the question of their identities, so that we may determine if Gilbert stays true to them or not.

1.3 Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

It would be almost another hundred years from Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* before another writer would take the same level of interest in the two scheming school-fellows, but when it once again happened, the result brought about a play that was arguably not just more thorough and clever, but also funnier than Gilbert's play. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (abbreviated *R&GAD* from here on) is a play which asks the question of how the events in *Hamlet* must have appeared from the point of view of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but it also explores the problem of how much freedom a character possesses in a story already known to the audience. In this sense it is a play about the possibilities and the difficulties of character elaboration. By approaching *Hamlet* from the sidelines Stoppard demonstrates how it is possible to draw different conclusions from the events taking place, without actually contradicting Shakespeare; or at least, that is the idea. While most critics have heaped praise upon Stoppard for his inventive examination of *Hamlet*, there are others who claim that Stoppard is taking liberties with his interpretation of the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and because they reject the canonicity of Stoppard's play, this becomes a ground on which to reject the very quality of the play as well.

It should be easy to see how rich *R&GAD* is in terms of subject matter pertaining to our

current examination of the lives of characters beyond their point of origin. However, Stoppard's play also touches upon a lot of other interesting issues. For instance, one of the main points of debate for a long time among scholars have been whether the play is existentialist or absurdist,¹⁹ even if Stoppard himself has made it explicit again and again that he personally does not regard the play in one definite way: "I have written about two people on whom Shakespeare imposed inevitability, but I haven't got a philosophy figured out for you" (Louis). Part of this insistence among the critics on philosophical undertones is owing to Stoppard's play being considered a direct derivative of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (Easterling 58), with the understanding that since *Waiting for Godot* is absurdist it should follow that *R&GAD* must be so as well; *R&GAD*'s connection to Beckett will however not be touched upon in this thesis.²⁰

I am also aware that there is a film adaptation of *R&GAD* directed by Tom Stoppard himself, but the changes and cuts made by Stoppard for his screenplay makes the film an independent adaptation, which will have to be ignored due to spatial constraints. The focus will be on the relationship between Stoppard's and Shakespeare's characters, and to some extent how these iterations relate to the ones in Gilbert's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern*. The structure of this subchapter will follow that of the two preceding it, beginning with a presentation of the play itself and the plot, followed by a detailed character analysis before moving on to a discussion of the critical reception and how *R&GAD* has been seen in relation to the two preceding plays.

1.3.1 About the Play

R&GAD was originally envisaged as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*, intended as a burlesque Shakespeare farce based upon the premise that King Lear must have been king in England around the time Rosencrantz and Guildenstern set sail for England with Hamlet (Levenson 157). But Stoppard regarded this play as a failure, and the critic Charles Marowitz famously remarked that "It struck me, and most everyone else, as a lot of academic twaddle" (158). However, Stoppard remained inspired by the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and their situation, and so he set out to rework his failed play. As Stoppard stated:

Something alerted me to the serious reverberations of the characters. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the most expendable people of all time. Their very facelessness makes them dramatic; the fact that they die without ever really understanding why they lived makes them somehow cosmic. (Fleming 53)

The suggestion seems to be that there is something very particular about the predicament

¹⁹ See for instance Joseph E. Duncan's "Stoppard and Beckett" (1981) and William E. Gruber's "A Version of Justice" (1982) for a discussion on the absurdist nature of the play.

²⁰ Though I am aware that it is possible to make the claim that Ros and Guil in *R&GAD* are not merely Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from *Hamlet*, but actually an amalgam of the two Shakespearean courtiers and Estragon and Vladimir (Gogo and Didi) from *Waiting for Godot*.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves in within *Hamlet* which begs further theatrical exploration.

And it is this predicament which sets the scene for *R&GAD*. The play starts with the two characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (from here on Ros and Guil) “passing the time in a place without any visible character” (1) by tossing coins. However, as they keep tossing the coins the amount of consecutive coins landing heads up are starting to worry Guil: “A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if nothing else at least in the law of probability” (2).

This goes on for quite some time, and Guil, increasingly troubled by the unbroken chain of consecutive heads becomes more and more metaphysical in his musings. They then try to summarize what they can remember of their past, but the results are disappointingly vague:

GUIL. (*tensed up by this rambling*) Do you remember the first thing that happened today?

ROS. (*promptly*) I woke up, I suppose. (*Triggered.*) Oh – I've got it now – that man, a foreigner, he woke us up –

GUIL. A messenger. (*He relaxes, sits.*)

ROS. That's it – pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters – shouts – What's all the row about?! Clear off! – But then he called our names. You remember that – this man woke us up.

GUIL. Yes.

ROS. We were sent for. (9)

Ros and Guil know that they were sent for, but it seems any prior knowledge to that is hard to come by for any of them. As they are trying to remember this they are suddenly overcome by the Player and his troupe. This is the very same troupe that Rosencrantz later introduces in *Hamlet*: “To think, my lord, if you delight not in / man what lenten entertainment the players shall receive / from you; we coted them on the way and hither are they coming to offer you service.” (2.2.281-4). Stoppard thus plays out this previously mentioned meeting on the road to Elsinore.

However, in *R&GAD* the players are a sad, ragged bunch of pornographers and prostitutes who put on shows wherein “it costs little to watch, and little more if you happen to get caught up in the action, if that's your taste and times being what they are” (14). Throughout their conversation the Player gives Ros and Guil several hints pertaining to the nature of stagecraft but they are bewildered to realize that much of it apply to themselves.²¹

²¹ The two most important hints to this effect is the Player's statement that “We keep to our usual stuff, more or less, only inside out. We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else.” (19) and later when, upon being asked if he will change into his costume, he replies “I never change out of it, sir” (25). The Player is always in character and reveals that as far as his philosophy is concerned, the whole world truly is a stage, which in the world of *R&GAD* is a truth not only on a metaphorical level, but also a literal truth.

When Ros and Guil arrive at the court of Elsinore they witness first hand a mute version of the encounter between Ophelia and Hamlet which she narrates to Polonius in *Hamlet* 2.1.84-97, before they are suddenly thrust into the action from *Hamlet* scene 2.2 as Claudius and Gertrude overtake them. Since they are now in the world of *Hamlet* Ros and Guil switch from vernacular English to the classical Shakespearean English in their brief exchanges with the royal couple, and from this point in *R&GAD*, the plot mirrors that of *Hamlet*. And yet Stoppard's invention is to keep the focus on Ros and Guil and their thoughts and reactions to the events we have seen them experience in *Hamlet*.

For instance they are left positively confounded and frustrated after their first encounter with Hamlet. Having done their best to obey the commands of Claudius to “glean what afflicts him,” the audience gets to witness their subsequent evaluation of the encounter:

GUIL. He might have had the edge.

ROS. (*roused*) Twenty-seven-three, and you think he might have had the edge?! He *murdered* us.

GUIL. What about our evasions?

ROS. Oh, our evasions were lovely. 'Were you sent for?' he says. 'My lord, we were sent for...' I didn't know where to put myself.

GUIL. He had six rhetorical –
[...]

ROS. Six rhetorical and two repetition, leaving nineteen of which we answered fifteen. And what did we get in return? He's depressed!... Denmark's a prison and he'd rather live in a nutshell; some shadow-play about the nature of ambition, which never got down to cases, and finally one direct question which might have led somewhere, and led in fact to his illuminating claim to tell a hawk from a handsaw. (48)

This example cuts right to the heart of Ros and Guil's predicament, as we see that while their reasoning is sound, they are unable to procure or infer any sort of knowledge outside the foundations of *Hamlet*. Since they are characters in Shakespeare's play, the very foundations of their existence is anchored within that reality, and while improvisation is allowed between the entrances in *Hamlet*, they can never arrive at a state that actually contradicts *Hamlet*.

The rest of the play deals with similar episodes to the one above, and as the action progresses Ros and Guil become increasingly desperate to try and escape the trappings of the court at Elsinore. In all this the Player also makes occasional appearances to give increasingly explicit forewarnings of Ros and Guil's imminent deaths, the culmination of which is a dumb show of *Hamlet* performed in front of Ros and Guil wherein the Player narrates the entire plot of the play,

including the detail about the deaths of the Prince's friends (73-74), but once again Ros and Guil are unable to grasp how this affects them, and so they eventually find themselves on the boat bound for England without any inclination of their imminent fate.

It is at this point Stoppard makes the most interesting elaboration on Shakespeare's plot. Since the action taking place on the boat is not actually in *Hamlet*, and is only narrated in passing by Hamlet to Horatio in 5.2.12-55, Ros and Guil experience a brief moment of freedom from the plot. As Guil puts it: "One is free on a boat. For a time. Relatively." (92). His increasing negation of his statement does however betray an underlying uneasiness, which is soon proven to be well founded as they decide to open the letter they are delivering to the English King:

GUIL. There may be something in the letter to keep us going a bit.

ROS. And if not?

GUIL. Then that's it – we're finished. (96)

Without fully realizing it, they are dependent on the confines of the plot in *Hamlet* to drive them onwards. When they open the letter and discover that it contains the orders to execute Hamlet they begin to discuss the ethics of delivering the letter:

ROS. We're his friends.

GUIL. How do you know?

ROS. From our young days brought up with him.

GUIL. You've only got their word for it.

ROS. But that's what we depend on. (101)

In the end they are unable to make a decision which contradicts the original source *Hamlet*. The letter is then resealed, only to be replaced by Hamlet's forgery ordering the deaths of Ros and Guil. Then Hamlet disappears in the pirate attack and Ros and Guil find themselves alone on the ship with the Player and his troupe, who came on as stowaways. Bewildered that Hamlet is gone, and having lost their sense of purpose, Ros and Guil once again read the letter they are carrying only to discover that it now calls for their execution. The play ends as they make up their minds to end the struggle against the plot and just go with it:

ROS. All right then. I don't care. I've had enough. To tell you the truth, I'm relieved.

And he disappears from view. Guil does not notice.

GUIL. Our names shouted in a certain dawn... a message... a summons... there must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said – no. But somehow we missed it. (*He looks round and sees he is alone.*) Rosen –? Guil –? (*He gathers*

himself.) Well, we'll know better next time. Now you see me, now you –
And disappears. (117)²²

1.3.2 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

The key to understanding the characters of Ros and Guil lies in examining their direct relationship to the text of *Hamlet* and how Stoppard allows them to interact with the material; their “extra-textual existence outside *Hamlet*” (Easterling 13). In the analysis of Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* the emphasis was on Gilbert's disregard for the source material and the question of whether the characters in question still could be identified as their Shakespearean counterparts. In *R&GAD* it has been suggested that the very opposite is the case. John Russell Taylor claims that the whole point of Stoppard's play is “to reinforce the strict classical viewpoint that dramatic characters do not have any independent, continuing existence beyond the confines of what their inventor chooses to tell us about them” (Easterling 13). And yet, anyone that has read or seen a performance of *R&GAD* must surely agree that Stoppard elaborates on the characters by adding color and depth to the outline sketched by Shakespeare. It is this possible contradiction between adhering to the source in *Hamlet* and still adding his own spin to the proceedings I will explore in my character analysis.

1.3.2.1 Differences and Similarities to *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Just like in the Gilbert-section I will once again use Pfister's model as starting point for my examination of the various facets of Ros and Guil's characters, to make comparison and contrast with my earlier findings easy to follow.

1.3.2.1.1 Static versus dynamic

One could say that the main theme in *R&GAD* is precisely an exploration of Ros and Guil's capacity for change. As Norman Berlin puts it, because we know the action from *Hamlet* “we are forced to contemplate the frozen state, the status-quo of the characters who carry their Shakespearean fates with them” (Berlin 108). But is it really true that they are given no space to develop whatsoever? William E. Gruber seems to think this is the case: “despite [Ros and Guil] being given an entire play

²² Most productions of *R&GAD* end on this final note, but there is an additional scene in the original script where we return to the final tableau of *Hamlet*, all the principal actors lie dead on the floor after the final, fatal duelling-scene between Hamlet and Laertes, and the ambassador from England comes on stage to announce that 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead'. Regardless of which ending one decides on, the inevitable conclusion of the play is that Ros and Guil in accordance with the plot of *Hamlet* decided to finish their journey to England and deliver the letter, knowing it would seal their fate.

of their own, [they] have not advanced beyond the interchangeable, nondescript pair who took the boards more than three hundred years ago” (Gruber 91). There is certainly evidence within the play to support such notions, at least on the surface level. The most damning piece of evidence is of course the affair pertaining to the two different letters Ros and Guil find themselves in possession of while on the ship bound for England. When they read the first letter, ordering the execution of Hamlet, they debate among themselves whether they should deliver it or not, but despite their reasoning back and forth, in the end Guil asserts that

we are little men, we don't know the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels, etcetera – it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the design of fate or even of kings. All in all, I think we'd be well advised to leave well alone. Tie up the letter – there – neatly – like that – (102)

Blaming their own lack of direction and understanding, Ros and Guil opt out of any and all situations where they have an actual opportunity to exercise real agency.

This is made even more apparent when we learn at the end of the play that in spite of them knowing the contents of the second, fatal letter, they have still stayed true to their principle of inaction and have handed over it over to the English King. If nothing else, it seems that any harsh judgments of their willing betrayal of Hamlet in Stoppard's play should at least be mitigated to some extent by this refusal to discriminate between the letters. They have been commanded to deliver a letter to the English King, and this they will do regardless of its contents.

What are we then to make of these actions, and the repeated indecisions of Ros and Guil that permeates the entirety of Stoppard's play? The question is whether Ros and Guil can be seen to undergo some sort of development throughout the play. I would argue that there is a case for suggesting that they undergo such development. At first they seem satisfied to go along with the proceedings of the play:

GUIL. Tread warily, follow instructions. We'll be all right.

ROS. For how long?

GUIL. Till events have played themselves out. There's a logic at work – it's all done for you, don't worry. Enjoy it. Relax. (31)

But then, as the plot starts to spiral out of control they become increasingly determined to circumvent it and escape the action in total:

ROS. I wish I was dead. (*Considering the drop.*) I could jump over the side. That would put a spoke in their wheel.

GUIL. Unless, they're counting on it.

ROS. I shall remain on board. That'll put a spoke in their wheel. (100)

Thus, when they finally arrive at the end of their allotted Shakespearean narrative, their final lines

can be interpreted in a number of different ways: as defeatist resignation, as a final act of defiance by affirming the injustice of their deaths to the bitter end, or as a transcendental acceptance of their assigned role through the action of handing over their own death warrant. This last view has been suggested by Joseph E. Duncan who makes the claim that Ros and Guil's realization of the inevitability of their deaths serves to cast them in the picture of modern 'everymen' (Duncan 82). Regardless of which of these interpretation one favors, I would argue that they all evidently point towards a character trajectory wherein a change takes place as the two courtiers struggle to make sense of their surroundings.

1.3.2.1.2 Mono- or multidimensional

Though Jonathan Bennett claims that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard's conception are "flatter than ever" (10) I would argue the contrary. While Ros and Guil retain most of the spoken lines they utter in *Hamlet*, Stoppard also spends a great deal of time behind the scenes of *Hamlet* and in doing so, is able to bestow more rounded personalities upon the two. Where before in Shakespeare there were two interchangeable courtiers who were either constantly scheming or flailing bewildered about, depending on your point of view, there emerge in Stoppard two separate entities with different approaches to the emerging obstacles. Easterling describes their different natures in the following way: "Throughout the play Guil retains his role as the rationalist and the magician of logical deduction. He is capable of making sharp logical distinctions which Ros, the more down-to-earth and less intellectual of the two, often misses" (Easterling 155). This same distinction is echoed by Fleming in one of the footnotes to his chapter on *R&GAD*: "Guildenstern is the rational one, Rosencrantz the more passive instinctive one" (267). This does not change the fact that both authors appear to be able to summarize the two characters by applying one attribute to each, which hardly can be taken as evidence of multidimensionality, but it is still a significant move forward in terms of developing the characters beyond their framework in Shakespeare.²³

Bennett finds these slim characteristics of 'rational' or 'curious' to be unsatisfactory, and remarks that these characteristics only concern matters of intellectual character and as such are insufficient to "give someone a solid sense of who he is, e.g. to make his name 'instinctive' to him" (16). Moreover he makes the claim that Ros and Guil trade characteristics throughout the play. But Bennett does not cite any examples from the text in support of this claim, and so it should be disregarded. To give Bennett credit it would be stretch to call Ros or Guil 'deep' characters, but their new-found freedom as distinguishable entities, coupled with their contrasting philosophical

²³ To add to this there is also the interesting fact that since Guildenstern is the more rational and intellectual of the two, he is usually the one to take the lead in any given situation. This is in stark contrast to both Shakespeare and Gilbert, where Rosencrantz is the one to take the lead.

approaches to their predicament, firmly demonstrates that their personalities exhibit more depth than those of their predecessors.

1.3.2.1.3 Type versus individual

As evidenced by the previous paragraphs, it is easy to distinguish Ros and Guil as separate individuals with separate identities. It should however be mentioned that Ros and Guil themselves are usually not able to do the same. This is owing to Stoppard playing on the two characters being virtually indistinguishable in *Hamlet*, and as such everyone (including Ros and Guil) struggle to separate the two:

GUIL. Rosencrantz...

ROS. (*absently, still listening*) What?

Pause, short.

GUIL. (*gently wry*) Guildenstern...

ROS. (*irritated by the repetition*) What?

GUIL. Don't you discriminate at all? (43)

It is most often Ros that struggles to distinguish the two, while Guil seems to have somewhat firmer hold on his own identity, but one of his last lines in the play “Rosen –? Guil –?” (117) shows that Guil too suffers from this tendency to confuse the two. Mixing up their names is however more a question of lack of knowledge than a question of lack of identity as it is made sufficiently clear throughout that they both regard the other as a separate individual with differing methods of reasoning, as evidenced by Guil: “I mean you wouldn't *bet* on it. I mean *I* would, but *you* wouldn't...” (3).

However, as we saw earlier, Joseph Duncan has suggested that Ros and Guil resemble the modern type of the 'everyman', which is to say that they become an emblem of humanity's struggle against the unfathomable powers of destiny and death. But this is a point of contention, and Fleming argues that “[Ros and Guil's] 'characterness' (inability to define themselves sufficiently outside of Shakespeare's world) is somewhat unsatisfying and prevents them from reaching 'Everyman' status” (65). Stoppard also holds the view that they should be seen as characters, and not as an *intended* metaphor for humanity:

I mean to me, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern [Are Dead]* is a play about two Elizabethan courtiers in a castle, wondering what's going on. [...] I know perfectly well that the situation, the predicament which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves in is an interesting one in the sense that it can be used or thought of as being a metaphor for other situations. That's a very different matter from deciding to write about a particular kind of predicament, a specific predicament of modern man and look around for some symbolic form in which to convey it, and decide to do it in terms of two characters in *Hamlet*. (Kuurman 68)

1.3.2.1.4 Open or closed

Ros and Guil's struggles stem directly from the fact that their only point of orientation is the explicit information found in *Hamlet*. They continuously attempt to question and transgress upon these established facts, but either through the invisible shackles of Shakespeare or their own indecision, they are unable to define themselves in a definite, meaningful way, outside of *Hamlet*. They do however question their own nature and show an expressed desire to break free from the closed confines of the play:

ROS. He *said* we can go. Cross my heart.

GUIL. I like to know where I am. Even if I don't know where I am, I like to know *that*. If we go there's no knowing.

ROS. No knowing what?

GUIL. If we'll ever come back.

ROS. We don't want to come back.

GUIL. That may very well be true, but do we want to go?

ROS. We'll be free. (87)

Their desire is however never transformed into action and so they must follow Shakespeare's preordained course.

We saw in *Hamlet* how there is a case to be made for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as enigmatic characters owing to the uncertainty of their motives in the play. Stoppard, however, makes a conscious stand in this debate, as he himself has stated that he regards the two courtiers as two innocent victims of the circumstances they find themselves in (R. Hudson et al. 66). By opting for one definite interpretation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's role in the plot, Stoppard removes any ambiguity concerning their characters and in that respect his depiction of the two becomes a more closed character conception than the one in Shakespeare. By doing so he is actually echoing Gilbert, although Gilbert's conception is closer to the sly, scheming version of the courtiers favored by some critics.

1.3.2.1.5 Transpsychological or psychological

Stoppard's play is teeming with examples demonstrating a sort of super-awareness in Ros and Guil. One such example that comes readily to mind is the previously quoted exchange where Ros wants to jump off the ship to put a spoke in "their" wheel (99). There are several instances in the play where this vague "they" is invoked, and in most cases it can be taken as referring to either the principal agents at the court of Elsinore, or the audience in the theatre and their expectations. Either way, this expressed wish to actively interact with and frustrate the expectations of "they" is clear

evidence of an awareness of a dramatic reality, even if Ros and Guil are unable to successfully identify it as such.

This is also seen in the way they attempt to interpret and bargain with the source material in *Hamlet*, as in the scene where they argue about whether to deliver the letter with the warrant for Hamlet's death. "You've only got their word for it" (101) Guil protests, as Ros tries to argue that Hamlet is their childhood friend. The implication is that Ros and Guil themselves have no recollection of their childhood (since it is not a part of *Hamlet*) and they are aware of this fact. Which means that even though they are unable to arrive at the final revelation of their statuses as mere characters in a play, they still are able to exhibit an impressive, instinctual awareness of their situation. This ability to reflect on their fate and question the nature of their existence is of course also the reason why they ultimately appear sympathetic to the audience and why scholars have been able to argue in favor of an interpretation which sees the two as a metaphor for humanity's struggle to understand its own existence. It could be said that more than anything else it is the transpsychological attributes of Ros and Guil that imbues them with the humanity that has allowed them to resonate with audiences to an extent well beyond that of their corresponding iterations in Shakespeare and Gilbert.

1.3.2.2 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's role in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

As Alan Sinfield remarks in his essay on character appropriation in Shakespeare, Stoppard's play is actually very conservative when it comes to staying true to the source material in *Hamlet* (131). Though Stoppard opts not to include every scene from *Hamlet* in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear, the ones he does include remain faithful to Shakespeare. Obviously, Stoppard does have his own notion of how the characters should be perceived in his play, and he inserts stage directions within the *Hamlet* scenes to cast them in a certain light, but none of his insertions are forceful enough to merit accusations of 'changing' the text as opposed to 'interpreting'. And yet in spite of this, *R&GAD* demonstrates how it is possible to radically alter our perception of two characters, simply by filling in the blank spaces left untouched by the source material. So while Ros and Guil in one sense definitely are the same characters as the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who appear in *Hamlet*, in another sense they are quite different; Ros and Guil inhabit Shakespeare's play and yet at the same time they are also divorced from it. To explain with an analogy, the reason for this duality has to do with Stoppard's adding color within the lines that Shakespeare has already drawn up, creating a picture which is still recognizable as Shakespeare and still no longer resembling it completely, as the uncolored space filled with possibilities is no longer there. And so,

regardless of Stoppard's intentions, *R&GAD* is actually challenging the authority of *Hamlet* or at the very least the authority of some readers' interpretation of *Hamlet*. Sinfield emphasizes two ways in which this happens:

formally, in that the 'natural' flow of the Shakespearean text is disrupted, and the familiar relationship between it and the experienced audience is broken; and thematically, in that the 'tragic hero' is displaced from the centre of his own play and the substitute protagonists (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) achieve no heroic control of themselves or their destinies. (131)

Let us also keep in mind that we have already seen that any interpretation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern directly ties in with our perception of Hamlet himself, owing to his agency in their deaths. So that it might not simply be a question of 'displacing' Hamlet, but actually blemishing him for the sake of elevating of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. What is interesting about this issue, is that while Gilbert went much further in ridiculing Hamlet and reconfiguring Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for his own purposes, his burlesque was not perceived as threatening to the authority of *Hamlet*. At least that is one natural inference of the scarcity of critical reference to his play in the scholarly debates on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In contrast the question of whether Stoppard's play is compatible with the canonicity of *Hamlet* became a major issue with reviewers and critics alike.

1.3.2.3 Receivers' response to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Tellingly the first chapter in John Fleming's book *Stoppard's Theatre* is titled "Career before *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*". The play was thus the first significant milestone in Stoppard's career as it rapidly gained success with the audience, and in consequence a lot has been written about it. The debate about absurdism and existentialism within the play and similarities with *Waiting for Godot* has already been mentioned, but *R&GAD* has also been held up as a go-to example of works rewriting or travestyng Shakespeare. Most critics are of the opinion that Stoppard has successfully achieved what he set out to do in his play, namely to look at *Hamlet* from askew and make a case for his iteration of a confused Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are told little but lies; and still there have been other critics that proclaim Stoppard's play an utter failure.

1.3.2.3.1 The question of canonicity

There has been no lack of praise for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. For instance, Irving Wardle in his *The Times* review of the first London Production in 1967 writes that "in its origin this is a highly literary play with frank debts to Pirandello and Beckett; but in Derek Goldby's production these sources prove a route towards technical brilliance and powerful feeling" (71). He

then goes on to add that “there are times when the author, like his characters, seems to be casting about for what to say next. But for most of the time he walks his chosen tight-rope with absolute security” (71). Philip Hope-Wallace in his *Guardian* review of the same production states that “the joke seems rather protracted in the first and second acts, in spite of many amusing lines and patter” (70).

It is interesting to compare these initial reservations to later criticism, as it seems Stoppard's play has risen a great deal in esteem in tandem with his reputation as a playwright. After all, it is a long way from the slightly reserved praise of the first reviews to Alan Sinfield's assurance in the essay “Making space: appropriation and confrontation in recent British plays” that: “Like the sick people with Jesus, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* touches the hem of Shakespeare's garment, and some of his power is conducted into the new work” (133). Sinfield's argument is that the play is able to find its place right next to *Hamlet*, and that its playful challenging of the Shakespeare myth is an attempt at dialogue and not dislodgment. William E. Gruber suggests a similar thing by stating that “the texts of Hamlet's play and Ros and Guil's play form two separate spheres of human activity which, like the two heavenly bodies, impinge upon each other because of their respective gravitational fields” (Gruber 86). By beginning at the other end of the discourse Sinclair and Gruber call attention to the fact that the excellence of *Hamlet* has an impact on the perceived quality of *R&GAD*. At least this would seem to be the case as long as the play can claim for itself a status as more than simply a light-hearted spoof on Shakespeare's drama, which is the niche Gilbert's work has found itself (perhaps justly) relegated to. In other words, as the acclaim for the play has risen, so too have the stakes, as *R&GAD* must take the consequences of its gamble and attempt to stand side-by-side with Shakespeare.

Sinfield claimed that Stoppard succeeded at this, and Jonathan Bennett too, affirms that “the events on Stoppard's stage, rather than conflicting with those on Shakespeare's reinforce and elucidate them” (Bennett 10), there were however other voices who voiced their dissent to this opinion. One of the early voices to this effect was John Weightman who in a 1967 review-article professed that “the action [in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*] is not a legitimate extension of the minimal identity that Shakespeare gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*, and so Mr. Stoppard's play operates at an uncomfortable tangent to Shakespeare's” (72). In support of this claim he points to Stoppard's omission of the 'recorder scene' wherein Weightman feels that they are revealed as “rather silly time-servers, at the opposite pole from Horatio, the friend of sterling silver”.

One of the consequences of Stoppard opting for the two courtiers as his principal characters was that the 'true-friends' debate surrounding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet* would

inevitably make its impact on the reception of the play, and it seems to have happened sooner rather than later. Robert Brustein picks up this thread in his scathing piece “Something Disturbingly Voguish and Available”:

It is, in fact, the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that account for a good deal of my queasiness about the play. In Shakespeare, these characters are time servers – cold, calculating opportunists who betray a friendship for the sake of a preferment – whose deaths, therefore, leave Hamlet without a pang of remorse. In Stoppard, they are garrulous, child-like, ingratiating simpletons, bewildered by the parts they must play – indeed, by the very notion of an evil action. (95)

Joining his voice to that of Weightman he accuses Stoppard of deliberately omitting the 'recorder scene' as it would reveal the true nature of the two courtiers to the audience. It is also worth noting in passing that where Sinfield sees Stoppard touching the Christ-like hem of Shakespeare's cloak to receive its power, Brustein sees “a theatrical parasite, feeding off *Hamlet*” (93); it is the same process of textual discourse described in vastly different terms. Returning to the issue of the missing 'recorder scene', Stoppard himself has noted that the reason for omitting the scene is merely one of consideration to the time constraints of a stage production (R. Hudson et al. 32). In a sense, this reads a lot like an evasion and seems typical of Stoppard's tendency to deny any conscious intentions beyond entertaining people with the play; we do however already know that Stoppard is firmly decided in his interpretation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's role in *Hamlet*, and that his play merely elaborates on this standpoint. But even so, the lack of a recorder scene does raise the important question of whether it is in fact compatible with a perception of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as clueless victims, and Stoppard's failure or unwillingness to address the issue leaves the question hanging in the air. For the likes of Brustein and Weightman this becomes an insurmountable obstacle to their enjoyment of the play. This is because “the dynamic dialogue between texts depends upon the audience performing as 'witnesses' to the possibilities of 'entering into [...] collaborative worlds of play’” (Meyer 106). However, this can only happen if the subject matter in the different texts is acknowledged as 'possible stories'. The fact that *R&GAD* presents itself as existing in the same world as *Hamlet* becomes a cause for rejection among certain audiences, as they are unable to reconcile the two in their minds and thus opts to disavow the one to preserve the other.

1.3.2.3.2 The question of genre

R&GAD ran the risk of rejection by inviting comparison to *Hamlet* as the choices made pertaining to the situation and characters of Ros and Guil ran at direct odds with some receivers' conception of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's canon. This could be taken to suggest that when faced with Stoppard's play one must either accept or reject his conception of the two courtiers and

subsequently the play. But as Neil Forsyth points out in his essay “Rewriting Shakespeare: Travesty and Tradition” there are other ways to approach Stoppard's play, which seemingly make the question of canonicity irrelevant. By focusing on *R&GAD* as a travesty of *Hamlet*, Forsyth argues that the play's identity rests on its reversals and inversions and thus that its contradictions of *Hamlet* are the actual source of enjoyment:

[Rosencrantz and Guildenstern] are not very good psychologists, and Hamlet easily outwits them. It is this position which Stoppard dramatizes, and makes sympathetic fun of – partly because it is the position of many members of the audience at a performance of *Hamlet*, and indeed of his critics. The tradition being travestied includes all the interpretations and responses to *Hamlet*. Ros and Guil dramatize for us the interpretive dilemmas that are set into *Hamlet* itself: the need to understand and the obstacles that frustrate understanding are together what accounts for the play's appeal. (120)

Thus, if one feels that *R&GAD* completely misinterprets *Hamlet* and the actions found within, Forsyth would argue that this is precisely the point. From this point of view, *R&GAD* is more closely aligned with Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* as they both come across as playful travesties²⁴ whose source of enjoyment first and foremost stems from their ability to pinpoint and satirize interpretive reactions to *Hamlet*.

While there can be no doubt that Forsyth's analysis of Stoppard's play is poignant and that 'travesty' indeed is one of the most applicable terms with regards to assigning a genre to it, it is still worth asking the question of whether the distinction is in danger of negating its attempts to rewrite or elaborate on Shakespeare. Stoppard himself comments that he “was not in the least interested in doing any sort of pastiche [...] or in doing any sort of criticism of *Hamlet* – that was simply one of the by-products. The chief interest and objective was to exploit a situation which seemed to me to have enormous dramatic and comic potential – of these two guys who in Shakespeare's context don't really know what they're doing” (R. Hudson et al. 66). If we compare Gilbert and Stoppard on this point, we see that Gilbert's play is a travesty or burlesque in the truest sense, exploiting the comedic potential of subverting the configurations and expectations associated with a production of *Hamlet*. Stoppard too, does this, but underlying it there is an expressed intention to make the case for an actual interpretation of two characters in *Hamlet*. As Stoppard makes clear time and time again, he really regards the dilemma at the core of his play as the actual situation that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are in within Shakespeare's text. And what is more, the critical debate surrounding the two characters demonstrates that Stoppard is not alone in his interpretation.

While *R&GAD* certainly is a travesty of *Hamlet* it still, quite seriously, examines a central premise in *Hamlet* and asks that the audience accept its point of view. This view is not forced on the audience. Forsyth, though a staunch member of the 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as villains'-camp,

²⁴ Forsyth himself describes travesty as a sort of “interrogation of the past by the present, risking the accusation of treason in order to ascertain or reveal the tradition – travesty as second or strong reading” (118).

is still able to enjoy and praise the play for its inventiveness. But in spite of this, one is left with the feeling that anyone failing to accept the premise of Ros and Guil's innocence, though not rejecting the play like Weightman and Brustein, are still missing out on the more serious implications of the play, and the way in which Stoppard sets his play up to retroactively influence any subsequent viewings of *Hamlet*. To give one concrete example of how such influence can be said to exist, I would like to point to the dual production of *Hamlet* and *R&GAD* at the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival in 1988, where both plays were performed on and off with the same cast. While the result of the experiment seems to have been sub-par according to reviewer Bernard Mc Elroy (95) the very existence of such a production speaks volumes of the intertwined relationship the two plays share, and moreover provides a tangible example of how Stoppard might succeed in winning over audiences to his interpretation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

1.4 Chapter conclusion

We have seen how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's origin in *Hamlet* have become the source of a critical debate, as different critics try to argue in favor of seeing them as scheming betrayers, unreliable friends or simply innocent bystanders respectively. Much of this discussion has to do with attempting to come up with an acceptable solution to the dilemma of their deaths at the hands of Hamlet; an issue that some argue even Shakespeare made revisions to address in the Folio. The possibility of interpreting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as bystanders, detached from the plot of *Hamlet*, is then seized upon by Gilbert, who exploits their position at the sidelines to travesty and interfere with *Hamlet* and its principal characters. In so doing, he demonstrates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's aptness as characters through which the audience can project themselves into the action in Shakespeare; since their neutral status is the seemingly perfect attribute for a theatre audience to identify with. The smallness of their part in *Hamlet* also makes the very act of promoting them to central characters a successful joke at the expense of Hamlet, and is further testament of the applicability of the two courtiers in a comedic discourse with Shakespeare's play.

But owing to its loose relationship to the actual text of *Hamlet*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* leaves no great impact on people's perception of either *Hamlet* or the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; though most critics agree that his play were one of the main influences on Tom Stoppard, when he sat down to write *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Stoppard combines the elements of the critical debate around Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's questionable complicity in the plot against Hamlet with the humorous antics from Gilbert to create a play that simultaneously works as a loose travesty of *Hamlet* and a more serious exploration of the dilemma surrounding the two courtiers' situation. By assigning each of the two courtiers separate

characteristics and having them constantly attempting to evaluate their situation and comment on the actions taking place around them in *Hamlet* it can be argued that Stoppard actually develops Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as characters. This is of course a point of contention and some critics feel that Stoppard is taking liberties with the source material in Shakespeare which necessitates that a clear distinction be made between Stoppard's and Shakespeare's courtiers. Others see Stoppard's creations as a natural progression of the characters found in *Hamlet* and feel that Stoppard's interpretation in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is merely a case of filling in the blank spaces Shakespeare left open in the way that appears most meaningful to the audience.

This brings us to today. While there are no definite conclusions to be made when considering the ultimate success of Stoppard in reappropriating or rewriting Shakespeare, T. Bareham in his foreword to *Tom Stoppard: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Jumpers & Travesties* draws a parallel to Gilbert. His suggestion is that Stoppard succeeded where Gilbert failed and cites as evidence that while Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* has been left largely forgotten, Stoppard's play has survived within the active professional repertory (12). This coupled with the knowledge that the play eventually made the translation to film, and the existence of productions where *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* have been performed back to back with the same cast and costumes, certainly seem to suggest that Stoppard has been able to leave a lasting influence on *Hamlet* and consequently the way we perceive the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Some might protest that there is nothing remarkable in this, and that it does not differ in the slightest to how a critic can introduce a new interpretation of a famous work and in a sense, win us over, to see the characters in a new light. The difference is of course that Stoppard does this by actually producing new material, which in a way is meant to supplement what is already there. He locates blank spaces in two of Shakespeare's characters and then goes on to fill those spaces with things that enforce a certain interpretation of these characters. In this light we could say that Stoppard succeeds where Gilbert does not, though one could argue that Gilbert and Stoppard are not attempting the same thing. Regardless, as Stoppard continually explores in his play, any attempt to rewrite or elaborate a character will have to confront a series of constraints forced upon it by the original source material. In this chapter we have seen how one can successfully operate within those constraints to rewrite or elaborate. In the next chapter we will examine these constraints further as we move on to the question of whether the source material trumps the authority of the original author, when Shakespeare attempts to elaborate on Falstaff.

2 Falstaff

2.1 Chapter introduction

In the first chapter we saw how the elaborations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were either assimilated or rejected in connection with their perceived adherence to the source material. This is most likely a consequence of the two courtiers' indistinct nature; they only ever seem to find a valid expression when they are conceived within the context of *Hamlet* and its plot. However, in this chapter we will examine a more complex character whose conception is not tied to the specific plot of a single play. The fat knight Sir John Falstaff occupies the center of three distinct plays, 1 *Henry IV* (ca. 1596), 2 *Henry IV* (ca. 1597) and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (ca. 1597) and in addition he is also mentioned on several occasions in *Henry V* (1599). His prominence in so many plays has made Falstaff one of the most heavily debated characters in Shakespeare.²⁵ The goal of this chapter is to shed some light on how Falstaff's character-conception has been formed by his continued treatment in Shakespeare. We must ask how Falstaff is defined when the audience has to approach more than one text in order to locate him, and further, what happens when any of these texts fail to conform to the rest of the picture. Thus, while Chapter 1 dealt with elaborations of characters centered around one plot, this chapter will deal with elaborations of a character spanning across several plots.

David Scott Kastan suggested that, owing to his inherent charisma and ability to become the center of attention within any space he inhabits, Falstaff "is perhaps the character easiest to imagine existing outside the plot of [*1 Henry IV*]" (49). But most critics believe that Shakespeare himself botched such an attempt with his *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. These critics insist that the character named Falstaff featuring in this comedy bears no relation to the other Falstaff of the history plays. As a result, though there are four plays by Shakespeare in which Sir John appears, only three of them have been approved as his "canon".

This development of Falstaff's character and the rejection of his iteration in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* will be the main focus of this chapter. Because of the prevailing tendency to regard the Falstaff of the history play as one entity and the Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as another, I will for the purposes of this discussion treat the "Henriad" (*1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*) as one continuous narrative chronicling the exploits of one Sir John Falstaff and his relationship to

²⁵ David Scott Kastan writes in the Arden 3 introduction to *1 Henry IV* that "there are more references to the fat knight up until the end of the eighteenth century than to any other literary character" (2).

Prince Hal/King Henry V.²⁶ There are of course several problems with this approach, and I will attempt to address some of the issues pertaining to the difficulty of firmly establishing the “real” Falstaff of the history plays.

In order to sufficiently shed light on the perceived conflict of Falstaff's iterations in the *Henriad* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the structure of this chapter will initially resemble that of the first chapter. We will look at the background for the character's original conception, Pfister's model for character analysis will be revisited in order to establish what kind of structural space Falstaff inhabits within the history plays, and Sir John's critical reception will be examined. Once we have established how Falstaff's conception is defined within the *Henriad*, we will continue to examine how *The Merry Wives of Windsor* can be seen to detract from this iteration and the different strategies suggested by critics to reconcile the two iterations.

I will finish the chapter by briefly looking at a modern attempt at elaboration of the Falstaff character in Robert Nye's novel *Falstaff* (1976) which is presented as the autobiography of Falstaff, in which he tells the tale of his life and gives us his own version of the events taking place in the Shakespeare plays. After giving a brief account of Nye's Falstaff and the novel's reception by the general public, I will go on to demonstrate the strategy behind Nye's attempt at elaboration. By doing so we will hopefully be able to discover more about the nature of character elaboration, and what role the original text plays in the rejection or assimilation of subsequent iterations of a character as complex as Sir John Falstaff.

2.1.1 The origins of Sir John Falstaff

Scholars all seem to agree that the character we know as Falstaff today was originally named Sir John Oldcastle in *1 Henry IV*, and that it was only after pressure from the heirs of this Oldcastle (who died a Lollard martyr) that Shakespeare censured his play and changed the name (Kastan 52). Why Shakespeare chose to portray Oldcastle in the first place is still up for debate, but historical sources point him out as a friend to the king, who had served him in his youth, and who later found himself at odds with the monarch owing to the controversy surrounding his Lollardy (57) and so, if nothing else it placed Oldcastle in the vicinity of the historical plot. And even though Shakespeare went through with the change by naming his character Falstaff, evidence still remains of Oldcastle in *1 Henry IV*, such as Hal calling Falstaff “my old lad of the castle” (1.2.40)²⁷, and the suggestion

²⁶ See for instance Maurice Morgann's “An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff” wherein he makes the argument that the Falstaff of *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV* is “the only instance where a personage is presented in two plays with perfect consistency” (Charles F. Johnson 159) and also A. C. Bradley's assertion in his essay “The Rejection of Falstaff” that “the original [Falstaff] is to be found alive in the two parts of *Henry IV*, dead in *Henry V*, and nowhere else” (248).

²⁷ All citations from *1 Henry IV* and *Henry V* will be from the 3 Arden series, while citations from *2 Henry IV* are from the 2 Arden series, unless otherwise stated.

that “traces of lollardy may still be detected in Falstaff’s frequent resort to scriptural phraseology and in his affectation of an uneasy conscience” (Wilson 16).

To further complicate things there is also the matter of Sir John Fastolfe from *Henry VI, Part One*: a cowardly commander who eventually winds up stripped of his Garter for his desertion on the battlefield (Bloom 274). The similarities between the names Fastolfe/Falstaff and the theme of cowardice on the battlefield are striking, and suddenly we find ourselves with an Oldcastle/Fastolfe/Falstaff knot which is hard to immediately disentangle.

There have been many suggestions to solve this problem, some good and some rather bad,²⁸ but in so far as one undertakes to examine the Henriad as a whole, I believe we should let Shakespeare have the last word on the distinction between Falstaff and Oldcastle: “Falstaff shall die of a sweat, unless already killed with your hard opinions; for Oldcastle died martyr, and this is not the man” (*2 Henry IV* epilogue.30-32).

Distinguishing Fastolfe from Falstaff is easier, since this character inhabits a quite different part of English history in the reign of Henry VI, clearly separate from Falstaff, though Giorgio Melchiori theorizes that Fastolfe has an important connection to the Falstaff persona. Writing in the introduction to the Arden 3 *The Merry Wives of Windsor* he posits a theory that the masque part at the end of the play was written as a smaller piece for a Garter entertainment, sometime before writing *2 Henry IV*. This masque called for an anti-heroic Garter knight who could be shown contravening the virtuous behavior of the order and then suffering subsequent ridicule for it. Melchiori’s suggestion is that Shakespeare went back and found his disgraced knight of the Garter in the reign of Henry VI and thus inserted Fastolfe in the masque. And so, when Shakespeare began to get into trouble with the whole Oldcastle controversy, Fastolfe/Falstaff was so close to his mind that he immediately seized upon the name and inserted it into *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV*. (28)

Another theory worth mentioning before we move on posits that the Falstaff name was chosen not necessarily because of any connection to the dishonorable Sir Fastolfe from *Henry VI, Part One*, but because of the wordplay between Fall/staff and Shake/spear. In these readings emphasis is placed on the personal connection between Shakespeare and Falstaff, justified by the similarities between Hal’s rejection of Falstaff, and the young nobleman’s rejection of Shakespeare as it is described in his Sonnets (Bloom 273).²⁹ Regardless of whether such a reading is valid or not, it speaks volumes of Falstaff’s character that scholars have felt that it is not only possible, but natural, to draw comparisons to the private person Shakespeare when attempting to account for the

²⁸ Kastan mentions in his introduction to *1 Henry IV* the complete Oxford text, which has been “restored” by replacing “Falstaff” with “Oldcastle” (55).

²⁹ W. H. Auden for instance, though not making the mistake of conflating Falstaff and Shakespeare, invokes Shakespeare’s Sonnet’s in several places to illustrate parts of Falstaff’s character in his seminal essay “The Prince’s Dog.”

richness of sentiment the fat knight expresses.

2.1.2 Falstaff in the history plays

Though the majority of critics remain convinced that the Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has but a superficial relation to the Falstaff of the history plays, the same critics also seem in agreement that Falstaff as he appears in the three plays of the Henriad is indeed one consistent character. These critics claim that to construct a full picture of the Falstaff they love (or hate) one must gather all information given about the fat knight in the three plays and then assemble it correctly. It should however be noted that there are some who find this approach questionable, such as T. W. Craik who states in the Oxford *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: “Clearly Shakespeare has no purpose in giving his characters self-consistent life-histories, such as the characters in sequences of novels by Trollope and Galsworthy have” (12). But as we will come to see, Craik's assertion has not discouraged critics from searching out the Henriad in its entirety to define the character of Falstaff.

The sequelized nature of the Henriad challenges our conception of each play as a self-contained narrative, and it seems unlikely that one can really talk about Falstaff in *1 Henry IV* (from here on *Part One*) as one character, and then Falstaff in *2 Henry IV* (from here on *Part Two*) as another. Kastan suggests that *Part Two* is more a commentary on *Part One* than a continuation, arguing that Shakespeare's premeditation of *Part Two* when writing *Part One* is uncertain at best (22). However, the question of premeditation matters little. What matters is that Shakespeare eventually found himself writing no less than four plays that have become undisputedly linked through the character of Falstaff.

We will begin by examining how Falstaff's characteristics have been defined by the Henriad; how, though his role and proximity to the plot could be said to change from play to play, the critics have pointed out a set of features they find to be consistent throughout the three plays, and how these features have become the standard other elaborations of the character must adhere to if they are to gain acceptance.

2.1.2.1 Analysis of Character

Pfister's model for character analysis feels reductive in the extreme when applied to a character as multi-faceted as Falstaff, and one suspects that no one would protest more loudly against any such attempt at classification than Falstaff himself. I should also admit that my decision to regard the history plays as one continuous piece with regards to Falstaff's character development runs more or less counter to Pfister's conviction that characters do not exist outside of any one text in which they appear; Pfister would probably prefer that we talk about the Falstaff in *Part One* and the Falstaff in *Part Two* as separate entities. In spite of these possible objections, Pfister's model is valuable in that

it provides us with a neatly structured framework on which to base our analysis.

2.1.2.1.1 Static versus dynamic

Though scholars debate whether we are supposed to find Falstaff a sympathetic character or not, they all seem to be in agreement that there is a difference in Shakespeare's depiction of the fat knight in *Part One* and *Part Two*. While Falstaff is a jolly, wily, braggart and primarily a source of play and wit in the first part, A.C. Bradley suggests that his depiction in the second part moves towards a more sordid and perhaps threatening character (1911:271-272). As a reason for this change, Bradley suggests that since Sir John was such a delightful figure in *Part One*, his presence in *Part Two* would ultimately have to take on a more destructive nature to make the audience agree with Prince Hal's eventual rejection of him. In this reading both Falstaff's exploitation of Hostess Quickly in *Part Two* scene 2.1 and his later scheming against Justice Shallow in scenes 3.2 and 5.1 become not simply occasions for wit, but evidence of a growing sense of danger in Falstaff's presence. A. R. Humphreys puts it this way:

[Falstaff's] mind operates, then, less refreshingly than in Part I, in ways touched with the gross, the patronizing, even the sinister. Proximity to the throne can be no place for him. [...] One laughs at the comic aspects of Falstaff's misdeeds, but one is well aware that they disqualify him from a king's favor. He deteriorates not in artistic quality (not much, at any rate), but in the totality of qualities to be liked. (lvii-lviii)

It seems that morals are an important factor in this question of perceived change. What both Bradley and Humphreys point towards is not so much a change in the actions of Falstaff (he is up to just as much mischief in *Part One*) but to a change in how those actions are depicted. Falstaff is potentially the same in both plays, but the audience's perception of him is changed from one play to another as more of his character is revealed to them. This is done by showing more of the consequences of his actions. Though we hear about the sorry crew of beggars, cripples and thieves drafted by Falstaff as "food for powder" in *Part One* (4.2.64-66) it is not until *Part Two* that we actually see such men personified as Wart, Mouldy, Shadow, Feeble and Bullcalf in scene 3.2. In being confronted with the notion that Falstaff's actions actually have consequences for the people around him, the audience is made to realize that "Sir John is anything but a loveable old darling; he personally is bad news" (Bloom 284).

What then can be gathered about Falstaff as either static or dynamic with respects to the Henriad? On the surface level of the plot Falstaff does not go through any change: initially Falstaff demonstrates a care-free, morally ambiguous disposition, before he is rejected by the prince because of his refusal to reform himself and then possibly dies of a broken heart. However, it is possible that Falstaff develops on a more meta-dramatical level through the course of the Henriad.

Prince Hal states his intentions to cast off Falstaff in scene 1.2 of *Part One* and later

identifies him as an “abominable misleader of youth” in the pivotal roleplaying scene at the Boar's Head tavern (2.4. 450). This more or less firmly establishes the dynamic between Prince Hal and Falstaff, as they cross their wits and Falstaff humorously again and again assumes the role of charming tempter. Yet, when we come to the actual rejection of Falstaff in *Part Two* scene 5.5, many critics have pointed out that there is a pathos inherent in their exchange which far transcends the foreshadowed rejection of an old feeder of riots (Sewell 83):

FALSTAFF. My King! My Jove! I speak to thee my, heart!

KING. I know thee not, old man. (5.5.46-47)

Auden notoriously goes as far as to draw direct parallels between the rejection of Falstaff and the rejection of Christ (207-208) which seems extreme, but the fact that he is able to make this comparison suggests a development in the fat knight's character. At least if we suppose that Auden would not be able to make the same comparison if he only had *Part One* to draw on. It is only after we have seen Falstaff in *Part Two* at the very end, when he is rejected, that it becomes possible for us to see him as a tragic figure.

2.1.2.1.2 Mono- or Multidimensional

It is this capacity to inhabit different roles and support different readings that cements Falstaff's status as a multidimensional character. Falstaff is both the lying, braggart soldier exaggerating his exploits at Gad's Hill, as two men in Buckram suits become four, seven, nine and eleven (*1 HIV* 2.4.184-211), and at the same time the wise, battle-hardened, veteran expounding on the horrors of war and the ambiguity of honor (*1 HIV* 5.1.125-140). Likewise, we are also left to ponder how his wily, exploitative nature, as evidenced by his abuse of Hostess Quickly in *Part Two* 2.1.83-162, can inspire the kind devotion his followers declare in *Henry V* upon the news of his death:

BARDOLPH. Would I were with him, wheresome'er he
is, either in heaven or in hell!

HOSTESS. Nay, sure, he's not in hell; he's in Arthur's
bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. (2.3.7-10)

Revealingly, we are left to infer for ourselves what their devotion has its basis in. William Hazlitt noncommittally sees it as a sort of charismatic power to gain good will from his familiars (169), Auden imbues Falstaff with a nature of supreme charity (198), A. D. Nutall makes him an representative of fallen man, an Old Adam, and makes this the source of the sympathy the fat knight lays claim to (151-153), while William Empson suggests Falstaff as a model machiavel whose power over people stems from supreme social understanding (56-58). It would seem that with Falstaff the possibilities are nearly inexhaustible.

2.1.2.1.3 Type or individual

Though unquestionably an individual in his own right, several types have been suggested as frameworks through which Falstaff's nature can be deconstructed and properly explained. The most prevalent of these types is that of the vice Riot. Dover Wilson makes an argument in *The Fortunes of Falstaff* that the portrayal of Falstaff's character bears a strong resemblance to Riot, as personified in Renaissance morality plays. Thus, the two plays of *Henry IV* together in Wilson's opinion constitute a Shakespearean morality play structured in imitation of the parable of the Prodigal Son (18-22). Some of Wilson's arguments are convincing, such as his emphasis on Shakespeare's prevalent usage of the word "riot" and its connection to descriptions of Falstaff's influence on Prince Hal within the plays; i.e. "the tutor and the feeder of my riots" (2 *HIV* 5.5.62), "Riot and dishonor stain the brow / Of my young Harry" (1 *HIV* 1.1.84-85) and "When that my care could not withhold thy riots, / What wilt thou do when riot is thy care?" (2 *HIV* 4.5.134-135). It is also easy to see how Falstaff can be equated with Riot as he speaks lines akin to this one:

FALSTAFF. I know the young King is sick for me. Let
us take any man's horses – the laws of England are
at my commandment. Blessed are they that have
been my friends, and woe to my Lord Chief Justice! (5.4.131-134)

The point that Wilson arguably misses is that Falstaff functions as the vice Riot only in so far as he can be seen directly in opposition to the dignity and responsibilities of the throne. If we take Falstaff's catechism on honor or his "give me life" (1 *HIV* 5.3.60) seriously, it should immediately become clear that it becomes reductive in the extreme to merely equate Falstaff with vice. This is what Wilson does when he states that "[it was] in order to explain and palliate the Prince's love of rioting and wantonness that he set out to make Falstaff as enchanting as he could" (23). Anything appealing about Falstaff thus becomes a means of seduction rather than an actual characteristic of Sir John.

Another type that has been associated with Falstaff is that of the *miles gloriosus*, or braggart soldier (Wilson 20). Why this type has come to be closely associated with the Falstaff character is no mystery. The whole episode upon Gad's Hill and Falstaff's subsequent boasting of his own actions thereon is a textbook example of how the *miles gloriosus* is seen to act in the classical plays. And yet, it is this type that Maurice Morgann specifically sets out to refute when he writes in his "An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff" that "*Falstaff* was in all respects the *old soldier*; that he had put himself under the sober discipline of discretion, and renounced, in a great degree at least, what he might call, the Vanities and Superstitions of honor;" (183).

Falstaff it would seem is an amalgam of many types; highwayman, the vice Riot, *miles*

gloriosus, old soldier.³⁰ But one of Falstaff's wonderful tricks is that he is able to upset the expectations each of these types set out for him. As Prince Hal and Poins bait him into recounting his exploits on Gad's Hill in *Part One* his lies are so obvious that it becomes impossible to believe that he ever expected anyone to take them seriously: "These four came all afront and mainly thrust at me. I made me no more ado, but took all their seven points in my target, thus." (2.4.193-195) So that when his final claim is made "By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye" (2.4.259), it becomes impossible to reduce him to the role of braggart soldier which Prince Hal and Poins obviously intended for him with their little trick; on the contrary a suspicion is left lingering that Falstaff may have known it was them all along. And we are equally baffled when the old rogue, solemn on the morning of battle delivers his great rhetorical deconstruction of honor. So while it is safe to say that Falstaff imitates several types throughout the course of the *Henriad*, imitation is all it is, as the old knight is quick to moves from one mode of behavior to another as the situation requires it of him.

2.1.2.1.4 Open or closed

This movement between modes of behavior, or capacity for invention, is one of the chief causes for Falstaff's perceived complexity. The manner in which Falstaff reacts to things is so different from scene to scene, that scholars have struggled to find a way to reconcile the different modes into one consistent whole. I believe Auden is the one who most successfully succeeds in finding a unifying theme for Falstaff's behavior when he states that: "Falstaff's speech has only one cause, his absolute insistence, at every moment and at all costs, upon disclosing himself. Half his lines could be moved from one speech to another without our noticing, for nearly everything he says is a variant upon one theme – 'I am that I am'" (187).

This statement suggests that Falstaff is more concerned with the process of acting than the consequences of individual actions; it is not so important what is expressed as long as Falstaff can keep expressing himself. In the retelling of Gad's Hill, when caught slipping in his lie ("how couldst thou know these men in Kendal green when it was so dark thou couldst not see thy hand?" (2.4.224-226)), we see Falstaff sending forth a torrent of words, possibly stalling for time to come up with an excuse ("I knew ye"):

FALSTAFF. What, upon compulsion? Zounds, an I were
at the strappado, or all the racks in the world, I would
not tell you on compulsion. Give you a reason on

³⁰ Worth mentioning is also William Empson who makes an interesting observation by finding in Falstaff the figure of "cowardly swashbuckler" (56); a figure that stands for social disorder and can function as a contrast to both the rebels and the royalty in the plot.

compulsion? If reasons were as plentiful as
blackberries, I would give no man a reason upon
compulsion, I. (2.4.229-234)

Falstaff relishes the challenge, but tellingly he seems more concerned with the eloquence of his performance than its credibility. Similarly, we see Falstaff's powers of invention at his greatest after his sham death in *Part One* scene 5.4.110-127. After having justified his dishonorable behavior, he suddenly observes dead Hotspur on the ground and loudly muses "How if he should counterfeit too and rise?" (5.4.121-122). Falstaff takes this idea and runs with it, until he has reasoned that he might as well kill him again for good measure and then take the credit. In the blink of an eye he has turned philosophy to trickery and found a way to gain advantage from his new insight; one minute a grave philosopher, the next a conman. Falstaff's capacity for invention is impressive, but it also frustrates any attempt to determine if it is as philosopher or conman that Falstaff finds his most natural expression.

A.D. Nuttall states that Falstaff can be described as a 'poem unlimited' (151) while Harold Bloom terms Falstaff a free artist of himself (271). These terms describe a character who derives his self not from outward circumstances but from inward expression. It is this openness that permeates the whole of Falstaff's character. To explain, let us picture Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as the product of a sum of actions taking place within a specific setting. In comparison, it seems possible that Falstaff could be the product of any kinds of actions performed anywhere, as long as they are performed in a "certain manner".

For example does it not strictly matter if Falstaff was a coward or not when he ran away from Gad's Hill. Whether he is lying through his teeth or actually telling the truth when he says to Prince Hal and Poin "I knew ye" seems beside the point, since we could easily picture Falstaff in either scenario; his openness seemingly embodies both interpretations. Observing the Gad's Hill problem, Dover Wilson concluded that "Shakespeare deliberately left the question of Falstaff's cowardice as a problem to be debated [...]" (54). If this is the case, then Falstaff is defined not by the answer to such questions, but by the questions themselves.

Further evidence in support of a Falstaff who is primarily realized through ambiguity could be found in the relative lack of biographical information surrounding him. Most of what we know about Falstaff's past we have from the pitiful Justice Shallow in *Part Two* and he is not necessarily a reliable source. Take for instance the following exchange: "Ha, cousin Silence, that thou hadst seen that that / this knight and I have seen! Ha, Sir John, said I / well?" To which Falstaff cryptically replies: "We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow" (3.2.206-210) which can either be

taken at face value as a sort of nostalgic recognition of their shared past,³¹ or as a dry nonsensical response made at the expense of Shallow (Bloom 308). Though, if we let Falstaff have the last word on the matter he makes it quite clear what he thinks of Shallow's memory "I do see the bottom of Justice Shallow. Lord, Lord, how subject we old men are to this vice of lying! This same starved justice hath done nothing but prate to me of the wildness of his youth, and the feats he hath done about Turnbull Street, and every third word a lie, duer paid to the hearer than the Turk's tribute" (3.2.296-302).

We find ourselves moving towards a similar situation to the one we found with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, where the scarcity of reliable, unambiguous information allows for a plethora of divergent interpretations of the character; as the audience goes on to write their own respective versions of Falstaff in the manner they deem most fitting or most logical. And as with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern this has of course led to a whole slew of critical debate as the different readings of Falstaff prove to be irreconcilable and the critics lock horns.

2.1.2.1.5 Transpsychological or psychological

Ever as ready to make a joke at his own expense as at another one's, Sir John always seems to be completely aware of himself and his situation (Kastan 47). As Hazlitt puts it "the secret of Falstaff's wit is for the most part a masterly presence of mind, an absolute self-possession which nothing can disturb" (Hazlitt 164). There is the one obvious exception that becomes his undoing: he sets forth to greet the newly crowned King Henry V, hopelessly unaware that Prince Hal is gone forever and in his place stands a new being. But other than this Falstaff is able to see himself through the eyes of others. "I do here walk before thee like a sow that hath overwhelmed all her litter but one" (2.1.9-11) he drily remarks at the beginning of *Part Two*; describing the visual spectacle brought on by the contrast in size between him and his tiny page. Or later in the same play when he demonstrates his painful awareness of the impropriety of his relationship to Doll Tearsheet:

DOLL. By my troth, I kiss thee with a most constant heart.

FALSTAFF. I am old, I am old. (2.4.267-268)

I believe that A. C. Bradley is right when he remarks that this is not so much a matter of Falstaff being ashamed of the morality of the matter "but he knows that in such a situation he, in his old age, must appear contemptible" (1911:269). The question we should ask then is of course, contemptible to whom? Does Falstaff exhibit an awareness of the unnatural kind?

For starters, Falstaff seems to exist solely for the thrill of entertaining an audience, or to use Auden's words:

³¹ This is how Orson Welles chose to portray the exchange in his Falstaff film *Chimes at Midnight* (1965).

In Falstaff's world, the only value standard is importance, that is to say, all he demands from others is attention, all he fears is being ignored. Whether others applaud or hiss does not matter; what matters is the volume of the hissing or the applause.

Hence, in his soliloquy about honour, his reasoning runs something like this: if the consequence of demanding moral approval from others is dying, it is better to win their disapproval; a dead man has no audience. (195)

Falstaff is always catering to an audience, and on several occasions he appears to be talking directly to this audience but for some reason he is never seen to explicitly acknowledge them.³² One of the mysteries of Falstaff is that several of his greatest speeches (his reflections on honour, his philosophising over Hotspur's dead body, and his observations on the nature of Justice Shallow) are made when there is seemingly no one around to hear him. It seems at best implausible that Falstaff would utter some of his best prose while on his own.

Auden also points out that Falstaff is the only character in the *Henriad* who acts as if he is in a play (183). While the other characters are busy with their plots, motives and conflicts, Falstaff more often than not seems mainly to relish the time in the spotlight with little attention for anything else; perhaps best exemplified in *Part One* by him strolling around the battlefield of Shrewsbury with a bottle of sack in his holster while commenting on the absurdity of the slaughter (5.3.30-62). And at the beginning of *Part Two* one is even given to suspect that Falstaff has learned a thing or two about his imminent success with the theatre-going public when he bursts into a pseudo self-reflexive analysis: "Men of all sorts take a pride to gird at me. The brain of this foolish-compounded clay, man, is not able to invent anything that intends to laughter more than I invent, or is invented on me; I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men." (1.2.5-9). To this effect it seems at least possible to agree with Arthur Sewall that: "Falstaff is aware of his audience, on and off the stage, [...] the audience is necessary to his being" (15).

2.1.2.2 Falstaff's role in the plot of the *Henriad*

Already, we have seen it suggested from our initial analysis that Falstaff's character functions on a level removed from the plot, specifically meaning that his self-expression is more important than his actual impact on events in the play for the audience's conception of his identity. If this is the case, it represents a sharp contrast to the situation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, where every conception of them has a direct impact on *Hamlet* and our perception of its main protagonist. Considering that Falstaff operates at the center of the two plays that constitute *Henry IV*,³³ is it really possible to envisage Falstaff as a character totally divorced from the events and characters of

³² Take for instance Falstaff's long speech on the virtues of sack in *Part Two* scene 4.3.84-123. This is a speech of some forty lines being spoken while Falstaff is all alone on stage, but it is not denoted by the usual "aside" instruction that would suggest that it is being spoken directly to the audience.

³³ And his shadow rests over considerable parts of *Henry V* as well.

the Henriad? Or are there elements of his character, tied to his relationship to the other characters and function in the plot, which are integral to our conception of him, and so must be accounted for when we reject or assimilate his elaborations? To answer these questions we must scrutinize Sir John's role through the course the Henriad's plot.

In terms of spoken lines, Falstaff has one of the most prominent roles in both parts of *Henry IV*. In *Part One* the lines of the four largest roles are divided as follows: Falstaff speaks 542 lines; Hotspur, 538, Hal, 514 and King Henry, 338 (Kastan 7), while in *Part Two*: Falstaff speaks 637 lines; King Henry IV, 296, Prince Hal/Henry V, 292, and Robert Shallow, 185 (shakespearelinecount.com). Taking this into consideration it should come as no surprise that *Part One* was performed by the King's men in 1624 as *The First Part of Sir John Falstaff* (Kastan 15).

The framework of the story in *King Henry IV Parts One and Two* is that of “the wild Prince” and his transformation into the ideal English ruler King Henry V. In *Richard II* Shakespeare is already hinting at this theme as Bolingbroke laments over his unruly son:

BOLINGBROKE. Inquire at London, 'mongst the taverns there,

For there, they say, he daily doth frequent
With unrestrained loose companions,
Even such, they say, as stand in narrow lanes
And beat our watch and rob our passengers,
Which he, young wanton, and effeminate boy,
Takes on the point of honor to support
So dissolute a crew. (5.3.5-12)

And so when we meet young Prince Hal in *Part One* it is necessary that we also get acquainted with his “unrestrained loose companions”. This, incidentally, is where Sir John Falstaff enters the picture.

If we take *Henry IV* as one continuous narrative, the main obstacle that Prince Hal must overcome to ascend to the throne is neither Hotspur nor the other rebels threatening the peace. Instead, early in *Part One*, Prince Hal reveals that the main plot will show how he, the prince, will keep company with Falstaff and his ilk for a while and when the time is right, cast them off, in order to prove to the world that he is worthy to wear the crown and rule the land (1.2.187-193). His main antagonist is Sir John Falstaff; Falstaff the riot, Falstaff the rogue, Falstaff the individualist, Falstaff the father.

This last conception of Falstaff as a father-figure is especially important to our understanding of him and the relationship between the fat knight and the young prince. Since Prince Hal has already resolved upon his hostile rejection of Falstaff at the beginning of *Part One* we are

left to wonder for ourselves how things initially were between the two of them. There seems to be enough evidence to suggest that, at least at one point, Prince Hal really loved Falstaff, and while there have been those who have hinted at sexual implications (Empson 67) most critics seem to subscribe to the idea of Falstaff as a mentor and a father figure.

The moral solidity of Falstaff's paternal guidance is however a point of contention; Sir John's teachings is what Prince Hal turned to when he fled from the influence of his other father, King Henry IV. Here we touch upon part of the issue that seems to be laid out for us to look upon within the play. Anne Barton suggests that there are tragic elements in the Henriad and *Richard II* which highlight the burdens of kingship, and how ascension to the throne can only come at great personal expense (200-201). If we look at the Henriad in this way it becomes easier to understand the dynamic of the triangular relationship between Falstaff, Prince Hal and King Henry IV. Whenever Prince Hal is seen talking to King Henry it is of the responsibilities of the throne and of Hal's shortcomings, such as for instance in *Part One* scene 3.2:

KING. Yet let me wonder, Harry,
At thy affections, which do hold a wing
Quite from the flight of all thy ancestors.
Thy place in Council thou hast rudely lost,
Which by thy younger brother is supplied,
And art almost an alien to the hearts
Of all the court and princes of my blood. (29-35)

Compare this to Falstaff's first scene with the prince where he jovially bursts out "Do not thou, when thou art king, hang a thief" (*1 HIV* 1.2.58-59) and it becomes apparent how different father-figures the two old men make.

But, while the prince and King Henry seem to represent order (along with the Chief Justice in *Part Two*) the order they stand for is not necessarily meant to be equated with unquestionable virtue. Both King Henry and Prince Hal exhibit a certain coldness to which Falstaff strikes a favorable contrast.³⁴ While the Prince and the king promote cold, unfeeling justice, Falstaff, in comparison radiates a self-centered generosity and appetite for life which Hal sacrifices to gain power.

What we see then, is that even if Falstaff can function as an independent character, and might not be dependent on the plot of the Henriad for his definition, the different interpretations of him nonetheless directly influence how we see Prince Hal. Similar to how the interpretations of

³⁴ To be fair, Falstaff also has moments when he exhibits something resembling cold pragmatism, like his "banish Peto, banish Bardoll, banish Poins" (*1 Henry IV* 2.4.462) or his "woe to my Lord Chief Justice" (*2 Henry IV* 5.3.134). But in contrast to Prince Hal the king, Falstaff does not seem particularly serious with his threats.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern could change our perception of Prince Hamlet in Chapter 1, the different interpretations of Falstaff either make Hal out to be a scheming machiavel who firsts uses his old mentor and then casts him aside, or a victim who must learn to break free from the bad influence of a well-meaning but ultimately dangerous friend. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were limited by this relationship to *Hamlet*, in that any attempt at elaboration of the two courtiers had to address the plot of Shakespeare's play. Thus, the reception of any such elaboration was tied to the degree to which the audience found it to be in correspondence with their original conception, not just of the two courtiers, but of the larger character of Prince Hamlet. Now that we have seen that the different possible conceptions of Falstaff in turn influence the possible conceptions of Prince Hal, we need to establish the degree to which this relationship is important for the critics' approval or rejection of subsequent character elaborations.

The question of Falstaff's morality and the justness of his rejection is one that has dominated the critical debate surrounding him, and this is what we will proceed to examine. Since we know that the critics almost unanimously reject *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as a legitimate depiction of Falstaff, we must find out both where these critics are in agreement and disagreement when it comes to the depiction they all subscribe to in the *Henriad*. In doing so we will come to see if it is the relationship to Prince Hal which is the source of Falstaff's rejection in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, or if his "essence" of character is found elsewhere, as we saw suggested in our initial analysis.

2.1.3 Receivers' response to Falstaff in the *Henriad*

Harold Bloom suggests that one either loves or disapproves of Falstaff (271), and this question hinges primarily on how inclined one is to approve of Prince Hal's transformation into the ruler King Henry V, and his subsequent rejection of the old knight. We will examine some of the various arguments that have been presented by critics either to condemn or to exonerate Sir John, beginning with Maurice Morgann's unprecedented defense of Falstaff in his "An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff" (1777) and Dover Wilson's much later response to Morgann and his followers in *The Fortunes of Falstaff* (1945). These two critics more or less represent the polar opposites of the spectrum when it comes to how one can interpret the actions and sayings of Sir John Falstaff, and will provide us with a solid foundation for further discussion.

2.1.3.1 Morgann's noble Falstaff

The ideas which I have formed concerning the Courage and Military Character of the Dramatic Sir John Falstaff, are so different from those which I find to generally prevail in the world, that I shall take the liberty of stating my sentiments on the subject; in hope that some person as unengaged as myself will either correct and

reform my error in this respect; or, joining himself to my opinion, redeem me from, what I may call, the reproach of singularity. (Morgann 145)

Maurice Morgann's introduction to his defense of Sir John is nothing if not humble; and his tone speaks volumes of his sensitivity to the controversial nature of his argument. When Morgann wrote his "An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff" in 1777 it was still considered heresy to suggest that Falstaff was a man of much "Natural courage", and not at all cowardly in his actions (Fineman 12). The accepted view was that while it was possible to regard Falstaff as a charming person who held much sway over the attention of his audience, he was nonetheless of an ultimately negative disposition. Doctor Johnson summarized this view well when he stated that "The moral to be drawn from [Falstaff's] representation is that no man is more dangerous than he that, with a will to corrupt, hath the power to please; and that neither wit nor honesty ought to think themselves safe with such a companion when they see Henry seduced by Falstaff" (145).

This unanimous partaking in the rejection of Falstaff by the critics puzzled Morgann, as he felt that when all was said and done at the end of *King Henry IV parts One and Two* there was little reason to feel disgust towards the fat knight (Morgann 149). He proposed that "perhaps, after all, the *real* character of *Falstaff* may be different from his *apparent* one; and possibly this difference between reality and appearance, whilst it accounts at once for our liking and our censure, may be the true point of humor in the character, and the source of all our laughter and delight" (150). However, to find his "real" Falstaff, Morgann undertakes a project wherein he constructs a new iteration of the Falstaff character using the various fragments and pieces found in the plays:

To me it appears that the leading quality in *Falstaff's* character, and that from which all the rest take their color, is a high degree of wit and humor, accompanied with a great natural vigor and alacrity of mind. This quality so accompanied, led him probably very early into life, and made him highly acceptable to society; so acceptable, as to make it seem unnecessary for him to acquire any other virtue. (151)

The validity of his inferences should not concern us too much at the moment; what matters is that Morgann demonstrates the act of filling out blank spaces taken to its logical extreme.

The result is that his essay becomes difficult to classify, as it often strays from the realm of critical analysis into the realm of elaboration. Since his stated task is to exalt Falstaff and prove that he possesses the virtue of "Natural Courage" (150) every part of the *Henriad* pertaining to Falstaff is interpreted, or in a sense rewritten, to cast Falstaff in a favorable light. Thus, Hostess Quickly's warning to the officers Fang and Snare at the beginning of *Part Two* that "A cares not what mischief he does, if his weapon be out; he will foine like any devil, he will spare neither man, woman, nor child" (2.1.14-17) becomes evidence of the fat knight's prowess in battle, as opposed to a hyperbolic statement voiced by the whimsical Hostess. Similarly, the reminiscences of old Justice Shallow become evidence of a great soldier:

It is probable that Falstaff was singularly adroit at his exercises: 'He broke Schoggan's head,' (some boisterous fencer I suppose) 'when he was a crack thus high.' *Shallow* remembers him as 'notedly skilful at backsword'; and he was at that period, according to his own humorous account, 'scarcely an eagle's talon in the waist, and could have crept through an alderman's thumb ring'. (166)

In Morgann's mind the cipher bearing the name Schoggan immediately takes on the solid form of a 'boisterous fencer' to lend more gravity to his Falstaff character.

But as we affirmed, if one decides to conceive of Falstaff as an admirable character, this will have consequences for Prince Hal. And so, Morgann takes it upon himself to show how Prince Hal and Poins compare unfavorably to Sir John. After all, the major argument in support of Falstaff's cowardice is his behavior at Gad's Hill, where he is shown running away while ostensibly roaring, if we are to give credit to Poins' testimony to this fact in 2.2.108. Morgann's solution to this problem is to discredit the witness, and so writes his own Poins who is both a liar and a malicious antagonist of all things Falstaff, with Prince Hal as a gleeful accomplice (190). To Morgann's credit he is to honest a critic to leave out some of Falstaff's flaws and he reasonably points out the tendency, noticed by so many critics, of Sir John's worsened behavior towards the end of *Part Two*. Still, his argument proclaims that Falstaff never really behaves in a completely outrageous manner, and that the final rejection of Falstaff in *Part Two* scene 5.5 only really works dramatically if we are found to sympathize with the old, dishonored knight (214-215).

This last argument is convincing, and if nothing else seems to find support in Shakespeare's reverent treatment of Falstaff in *Henry V* where the old knight receives "Mistress Quickly's loving cockney elegy" (Bloom 298) relegating the details of Falstaff's final moments:³⁵

HOSTESS. Nay, sure, he's not in hell; he's in Arthur's
bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. 'A made
a finer end, and went away as it had been any christom
child. (2.3.9-12)

The suggestion is that Falstaff was very much a victim in his banishment. Fluellen makes the following comparison between King Henry V and Alexander the Great:

FLUELLEN. As Alexander killed his friend Clytus, being in his
ales and his cups, so also Harry Monmouth, being in
his right wits and his good judgements, turned away
the fat knight with the great-belly doublet: he was
full of jests, and gipes, and knaveries, and mocks; I

³⁵ Bloom points out that this passage is actually echoing Plato's account of the death of Socrates in *Phaedo* (292).

have forgot his name.

GOWER. Sir John Falstaff. (4.7.44-50)

These two echoes of Falstaff from the final part of the Henriad support the notion of a Falstaff that was to be admired and pitied in his rejection, and so Morgann's central argument is not without merit. But Morgann strays too far into the realm of elaboration to support it; as A.D. Nuttall points out: "The objection to Morgann's speculations is not that Falstaff has no previous life but that Shakespeare does not give us enough clues to render Morgann's more detailed inferences probable" (Bloom 290). Morgann's elaboration thus stands as an example of a potential Falstaff. But the level of detail in his elaboration and the singular focus of his interpretation (to paint him as favorable as possible) ultimately appear to have hindered his interpretation from winning over a larger audience.

To our present discussion, the point of interest is how Morgann finds in Falstaff a character whose conception seems to exist in conflict with the overarching plot in the Henriad. Falstaff, as Morgann sees him, is undeserving of the rejection which is necessary to solidify Prince Hal's transformation into King Henry V, and Morgann does an admirable job of backing up this view. While later scholars seldom completely agree with Morgann's interpretation of Falstaff, he has still influenced a host of critics by pointing out that there are blank spaces in Falstaff's character which legitimizes a more nuanced conception of him; in opposition to the moralistic condemnation which had dominated previous interpretations of the fat knight.³⁶ In doing so, one could argue that Morgann expanded the possible elaborations of Falstaff, and that he demonstrated that Falstaff's character as shown in the Henriad is not unambiguously defined as a truly negative force.

2.1.3.2 Wilson's sordid Falstaff

Not all critics found Morgann's arguments to be valid, and one example of this can be found in Dover Wilson and his *The Fortunes of Falstaff* (1945), which reads more or less as a direct rebuttal of the romanticist critic A. C. Bradley and his predecessor Morgann. Wilson's book was published the better part of 150 years after the first publication of Morgann's essay, but the popularity of Bradley's essay "The Rejection of Falstaff" (1911), had kept alive the opinion of Falstaff as a sympathetic character. Initially, Wilson admits that he himself subscribed to Morgann's and Bradley's view (Wilson 1) but as he began to examine the issue closer, he came to disagree quite heatedly with the idea of Falstaff as a character to be admired. His central argument is that the structure of *Henry IV parts One and Two* plays an integral role in how we perceive the characters found within; attention should be placed not just on what is revealed about the characters, but on how and when it is revealed:

³⁶ Fineman gives a detailed account of Morgann's critical influence in his biographical introduction to Morgann's essay. See section II "Reputation and Influence" (11-36).

One of these [errors] is the habit, which vitiates large areas of nineteenth-century Shakespearian criticism, of ignoring the fundamental fact of dramatic structure, its serial character. Thus Bradley begins his consideration of Falstaff with the Rejection, which takes place at the very end of Part II; Morgann, anxious to explain away the running and roaring on Gad's Hill, deliberately postpones his treatment of that incident, which belongs to the second of the Falstaff scenes in Part I, until he has reviewed what he calls the whole character of the man in light of the rest of the play [...]" (3).

This idea is intriguing and adds another layer to the debate surrounding Falstaff. By arguing that *Part One* and *Part Two* were unmistakably planned as two parts of a whole from the beginning (citing Dr. Johnson in support of this idea) (4) Wilson affirms that every scene containing Falstaff moves forward a plot arc, premeditated by Shakespeare, that will ultimately be resolved when Sir John is rejected by Prince Hal. This rejection is not to be seen as a tragedy (5) but rather as a scene of repentance by the Prodigal (39). Wilson introduces one very solid argument in support of this view: much of our conviction of the tragic implications of the rejection rests on the evidence from scenes in *Henry V*; however, the Epilogue in 2 *HIV* promises us a Falstaff who shall die of sweat (30) making it apparent that at least initially Shakespeare had planned for more merry-making antics by Falstaff later, and so could not have meant to depict him in a state of irremediable despair (5).

It is this technique that Wilson applies over and over to make his case that Falstaff is a tempter and a devil (23). For instance, it becomes a point of much importance that we are shown Falstaff being reprimanded by Prince Hal and later running away at the battle of Gad's Hill so early in *Part One*:

Shakespeare is pointing his audience to the end of the play, hinting at the denouement, so that they may be at ease and surrender themselves with a free conscience to all the intervening fun and riot, in the assurance that at last the Prodigal will repent [...] and the Tempter be brought to book. This means that Falstaff must be clearly seen for what he is, viz. an impossible companion for a king and governor, [...] and Shakespeare, accordingly, insists upon his shadier aspects, aspects which will fade into partial obscurity in the blaze of merriment that illuminate scenes to follow, but will show up distinctly again in Part II. (39)

Wilson's claim that Shakespeare shows off his sordid Falstaff so that the audience can "surrender themselves with a free conscience to all the intervening fun and riot" carries a strong suggestion of moral interest in making Falstaff out to be bad. The implication is that it would be impossible to enjoy the rest of the play with a free conscience if we were unaware of the "true nature" of Falstaff. It is this moralism (setting aside his conviction that authorial intention is the ultimate authority) which becomes the biggest weakness in Wilson's argument.

Because he feels that the morality of the plays is at stake, he repeats the strategies of Morgann in writing his own Falstaff through elaboration. One such instance is at the battle of Shrewsbury in *Part One* where Falstaff boasts that he has led his men to the thickest place of battle in order to have them killed (5.3.35-38). At first Wilson exhibits great insight by observing that the

dead soldiers do not collect wages and so Falstaff has found another way of turning the horrors of war to his profit (85), but no sooner than he has made this observation does Wilson go on to remark that “Elizabethans well knew that it was a common if not usual, practice for an officer of the army 'to offer his men to the face of the enemy' and then 'take his leave (under pretense to fetch supplies)’”. To Wilson's eyes it is impossible to picture a Falstaff charging headfirst into a fight. And so, although he is identifying the same blank spaces as Morgann, Wilson fills them out in another manner, so that the Falstaff he winds up with is very different from the one in Morgann's essay. But though Wilson protests against the conjectures that Morgann makes, he occasionally yields to the temptation himself, such as when he argues that “had Coleville not surrendered at once, we may surmise that another sham death would have followed the exchange of a few blows” (87). This judgment on the encounter between Falstaff and Coleville in *Part Two* scene 4.3 shows that Wilson is very much willing to participate in the strategies of Morgann and Bradley, by asking “what if?” and look for patterns in the behavior of the fat knight.

In a way it is fascinating how similar the strategies of Morgann and Wilson at times appear to be. Like Morgann, Wilson possesses impressive analytical skills, and while he has stated from the start that he intends to show once and for all that Falstaff is a devil and a tempter, in all things deserving of his eventual rejection, Wilson is still more than willing to give credit to the fat knight where he feels that it is due. His reading of Falstaff's account of his exploits on Gad's Hill stands out in particular, where he calls attention to Falstaff's singling out of “two rogues in buckram suits” (2.4.185-186): “Why this sudden singling out of 'two rogues in buckram suits', if not to inform us that he knows, well enough, who they were?” (53). It should be clarified that Wilson's suggestion is not that Falstaff knew them when they were upon Gad's Hill, but that he seemingly makes the connection the minute Prince Hal and Poins begin to enquire as to what happened. In either case it seems a remarkably generous reading of Falstaff's predicament and illustrates that Wilson still remains capable of admiring the fat knight: “thus, when the climax comes, alert minds are ready to take Falstaff's word for it that he had recognized the men in buckram from the beginning, and are almost prepared to doubt their own eyes and ears which had seen and heard the running and the roaring on Gad's Hill” (54).

But admiration or not, the Falstaff Wilson argues for is ultimately a bad apple. Because of this conviction, Wilson arguably provides the best commentary on the country scenes in *Part Two* where even Falstaff's staunchest supporters agree that he is shown at his worst. When we examined Falstaff's relation to types, we saw that Wilson makes a point out of emphasizing the connection between Falstaff and the vice Riot. In the country scenes, Wilson argues that we see Justice Shallow and his cousin Silence as contrasts to the veritable Lord Chief Justice and comments on Falstaff's

interactions with them: “the fact that Falstaff extracts from them the £ 1000 he fails to borrow from his lordship serves to underline the contrast. Foiled in his attempts to thrust the latter from a level consideration, Falstaff finds in these provincial representatives of 'old father antic the Law', manikins whose motions he can control like a couple of puppets” (112). The country scenes becomes a depiction of Falstaff's dream society, sparse in justice yet plentiful in sack. But as is suggested by Wilson's image of Falstaff as puppeteer, the knight's handling of the two crooks is no easy-going, jovial sort of trickery. Instead, Wilson ultimately winds up with a demon-like, agent of vice straight out of the renaissance plays, so that when he finally comes to the end and sets his sight on the newly rejected Falstaff, what he sees is a man who “instead of replying to his royal Hal with reproachful reminders of past friendship, he counts his blessings and rejoices, like Milton's Satan, that 'all is not lost'.’ Master Shallow,’ he remarks with a wicked smile to the chap-fallen justice at his side, when the procession has swept on, 'I owe you a thousand pounds!’” (126).

If we compare the contrasting interpretations of Morgann and Wilson, the one feature they both have in common is their willingness to engage in conjecture to try and explain how their respective conceptions of Falstaff find their expressions. Morgann talked of a Falstaff who must unquestionably have been a bold soldier, and who would have fought Sir Coleville valiantly if it had come to blows, while Wilson looks at the same scene and claims that if Coleville had not yielded, Falstaff would surely have faked his death in the same manner he does later when he fights the Earl of Douglas. The fact that they are both able to do this in good conscience supports our earlier notion of Falstaff as a character who can be imagined in all kinds of situations. One could possibly claim that Falstaff is a character who by his very nature both inspires and invites this kind of invention, or elaboration. And more importantly, the fact that they both have to resort to elaboration to support their interpretations seems to prove that Falstaff really does exist in the same kind of ambiguous space as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, wherein two contrasting interpretations of the character can be supported by the source material. But it still remains to be seen if the decision to either portray Falstaff in an ultimately negative or positive light becomes a cause for rejection. However, before we conclude that an equal case can be made for both Morgann's and Wilson's interpretations we need to examine some further critics and their interpretation of Falstaff's iteration in the Henriad.

2.1.3.3 Other critics

I mentioned earlier that Morgann's interpretation arguably represents the most extreme in terms of painting the wily rogue in a favorable light, and while this is true for the most part it must be mentioned that whereas Wilson found Falstaff resemble Satan, W. H. Auden on the contrary found Falstaff to resemble Christ. Making comparisons to Falstaff, Auden concludes his essay “The

Prince's Dog" in the following way:

The Christian God is not a self-sufficient being like Aristotle's First Cause, but a God who creates a world which he continues to love although it refuses to love him in return. He appears in this world, not as Apollo or Aphrodite might appear, disguised as man so that no mortal should recognize his divinity, but as a real man who openly claims to be God. And the consequence is inevitable. The highest religious and temporal authorities condemn Him as blasphemous and a Lord of Misrule, as a Bad Companion for mankind. [...] (207-208).

Auden's reasoning in comparing Falstaff to Christ rests on a conviction that the essence of Falstaff is charity: "Overtly, Falstaff is a Lord of Misrule; parabolically, he is a comic symbol for the supernatural order of Charity, as contrasted with the temporal order of Justice symbolized by Henry of Monmouth" (198). And once again it is the blank spaces in Falstaff which enables Auden to make this claim:

Thus, Falstaff speaks of himself as if he were always robbing travelers. We see him do this once – incidentally, it is not Falstaff but the Prince who is the instigator – and the sight convinces us that he never has been and never could be a successful highwayman. [...] He lives shamelessly on credit, but none of his creditors seems to be in serious trouble as a result. The Hostess may swear that if he does not pay his bill, she will have to pawn her plate and tapestries, but this is shown to be the kind of exaggeration habitual to landladies, for in the next scene they are still there. What, overtly, is dishonesty becomes parabolically, a sign for lack of pride, humility which acknowledges its unimportance and dependence upon others. (202-203)

The extent to which Auden elaborates on his Falstaff to make him into a saint-like character is genuinely impressive but also, at times, baffling. After all, we have to ask ourselves if it really is probable that Falstaff only agrees to the robbery at Gad's Hill because it is suggested by Prince Hal, or that his constant exploitation of others does not cause his victims any grievances at all. It becomes difficult to reconcile the more obvious vices of Falstaff with Auden's harmless patron of Charity.

But these charitable traits in Falstaff could be said to be part of what Prince Hal does indeed reject when he takes up the mantle and becomes the royal King Henry V. To give an example, Auden points out the amorous encounter between the fat knight and the courtesan Doll Tearsheet in *Part Two* scene 2.4 wherein he makes the argument that what we are made to witness is not so much the sexual greed of an old lecher as it is the charity with which Falstaff "loves all neighbors without distinction" (203). While one should be wary of doing away completely with Falstaff the sensualist (his speech on sack suggests that this part of him is very much alive and kicking), Auden makes a shrewd observation when he argues that it is this kind of charity which will be impossible for Prince Hal when he becomes king. The dignity necessitated by his royal person makes it impossible for him to be charitable with unsavory persons (at least until they reform themselves); a point which is arguably underscored by Shakespeare himself in *Part Two* scene 5.4 where Doll and Hostess are carried away by the beadles, presumably to be imprisoned and whipped. The reign of King Henry V

might usher in an era of justice, but not an era of unreserved charity wherein thieves are not to be hanged.

Falstaff's charity, Auden argues, is further exhibited by his willingness to let individual needs go before the needs of the state, so that the men he brings to the battlefield are the ones who are least able to fight, and yet also the ones with the least to lose by dying (204). Since war is absurd and death on the battlefield inevitable, Falstaff makes a mockery of war and honor by minimizing the loss; he cheats the system by providing beggars and convicts as food for powder. One might remain unconvinced by Auden's reasoning, but it is hard to argue against the fact that his interpretation is at least sufficiently justified in the text, and that his extremely favorable elaboration of Falstaff stems from Auden's inventive way of filling out the fat knight's blank spaces rather than from gross misreading.

One begins to suspect that whereas interpretations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can be neatly divided into a few consistent categories, (outright villains scheming courtiers or perplexed victims) with Falstaff there might be as many different interpretations as there are critics. For this reason we will not linger much longer on the subject of critical perception of Falstaff's character in the Henriad. Before we move on I do however wish to call attention to one last critic to cover one final important aspect of the fat knight which we briefly touched upon in our discussion of Falstaff's transpsychological attributes in **2.1.2.1.5**. Namely, Falstaff's reflexivity and possible meta-dramatical knowledge of his position within a play.

It is Arthur Sewell who makes this claim in his book *Character and Society in Shakespeare* (1951). To Sewell, the aesthetic value of a character is firmly rooted in its relative openness and enigmatic position in the text. As he puts it "we can only understand Shakespeare's characters so long as we agree that we cannot know all about them" (12). What Sewell rightly understands is that characters only remain rich and life-like as long as they retain their blank spaces. To fully explain a character is to diminish it. Because of this, Sewell continues "it was surely a mistake to ever ask the question: Is Falstaff a coward?" (13). Falstaff's very nature as a character, as opposed to a real person, coupled with his pronounced invalidation of the concept of honor, makes any attempt to judge him morally as a real person, absurd.

The fact that Falstaff could never exist in the real world does not make him a bad character, on the contrary Sewell finds this to be the main reason for Falstaff's appeal:

Such representation of personality is to be found in a work of art, and its consistency is not psychological but aesthetic. It is the notable distinction of Falstaff's being that he has been conceived quite independently of psychological motivation. His delights, like ours, are aesthetic, even though they have their play in the uncertain world of our moral scruples. (14-15)

A side effect of this is that Falstaff runs the risk of being robbed of our sympathy. In Sewell's

reading, it becomes impossible to identify with Falstaff on a personal level, since his very character makes him out to be a device within a structure. Rather than being an individual commenting on specific actions, he becomes a means to make broader commentary on an extra-textual level: “What, after all, is his speech on Honour? It is the spoken indignation of the individual in revolt against those irksome moral obligations which political order must impose. But laugh as we may, we do not shuffle those obligations off, and we laugh because we cannot shuffle them off” (51).

This is not to say that Sewell is wrong in his observations, as the artificiality of any character is an undisputable fact. But as we have seen in this section dealing with critical reception, there are many critics who feel that while this point is obvious, the discussion should not end there. Though it may hold true that it is impossible to ever fully “understand” Falstaff as it were, his vitality and continued presence in the mind of the audience is surely kept alive through its continuous undertaking of this very task. Surely nothing is more compelling than a figure who can simultaneously be made out to be both Christ and Satan? As Auden put it, to Falstaff “what matters is the volume of the hissing or the applause” (195). Sewell does however solidify the most important point about Falstaff which is that to explain Falstaff is surely to kill him. The fat knight thrives on ambiguity.

To this effect we have seen an important distinction between the characters of Falstaff and the pair Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The courtiers only appear to take shape as meaningful characters, either false friends or innocent bystanders, once the audience defines the pair's relationship to Hamlet. However, once the audience has opted for one of these iterations the other one seems improbable and will most likely be wholeheartedly rejected, as we saw evidenced by some of the reactions to Stoppard's elaboration. In contrast, though Falstaff too finds himself at the heart of a similar discussion on his morality and motives, the conflicting opinions are not necessarily as decisive for the receiver's conception of his character. Instead, we have seen it suggested that Falstaff primarily is defined by the manner in which he expresses himself and navigates through the plot. In the next section we will see this idea explored further and try to determine its validity as we deal with the rejection of Shakespeare's own elaboration of Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

2.2 *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

Up to this point I have treated the rejection of Falstaff's iteration in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as a self-evident fact. Let us therefore take a look at some examples of critics embracing this opinion to prove this tendency:

To exhibit Falstaff as throughout the whole course of five acts a credulous and baffled dupe, one “easier to be played on than a pipe,” was not really to reproduce him at all [...] for the violation of character goes far beyond mere inconsistency or the natural ebb and flow of even the brightest wits and most vigorous intellects [...] (Swinburne 116-117)

And

Of this play there is a tradition preserved by Mr. Rowe that it was written at the command of Queen Elizabeth, who was so delighted with the character of Falstaff that she wished [for a play] showing him in love. [...] Falstaff could not love but by ceasing to be Falstaff. [...] Thus the poet approached as near as he could to the work enjoined him; yet, having perhaps in the former plays completed his own idea, seems not to have been able to give Falstaff all his former power of entertainment. (Samuel Johnson 133)

And

It is commonly agreed [...] that in studying the character of Falstaff, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* may be left out of account, that play being indubitably 'an unpremeditated sequel,' the hero of which is made to bear the name of Falstaff primarily for reasons of theatrical expediency, not of dramatic art. (Wilson 4-5)

And

I begin, though, with the firm declaration that the hero-villain of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a nameless impostor masquerading as the great Sir John Falstaff. Rather than yield to such usurpation, I shall call him pseudo-Falstaff throughout this brief discussion. (Bloom 315)

It would seem that just as Falstaff was rejected by King Henry in *2 Henry IV*, so Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* suffers a similar rejection by a majority of the critics. This represents a fascinating problem since it becomes a case of Shakespeare arguably failing at elaborating on his own character, and where the receivers claim to know the character better than the original author. This notion is incredibly interesting as it could possibly reveal more on the nature of character appropriation, and how the Falstaff character arguably broke free from the influence of his creator. In order to pass a verdict on this problem, we must however first examine the circumstances surrounding *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, as well as some of the arguments for and against the conflation of the Falstaff of the Henriad and the Falstaff of *Merry Wives*.

2.2.1 The origins of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

Every discussion of Falstaff's comedy must at some point address the myth surrounding its conception, that it was initially written at the express command of Queen Elizabeth, instructing Shakespeare to portray Sir John in love. We have heard Dr. Johnson giving voice to this notion, and both he and many others suggest that this is the main reason for many of the play's perceived shortcomings. The idea is that Shakespeare initially had no plan to write such a play, and that the Queen gave him the unthankful task of writing a play where the premises for Falstaff's character were impossible and the deadline for its completion was short. Giorgio Melchiori in his introduction

to the Arden 3 *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, laments the damage done to the play by this legend, and posits that “crediting this narrative confines the play to the limbo of instant – albeit royal – pot boilers, an impression confirmed by its being nearly exclusively in prose, apart from some passages of serviceable verse” (2).³⁷

It is still an undeniable fact that many critics are of the opinion that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (from here on abbreviated *MWW*) is nothing more than a hastily conceived prank, but what evidence is this accusation founded upon? The legend of Queen Elizabeth has its basis in two main sources: John Dennis who states in his dedicatory epistle in *The Comical Gallant: Or the Amours of Sir John Falstaffe* (1702) made the claim that the Queen had commanded that Shakespeare write the play in no more than fourteen days, and Nicholas Rowe who stated in his 1709 edition of Shakespeare that the play was the result of Queen Elizabeth's request for a play showing Falstaff in love (Melchiori 2). Both sources are in other words separated from the initial work by a century, which explains why the claim is treated by most critics as an unconfirmed legend, plausible but not proven beyond doubt.

The issue of chronology is another problem that has been pointed at as evidence of Shakespeare's apparent disregard for the play. Several characters from the Henriad appear in *MWW*, most prominently Pistol, Bardolph and Hostess Quickly, but much like Falstaff, they only appear to resemble their iterations in the Henriad on a superficial level. This is made most apparent with Hostess Quickly, who in *MWW* has been transformed into Mistress Quickly, no longer a hostess at the Boar's Head tavern, but a housekeeper for the French Doctor Caius. She seems to have no recollection of a long friendship to Falstaff, in spite of her claim in *2 Henry IV* that she has known him “these twenty-nine years” (2.4.379-380). Direct contradictions such as these have made most scholars conclude that the play was never meant to be included in the canon of Falstaff.

A third element that must be addressed is that of the Garter Feast at Westminster on 23 April 1597. Melchiori does a good job of summarizing the different theories surrounding the relationship between this event and Shakespeare's play, and the most important thing to note is that the speech of the 'Fairy Queen,' which quotes the motto of the Knightly Order of the Garter, makes it clear that at some point the play (or parts of it) was performed at a celebration of the Order (Melchiori 18). Further evidence of this can be found in the naming of the inn in the play as the 'Garter Inn.'³⁸ What this suggests is that we have at least one more explanation for the existence of *MWW* which has

³⁷ Melchiori does however not completely reject the legend of Queen Elizabeth (most likely because of lack of evidence) but he affirms that the play deserves to be judged on its own merits, rather than be reduced to “a hastily conceived jolly prank to please a court audience that could appreciate certain topical allusions, and a popular audience fond of buffoonery” (3). Though, it is worth observing that with regards to this myth it could just as easily be a case of the play's perceived shortcomings perpetuating the legend, rather than the other way around.

³⁸ Melchiori does however go on to point out that almost all references to the chivalric Order are absent from the Quarto version of the play (18).

little to do with Shakespeare's desire to continue the tale of Sir John Falstaff. This has been accepted by most editors as the explanation of the genesis of the play (19), and it goes a long way to justify the masque at the end, the speech of the 'Fairy Queen' and other elements which would otherwise strike us as nonsensical in a comedy about Falstaff in love.³⁹

Regardless, scholars remain uncertain whether *2 Henry IV* or *MWW* was written first, or if they were in fact written during the same space of time.⁴⁰ There is however solid evidence that the two plays were written in proximity, as there are a great many similarities in vocabulary between them (Craik 13). If one is to establish some sort of chronological link between the four plays, it becomes necessary to make a choice of whether to place the events of *MWW* before or after *2 Henry IV*. But as we have seen, Shakespeare's apparent disregard for continuity between the history plays and the comedy makes any attempt to link the narrative gap between them a questionable, if not downright impossible task. At least if we take the word of William Green, who states in his thorough examination upon the matter that "the six characters [*The Merry Wives of Windsor*] shares with the *Henry* dramas are related in name only; otherwise they are entirely different creatures" (177). This leaves *2 Henry IV* and *MWW* in a somewhat awkward position of being at the same time inextricably linked and undoubtedly separate.

We should, however, remember that we have seen it suggested that biographical details and links to the plot in the *Henriad* are not decisive factors for the assimilation of elaborations of Falstaff's character. Instead we have seen it theorized that the framework for *MWW* may have been an ill fit for the fat knight from the very beginning. Though not necessarily true, the legend of the Queen's request for a play depicting Sir John in love illustrates an important point: that even if Falstaff can be imagined in any plot, there may be conditions to how he can express himself within said plots; as evidenced by Johnson's claim that it was impossible to show Falstaff in love. And so we must examine how his iteration in *MWW* is found to express itself, as well as how the critics justify their rejection of this expression.

2.2.2 Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

While we have no definite cause for Shakespeare's decision to cast Sir John in the principal role of his comedy, one has to assume that the popularity of the character must have played a prominent part in the matter. The legend of Queen Elizabeth's command stands evidence to this fact, so it should not be hard to imagine Shakespeare planning a play which the fat knight could have all to himself; a comedy where he could operate free from the inhibitions of the history plays. It is this

³⁹ Though if we remember from 2.1.1. Melchiori makes the case for a theory of his own that the initial Garter entertainment was a shorter masque which featured the anti-Garter knight Falstaff.

⁴⁰ For more details on the chronology of the four plays see William Green *Shakespeare's The Merry Wives of Windsor* (177-192).

kind of play T. H. Craik envisages that Shakespeare set out to write. A play “involving a succession of comic discomfitures from which Falstaff would emerge defeated but irrepressible, as he had done from the Gadshill robbery” (14). Craik may very well be accurate in this supposition, but then we still have to ask if Shakespeare successfully managed to create a depiction of a defeated but irrepressible Falstaff.

2.2.2.1 Rejections of Falstaff's portrayal in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

Despite (or perhaps because of) the overwhelming consensus among critics that Shakespeare's depiction of Falstaff in *MWW* (from here on “*Merry Wives-Falstaff*”) is inferior to the one in the *Henriad* (“*Henriad-Falstaff*”), most of them do not seem to offer much in way of explanation, other than the stated fact itself. Maurice Morgann saw no need to include any justification for his leaving out the comedy from his lengthy examination of the character, nor does Arthur Sewall so much as mention the play in spite of his insistence on the inherent comedic traits of the character (35). Part of the reason for this might be owing to “the belief that because *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was first printed in 1602 it must have been written at about that time, following *Henry V*, in which Falstaff's death is reported, and reviving him to play an ignoble part in a comedy which its bourgeois setting and physical action rendered liable to be belittled as a farce [...]” (Craik 27). In addition William Green makes the suggestion that since Shakespeare had completed Falstaff's character arc in *2 Henry IV* the character was “dead dramatically,” so that “it mattered little to debase Falstaff so completely in *MWW*. He was done with the character [...]” (187). Green introduces the notion that evidence of Shakespeare's conscious mistreatment of Falstaff can be read in the following speech:

FALSTAFF. I would all the world might be cozened, for I
have been cozened and beaten too. It should come to
the ear of the court how I have been transformed, and
how my transformation hath been washed and cud-
gelled, they would melt me out of my fat drop by drop,
and liquor fishermen's boots with me. I warrant they
would whip me with their fine wits till I were as
crestfallen as a dried pear. (*MWW* 4.5.95-103)⁴¹

In spite of this claim, Green makes no concrete references to further prove that Falstaff's depiction within the play was indeed of an inferior nature.

Initially this makes any attempt to judge in the question of the two Falstaffs a thankless task,

⁴¹ All quotations will be from the Oxford World's Classics *The Merry Wives of Windsor* edited by T. W. Craik.

as most critics believe the case to be self-evident to the extent that no discussion on the subject is deemed necessary. Luckily, there are a few critics who offer some explanation for their forceful rejection of *Merry Wives-Falstaff*. One such is Swinburne who makes it a central point of contention that the morality inherent in the play and the inhibitions it in turn puts on the Falstaff character is one of the main reasons for *Merry Wives-Falstaff's* failure to strike as inspiring a figure as Henriad-Falstaff:

Here only does Shakespeare show that he feels the necessity of condescending to such evasion or such apology as is implied in the explanation of Falstaff's incredible credulity by a reference to the "the guiltiness of his mind" and the admission, so gratifying to all minds more moral than his own, that "wit may be made a Jack-a-Lent, when 'tis upon ill employment." It is the best excuse that can be made; but can we imagine the genuine pristine Falstaff reduced to the proffer of such an excuse in serious good earnest? (117-118)

Swinburne's reference is to scene 5.5 where Falstaff is confronted by the principal players after his humiliation at Herne's Oak. Upon realizing that he has been made the butt of their joke and that all his efforts to seduce Mistress Ford and Mistress Page have been in vain, he makes the following speech:

FALSTAFF. And these are not fairies. I was three or four times in the thought they were not fairies; and yet the guiltiness of my mind, the sudden surprise of my powers, drove the grossness of the foppery into a received belief, in despite of the teeth of all rhyme and reason, that they were fairies. See now how wit may be made a Jack-a-Lent when 'tis upon ill employment! (5.5.121-127)

While we have seen that Falstaff is capable of inventing a multitude of different roles for himself, the role of genuinely repentant sinner is not one which we are used to seeing him in. As Swinburne points out, it seems highly uncharacteristically of Falstaff to pass on the perfect chance to exhibit his wit by finding a way to weasel out of his current predicament. But in this scene we get no echo of the inventiveness of his Gad's Hill defense ("By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye") or the verbal acrobatics of his reason for slandering Prince Hal in front of Doll ("I dispraised him before the wicked [*Turns to the Prince*] that the wicked might not fall in love with thee"). Instead we get the following exchange:

EVANS. And given to fornications, and to taverns, and sack, and wine, and metheglins, and to drinkings, and swearings and starings, pribbles and prabbles?

FALSTAFF. Well, I am your theme. You have the start of me. I am dejected. I am not able to answer the Welsh

flannel. Ignorance itself is a plummet o'er me. Use me as
you will. (5.5.157-163)

This is certainly a Falstaff that is defeated, but we should ask ourselves if Craik is right in his assertion that it is also a Falstaff that is irrepressible. Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of his reaction is that Falstaff himself seems to grasp at an evasion at the beginning of his confession. "I was three or four times in the thought they were not fairies" he states. And during the actual masque there is a brief instant where Falstaff behaves in a more familiar way when he makes a dry remark on Sir Evans' Welsh accent: "Heavens defend me from that Welsh fairy, lest he transform me to a piece of cheese!" (5.5.81). One could definitely argue that by now the audience should be aware of Falstaff's tendency to upset expectations, so that it would be erroneous to look to his previous actions in *1 Henry IV* to form an opinion on how he should react in his current predicament. But as we have seen, at the core of all the different modes that the fat knight inhabits, there is a playfulness and a desire to entertain. Even when we see him at his arguably darkest hour, when he stands rejected by Hal in *2 Henry IV*, there is an indomitable quality to his "Master Shallow, I owe you a thousand pounds" (5.5.73). Regardless of whether the line is spoken with devilish glee, as Wilson sees it, or with melancholic pathos, as Bradley suggests, it remains a defiant exclamation of a spirit determined to keep playing. In comparison *Merry Wives*-Falstaff's "use me as you will" comes across as flat and uninspired.

But what more can be said of this playfulness, or wit, which the critics accuse *Merry Wives*-Falstaff of lacking? Harold Bloom has this to say on the subject of *Merry Wives*-Falstaff: "No longer either witty in himself or the cause of wit in other men, this Falstaff would make me lament a lost glory if I did not know him to be a rank impostor" (316). The reverence Bloom holds for *Henriad*-Falstaff makes his disdain for *Merry Wives*-Falstaff all the harsher, and we see him go as far as to resolutely resort to canonical rejection of the whole affair. But what of his argument that *Merry Wives*-Falstaff is neither witty in himself nor the cause of wit in others? In Bloom's opinion, hardly any of Falstaff's speeches in *MWW* exhibit a depth beyond the immediate action to captivate and delight the audience. "Is this the Immortal Falstaff?" Bloom asks, quoting the speech from 1.3.61-70:

FALSTAFF. O, she did so course o'er my exteriors, with such
a greedy intention, that the appetite of her eye did seem
to scorch me up like a burning-glass. Here's another
letter to her. She bears the purse too. She is a region in
Guiana, all gold and bounty. I will be cheaters to them
both, and they shall be exchequers to me. They shall be

my East and West Indies, and I will trade to them both.
[*To Nim*] Go, bear thou this letter to Mistress Page, [*to
Pistol*] and thou this to Mistress Ford. We will thrive,
lads, we will thrive.

Compare this to Henriad-Falstaff's similar speech in *Part Two* where he is planning to fleece Justice Shallow:

FALSTAFF. Well I'll be
acquainted with him if I return, and t'shall go hard
but I'll make him a philosopher's two stones to me.
If the young dace be a bait for the old pike, I see no
reason in the law of nature but I may snap at him:
let time shape, and there an end. (3.2.322-327)

Characteristically, in the latter example we see Henriad-Falstaff take the time to philosophize over his own planned treachery, and employing his wit to justify his course of action. Never lost for words, Henriad-Falstaff reasons that just as the bigger fish eat the smaller, so may he prey on the wretched country justice; the law of nature decrees the survival of the fittest. This is the mode in which we always see Henriad-Falstaff. He is not content by simply feigning death at the battle of Shrewsbury in *Part One*. Once the deed is done he relishes the opportunity to employ his wit in such a way as to make his action seem not only logical but admirable: "To die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of man. But to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be no counterfeit but the true and perfect image of life indeed" (5.4.114-118). In comparison, the assurance from *Merry Wives*-Falstaff that the Mistresses Page and Ford shall be his "East and West Indies" and final declaration "We will thrive, lads, we will thrive" come across as uninspired and disappointingly straightforward. There is no trace of wit or inventiveness by which *Merry Wives*-Falstaff attempts to justify his treachery. No ambiguity in which the listeners find their moral convictions challenged. Considered from this point of view, it begins to become apparent why Bloom and his peers see a problem with *Merry Wives*-Falstaff.

In the end, Bloom does allow for one line of authentic wit uttered by the supposed impostor: "'Seese' and 'putter'? Have I lived to stand at the taunt of one that makes fritters of English? This is enough to be the decay of lust and late-walking through the realm" (5.5.143-46). Here we see *Merry Wives*-Falstaff briefly stepping out of the action to make a dry comment from the sidelines. What is interesting about this instance is that it makes us wonder if maybe that is not the mode in which the fat knight functions best. Could it not be said that this is the main position of Henriad-Falstaff? As a voice from the sideline, constantly challenging the propriety of the ongoing actions, who will not

allow events to play their course before he has revealed the ridiculousness at their core? It certainly fits well with the Henriad-Falstaff we see in *Part One* during the negotiations before the battle of Shrewsbury who cannot help but chide in with his “Rebellion lay in his way, and he found it” (5.1.28). Or as evidenced in *Part Two* during the fat knight's rejection when King Henry V deems it necessary to silence Falstaff: “Reply not to me with a fool-born jest” (5.5.55). In doing so he echoes an earlier assurance by Poins from the same play: “My lord, he will drive you out of your revenge and turn all to a merriment, if you take not the heat” (2.4.295-296).

It is this we see in Bloom's example from *MWW*, and it is arguably what is lacking from the rest of his prose in the same play. But what then, is the reason for *Merry Wives*-Falstaff's transformation? If Falstaff primarily comes to life as a character through this mode of expression, why does Shakespeare not allow for more of this in his elaboration? Before we attempt to answer this question we should however take a brief look at the few critics who claim that *Merry Wives*-Falstaff is a legitimate elaboration of the character, and examine how they justify this point of view.

2.2.2.2 Acceptances of Falstaff's portrayal in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

One such instance of a critic who actually looks to *Merry Wives*-Falstaff in his analysis of the character is Dover Wilson:

The most vivid presentation of Falstaff served up hot, so to say, is the picture we get of him sweating with fright in Mistress Page's dirty linen basket, as it was emptied by her servants into the Thames; and though *The Merry Wives* does not strictly belong to the Falstaff canon, the passage may be quoted here, as giving the clue to passages in *Henry IV* itself. For however different in character the Windsor Falstaff may be from his namesake of Eastchap, he possesses the same body, the body that on Gad's Hill 'sweats to death, and lards the lean earth, as he walks along.' (28)

And so taking his cue from the “lards the lean earth” in *I Henry IV*, Wilson goes on to demonstrate how the same image is further employed in *MWW*:

FALSTAFF. To be stopped

in like a strong distillation with stinking clothes that
fretted in their own grease. Think of that, a man of my
kidney – think of that – that am as subject to heat as
butter; a man of continual dissolution and thaw. It was
a miracle to 'scape suffocation. And in the height of this
bath, when I was more than half stewed in grease, like a
Dutch dish, to be thrown into the Thames, and cooled,
glowing hot in that surge, like a horseshoe. Think of
that – hissing hot – think of that, Master Brook! (3.5.103-112)

The comparison is made not to clear the name of the good *Merry Wives*-Falstaff, but to emphasize

the ridiculousness of Henriad-Falstaff. In other words, Wilson allows for Shakespeare's elaboration, and uses imagery from the later addition of *MWW* to add color to the fat knight's representation in *I Henry IV*. But Wilson still makes sure to negate the material in *MWW* when he states that it “does not strictly belong to the Falstaff canon”. One has to ask if Wilson is trying to have his cake and eat it too; similarly affirming and rejecting *Merry Wives*-Falstaff. This notion is further increased when he evokes *MWW* for a second time:

Falstaff, we must believe, had a real liking for the Prodigal Son story, or why should that tactful person, mine Host of the Garter Inn, have gone to the trouble of having it painted, 'fresh and new', about the walls of the chamber that he let to the greasy philanderer who assumed the part of Sir John in Windsor. Not being a modern critic, the good man could not know that his guest was an impostor. (35)⁴²

So, while Wilson may not subscribe wholly to the canonicity of *Merry Wives*-Falstaff, he does demonstrate how it is possible to assimilate aspects of his character into the Henriad-Falstaff. Though not explicitly stated, it appears that Wilson's strategy to succeed in this is by treating *Merry Wives*-Falstaff as a caricature of the Henriad-Falstaff, meaning that his representation in *Merry Wives* is not false, but merely exaggerated.⁴³

Another critic who found *Merry Wives*-Falstaff pleasing was Auden. He argues that since Falstaff is ultimately a comic figure he is actually an ill-fit for the history plays. Falstaff functions best in a world without serious consequences: “In *Henry IV* [...] something has happened to this immortal which draws him out of his proper world into the historical world of suffering and death” (191). This leads Auden to conclude that “the essential Falstaff is the Falstaff of *The Merry Wives* and Verdi's opera, the comic hero of the world of play, the unkillable self-sufficient immortal whose verdict on existence is '*Tutto nel mundo è burla.../ Tutti gabbàti. Irridè/ L'un l'altro ogni mortal./ Ma ride ben chi ride/ La risata final*'” (190). Auden's argument that Falstaff's very nature runs counter to the reality of the Henriad is sound, and so, his suggestion that Falstaff should feel more at home in a comedy at least initially seems logical. But Auden's insistence that Falstaff is better suited to *MWW* than to the Henriad, is negated by his own argument that “even in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Falstaff has not and could not have found his true home because Shakespeare was only a poet” (183). Auden, like Wilson, is unwilling to completely endorse *Merry Wives*-Falstaff, though he is equally unable to account for his decision.⁴⁴

⁴² The dry remark at the end seems like an obvious jab A.C. Bradley, whose opinion on Falstaff Wilson is out to debunk.

⁴³ Arguing against this approach, Bloom drily remarks: “You can cram any fat man into a basket and get a laugh. He does not have to be Falstaff [...]” (317).

⁴⁴ One should also keep in mind that Auden does not only mention *MWW*, but also Verdi's opera *Falstaff* (1893) which he claims is the definite fit for the fat knight. According to Auden this is the one instance where his comedic Falstaff is allowed to function in all his uninhibited glory. I have deliberately chosen not to make a close examination of Verdi's opera, primarily due to my lack of knowledge of both the operatic genre and Italian. I do however wish to point out an interesting piece of information brought to the foreground by Giorgio Melchiori, wherein he states that

One final modern proponent of the *Merry Wives-Falstaff* is T. W. Craik, who sees in him Falstaff the coward, who ran away roaring at Gad's Hill and who faked his own death to escape the Douglas at Shrewsbury (34). Craik's Henriad-Falstaff is primarily fat and a blustering coward, perhaps resembling the type of *miles gloriosus* which we touched upon in 2.1.2.1.c. Craik makes the case that it was precisely because of these qualities that Shakespeare decided to cast the fat knight in the principal role of seducer in *MWW*: "His bulk 'provides a comic equivalent for the moral indignation felt at the idea of adultery', and helps to ensure that 'the assertion of chastity is achieved without preaching, and in a spirit of fun'"(34).⁴⁵ Craik sees Henriad Falstaff as a non-sexual being, whose immense size alone all but guarantees that he can never be regarded as a legitimate sexual threat to the marriages of Mistresses Ford and Page. As Mistress Page puts it "I had rather be a giantess and lie under Mount Pelion" (2.1.73-74).

This is a valid observation, and true in as much as that the scene where Falstaff is shown at his most sexual does not occur until 2 *Henry IV* where Doll Tearsheet (presumably sitting in Falstaff's lap) exclaims "By my troth, I kiss thee with a most constant heart" (2.4.267), and Craik is of the opinion that Shakespeare primarily based his Falstaff on the iteration in *Part One* (34). I would however interject that it is in *Part One* we hear Falstaff confess (albeit jokingly) that he "went to a bawdy-house not above once in a quarter – of an hour" (3.3.16-17). While this is a typical example of Henriad-Falstaff's wit, the implications of the joke are that of Falstaff the sensualist; the knight who seeks out pleasures wherever he can find them. Thus, while Craik is right that *Merry Wives-Falstaff* has no sexual motive in the play,⁴⁶ his claim that this corresponds with the Henriad-Falstaff of *Part One* seems unjustified.

Craik is one of the few who completely endorses Falstaff's iteration in *MWW*, and in his interpretation of the fat knight he allows the comedic elaboration to color the original Henriad-Falstaff. What happens then is of course that Falstaff ultimately becomes a clown; a character whose central purpose is to be funny. That such a view of the character is ultimately diminutive seems hard to contest, but it does allow Craik to take great pleasure in *Merry Wives-Falstaff*. It would appear that it is largely a question of approach. Most critics go to the Henriad to find Falstaff and then turn their sight to *MWW* to see if the fat knight contained within corresponds to the one

Verdi was induced "to read not only *Merry Wives*, but also the two parts of *Henry IV* and even *Henry V*, to get a full picture of the character of the hero" (99). Among other things this led to a "vigorous musical rendering of Falstaff's catechism on honor" at the close of the opera's first scene (99) and other such instances where the more familiar traits of Falstaff's superior wit are allowed to show. This is incredibly fascinating as it could suggest that Verdi arguably surpassed Shakespeare in elaborating Falstaff, and that the way he did it was by remaining truer to the source material of the Henriad, and allowing it to drip into the *Merry Wives*-narrative. This would however require closer examination to affirm, which unfortunately lies outside the scope of this thesis.

⁴⁵ Craik is quoting from Alexander Leggatt, *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare* (Toronto, 1973) p. 146.

⁴⁶ I believe Dr. Johnson was the first to notice this when he pointed out that "[Falstaff's] professions could be prompted, not by the hope of pleasure, but of money" (133).

they already have found. Craik on the other hand, appears to pre-emptively accept *Merry Wives-Falstaff*, on account of his author, and his chronological birth before the completion of the *Henriad*, and only then begin to formulate an opinion on the character of Sir John. Because of this, he is able to make the assertion that *Merry Wives-Falstaff* is both witty and inventive. Take for instance the following passage:

FALSTAFF. Have I lived to be carried in a basket like a barrow of
butcher's offal, and to be thrown in the Thames? Well,
if I be served such another trick, I'll have my brains
ta'en out and buttered, and give them to a dog for a
new-year's gift. 'Sblood, the rogues slighted me into the
river with as little remorse as they would have drowned
a blind bitch's puppies, fifteen i'th' litter! And you may
know by my size that I have a kind of alacrity in sinking.
If the bottom were as deep as hell, I should drown. I had
been drowned but that the shore was shelvy and
shallow – a death that I abhor, for the water swells a
man, and what a thing should I have been when I had
been swelled! I should have been a mountain of mummy. (3.5.4-11)

This passage is exemplified by Harold Bloom as evidence of *Merry Wives-Falstaff's* shortcomings (Bloom 316). He laments that the passage contains no trace of wisdom or double bottom which are the essential traits of his Falstaff. In contrast Craik uses this same passage as an example of *Merry Wives-Falstaff's* immense eloquence and wit (35). This is possible only because Craik is not looking for profound statements of wisdom, or ironic observations. To him it is enough that Falstaff evokes imaginative imagery; it is through the demonstration of imagination that he rises above his disasters. Craik represents a definite minority in his interpretation of Falstaff, and since he argues from the point of view of *MWW*, his arguments could be seen as a strategy to elevate the status of this play. To this purpose, it should be acknowledged that his approach is reasonably effective, but it raises some critical issues with the portrayal of Falstaff in the subsequent parts of the *Henriad*, and it is a shame that Craik does not address these issues to further elaborate on how his comedic perception of Falstaff fits into *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*.

2.2.2.3 Falstaff's role in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

By now it seems apparent that something was lost in Falstaff's transition from the *Henriad* to the comedy. Those critics who feel that the resemblance is poor cite the general lack of inventiveness

and wit as the main source for their rejection of *Merry Wives*-Falstaff. And likewise those few who seem to find him more agreeable, with the notable exception of Craik, only embrace some aspects of him: a spoken line here or there, or just his general physical presence as an embodiment of the fat, blustering comic. Earlier we questioned what the reason for this reduction in the fat knight's vitality could be. I believe part of the answer to this question is revealed in Auden's assertion that Falstaff works against the serious plot of the *Henriad*. But whereas Auden believes that this conflict between Falstaff and the drama of the history plays limits the scope of his character, we should consider the viability of the opposite suggestion.

We have examined Falstaff's role in the *Henriad*, and seen how he appears to shift from one mode to another seemingly without effort. The fat knight's inventiveness makes it difficult to peg him down in one particular category or role, but all critics seem to agree that he functions primarily as an antagonist to Prince Hal, an opposing force that the Prince must ultimately confront in order to complete his transformation into King Henry V. The disagreement begins only when they try to decide on the moral implications of this rejection, and whether Falstaff's influence when boiled down to its core is ultimately of a positive or negative nature. He may be Christ, Satan or somewhere in between, but he is not an opponent to be taken lightly. Dover Wilson, who does not count himself among Falstaff's admirers, begins his attack on Falstaff by affirming that "to write off the succulent old sinner as a stage butt, even if a witty stage butt, is to dehydrate him, even to lay oneself open to the suspicion of possessing an insensitive aesthetic palate" (1). If there is one thing Falstaff seems to demand of his audience it is that they take his jesting seriously. In the context of the *Henriad*, this seems to happen by its own volition in an almost natural sense; the gravity underscoring Falstaff's catechism on honor is made readily apparent by the presence of Blount's dead body on the stage. It is the harsh reality of death that Falstaff confronts, and though we may laugh, we are at the same time forced to make a moral judgment. As Sewell says: "laugh as we may, we do not shuffle those obligations off, and we laugh because we cannot shuffle them off" (51). Falstaff's wit seems inextricably tied to gravity and his function as a worthy opponent to that gravity.⁴⁷

In *MWW* Falstaff is arguably declawed. The role he inhabits as principal antagonist in a comedy seems to dictate by its very nature that he must refrain at all times from posing a genuine threat. By downplaying the serious implications of Falstaff's moral ambiguity Craik succeeds in reconciling *Henriad*-Falstaff with his *Merry Wives*-iteration, but the consequence of his strategy is a Falstaff whose primary purpose is to be laughed at.

And most have made the argument that a Falstaff that can be dismissed with laughter is not

⁴⁷ Through "his effect of gravy, gravy, gravy" (2 *HIV* 1.2.161).

an accurate representation of the character. *Merry Wives*-Falstaff suffers a number of humiliations throughout the course of the play: he is thrown in the Thames, forced to dress up as an old woman and subsequently to suffer a beating in this guise, and finally to wear horns and tremble in fear at the sight of the fairies by Herne's Oak. Falstaff's staunchest supporters, such as Bloom and Bradley, take offence that he is made to endure these happenstances at all, but it should not be impossible to imagine that these incidents could happen to Falstaff "on a bad day." After all, Kastan made the argument that "Falstaff is the character easiest to imagine existing outside the plot of [*I Henry IV*]" (49), and so the events themselves should not initially limit the character of Falstaff. The problem lies with how *Merry Wives*-Falstaff responds to these events, and the fact that his responses seem dictated by the necessities of plot rather than the necessities of character. Even Craik, whom we know is an adherent of *Merry Wives*-Falstaff, has to point out that "it must be admitted that Falstaff is the last person one would expect to believe in fairies, and that he would not easily be persuaded to come to Herne's Oak at midnight wearing a pair of antlers" (20).

The one thing we expect from Falstaff is that he will work to upset the order of the plot. In the *Henriad* this has worked to the extent that many critics are able to make the claim that Prince Hal comes out much worse at the end of it as a consequence. He is able to reject the riotous knight, but not before Falstaff has won the sympathy of many in the audience. However, in *MWW* no such inversion takes place. *Merry Wives*-Falstaff upsets no expectations, and in the end he stands humbled and repentant, just like any other antagonist at the end of a comedy. Why this happens is a question that can only be answered by making a much closer examination of *MWW* and the genre of comedy in general, but as an initial suggestion I would propose that it might be question of morality. *Henriad*-Falstaff is ultimately rejected, and while his rejection might be just, it has the capacity for tragic reverberations with the audience, and so a conflict arises between our sense of the just and our personal sympathies (Sewell 82-83). However, in a comedy whose subject matter is infidelity, any such complexity or ambiguity would be an ill fit. Falstaff thrives whenever he can point out that there are two sides to every coin, but the moral necessity for a complete, unanimous condemnation in *Merry Wives* stifles him. For *Merry Wives*-Falstaff to succeed we must accept his argument that "wit may be made a Jack-a-Lent when 'tis upon ill employment" and so agree that the needs of the plot supersede the needs of the character. While it is hard to determine the success of this argument with Shakespeare's contemporary audiences, we have seen that later receivers are unwilling to make any such concessions. They would rather reject the iteration of the character from the "canon" than agree to his moral conversion at the end.

This is, I believe, why Shakespeare can ultimately be said to fail with his elaboration of Falstaff in *MWW*. Most receivers feel that they must either accept a thorough reconfiguration of

Henriad-Falstaff's character conception or completely reject *Merry Wives-Falstaff*. There appears to be little room for any kind of middle of the road interpretation. And still, we have to ask if the situation could not have been different, had Shakespeare been less reluctant to show a more brilliant, flourishing and morally ambiguous Falstaff in his comedy; much in the manner Verdi was able to take the action from *MWW* and insert a fat knight who exhibited more of Henriad-Falstaff's traits.

What is easy to forget is that in spite of Shakespeare's inherent failure to elaborate on his character in *MWW*, he succeeded in his attempt in *Henry V*. Of all the critics, Dover Wilson appears to be the only one to fully realize the ramifications of Falstaff's depiction in the Henriad's last play. As he points out, it is only once they have the account of Falstaff's death that the critics are able to fully make out their conception of Falstaff as the knight who died of love for Prince Hal (5). And more to the point, the epilogue at the end of *2 Henry IV* promises that Falstaff will rise again, vibrant and unscathed by his rejection. However, as we know, at some point Shakespeare changed his mind and instead wrote the scenes in *Henry V* that served to cast the events of *Henry IV parts One and Two* in an even more tragic light. Falstaff was now compared to Clytus who was slain by his best friend Alexander the Great. For the critics who prefer to think of Falstaff's rejection as positive, such as Wilson, his elaboration in *Henry V* is disregarded, but as we have seen, the majority of critics find the Falstaff in *Henry V* to be compatible with their previous conception of him. Though the little we hear of him in *Henry V* is not particularly witty, he continues to operate in his usual mode of working against the order in the plot. By dying as he does, he is allowed to indict the former Prince Hal turned King Henry V and cast a shadow of doubt over his image as the ideal king. He is not allowed his victory at Agincourt without the ghost of Falstaff hanging over him, evoked by Fluellen's musing on the rejection of the fat knight.

It is this that arguably allows the critics to talk about the Henriad as a continuous, consistent story told over three installments. So that, while the relationship between *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV* can be hard to determine, with respect to whether they really are two separate plays or two parts of one play (as their names suggest), it seems clear that both *MWW* and *Henry V* can be regarded as elaborations, in as much as they represent plays where Shakespeare continues the stories of previously established characters. But Shakespeare succeeded with one and failed with another: *Henry V* has become part of the canon while *MWW* has been left out of it. And though I am hesitant to draw any definite conclusions as to the reasons for this, I believe part of the failure of *Merry Wives-Falstaff* is his inability to work as an opposing force working whose joy lies in undermining the order of the play. If this is the case then *MWW* stands as an example of an elaboration that is rejected not because it is found to contradict major plot details from the original source, but because

it fails to make the elaborated character act, or express itself, in a manner that is consistent with the expectations of the audience.

2.3 Robert Nye's *Falstaff*

As a final example to demonstrate how our conception of Falstaff is defined by his manner of expression, rather than the factual plot details of the *Henriad*, we will examine a modern elaboration of him. *Falstaff* (1976) is Robert Nye's fictional auto-biography where the reader is promised to receive a full account of the events from Shakespeare's plays, as they happened according to Sir John Falstaff. Nye's novel has received little scholarly attention, perhaps justly so, as its literary qualities beyond that of sheer entertainment value are questionable.

However, as an elaboration of the Falstaff character, Nye's novel has garnered a great deal of success. Upon its publishing in 1976 it received the Guardian Fiction Prize in as well as The Hawthornden Prize⁴⁸ and the novel has also served as basis for several stage adaptations (Chamberlain 1). Both the novel and stage adaptations have resonated well with audiences, and the general sentiment seems to be that Nye's Falstaff is an inspired elaboration of the original as he is found in Shakespeare. For instance, in his review of a 2013 stage adaptation of Nye's novel, Adrian Chamberlain writes in the *Times Colonist* that “the play (and no doubt Nye’s novel) add to the character of Falstaff by making him richer, more complex and, arguably, more human than Shakespeare’s amoral knave. This Falstaff is a study in contradictions: vulgar, intelligent, crass, empathetic, deluded, realistic ... and above all, pleasure-seeking” (1). Elsewhere, Dominic Cavendish writes in his *The Independent* review of another Shakespearean elaboration *The Popular Mechanicals* that “having spent an evening in the company of David Weston's beautifully fleshed-out Falstaff recently, I was almost persuaded that flagrant Bardic borrowing was an entirely legitimate activity - and that, if you picked the right personae to enlarge on, you'd probably have a well-deserved hit on your hands.” Nye, then, seems to have succeeded with his elaboration.

Unfortunately there is no room in this thesis for a detailed analysis of Nye's 600 page novel. I will, however, examine a few excerpts from the work in order to try and point out a few tendencies in Nye's strategy for elaborating Falstaff which I believe are integral to understanding why his Falstaff has been able to succeed where Shakespeare and *Merry Wives-Falstaff* failed.

2.3.1 About the novel

Falstaff is presented as the memoirs of Sir John Fastolf, as told over the course of 100 days with one chapter for each day, written by an assortment of scribes to whom Falstaff is dictating. Nye's Sir

⁴⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guardian_Fiction_Prize
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hawthornden_Prize

John Fastolf (from here on Falstaff) is an amalgam of Sir John Oldcastle the Lollard, Sir John Fastolf of *Henry VI* and Sir John Falstaff as he appears in the *Henriad* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. This is primarily achieved by having Falstaff fake his reported death from *Henry V* to escape his creditors (Nye 213, 472), and so allow Falstaff to live on until the reign of King Henry VI (14). Thus, while being an elaboration of Shakespeare's Falstaff, Nye shows surprisingly little regard for the chronological facts as they are laid out in the source material: Falstaff claims to be at Prince Hal's age and not an old man when they first meet, and in his story he only earns his knighthood from King Henry V in the events following the battle of Agincourt (534-535). And yet, while the novel is seemingly busy undermining Shakespeare's "official" account at every turn, the novel is continuously evoking it and recontextualizing it through recycled speeches and material.

Much like Stoppard's successful elaboration in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Nye's interaction with his source material takes on a playful nature where the exploration of character takes the front seat to exploration of the plot. There are for instance places in the book where the narrative is completely lost owing to the unwillingness of the current scribe to correctly transcribe what Falstaff is narrating. Chapter 78 titled "How Sir John Fastolf went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land" begins in the following way:

Scrope writes this.

N.B.: Not him saying 'Scrope writes this.'

He is saying something else altogether. He is boasting about some pilgrimage he claims to have made to the Holy Land with his man 'Bardolph'.

Lies!

I do not write that.

I do not write lies.

I do not write Fastolf. (456)

Scrope is the adoptive son of Falstaff who holds nothing but contempt for the fat knight. In the chapters where he is writing, he devotes most of his time to point out factual errors and implausibilities in Falstaff's account. Because of this, the reader never does learn what happened during Falstaff's pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In the next chapter Falstaff cheerfully continues his account, completely unaware that the reader has missed the entirety of the previous chapter owing to his deceitful step-son. The episodes involving the step-son Scrope mirror the main intention of the novel. The fact-seeking reader is asked to identify with the hostile Scrope, whose obsession with detail and general distrust of Falstaff robs the reader of their enjoyment of the preposterous tales the old knight is recounting. As such, Nye's novel should be seen more as a celebration of the inventive character of Falstaff, than an actual attempt at fleshing out the true memoirs of Sir John.

2.3.2 Nye's strategy of elaboration

It is in this manner that Nye's elaboration can be said to succeed as an elaboration of Falstaff.

Falstaff is a novel which more often than not depicts the memoirs of the Falstaff who at the Boar's Head tavern made the two men in buckram become four and then seven within the blink of an eye. By emphasizing this aspect of Falstaff, Nye suddenly has a strategy through which he can play with Shakespeare's material, as he takes familiar episodes from the *Henriad* and allows them to be subverted and reappropriated through Falstaff's skill of invention. We will examine three such episodes to demonstrate this strategy.

2.3.2.1 Nye's Battle of Gad's Hill

In the true spirit of Falstaff his memoirs contains no less than three separate accounts of the Gad's Hill robbery which are recounted in chapters 54-56. The framework in all the accounts of the episode is essentially the same as the source material in *1 Henry IV* but Falstaff makes subtle variations in each retelling of the incident.

In his first version the travelers are carrying £200 and he gives a few of his own lines to the robber Gadshill: "Ah whoreson caterpillars!" cried Mr. Gadshill, who in his Cuthbert Cutter moods possessed quite a poetical turn. 'Bacon-fed knaves!' he added. (There *was* a smell of grocer's shops about them)" (357). Also, he emphasizes that he fought with a dozen of his assailants for two hours, until he killed two men in buckram suits.

In the second version the travelers are suddenly carrying £1000, Gadshill's lines from the first version are not spoken by anyone, and when they are set upon after the successful robbery it is by a hundred men; of these hundred Falstaff claims to have fought with fifty-three of them, until he peppered two rogues in buckram suits (359).

The third and final version is concerned only with the fighting and echoes the account of *Henriad* Falstaff in *1 Henry IV*. The account begins with the following: "Here I stood, and thus I held my sword. Four rogues in buckram suits let drive at me – No, reader, I did not tell you two. I said four, all abreast. I took their seven points on my shield. Seven? you say, sir. But there were only four just now... *In buckram*. Seven, or I'm a villain" (360). This third and last version emphasizes the word buckram again and again. It is mentioned seven times, two of them capitalized.

The reason for the three versions and the emphasis on buckram is explained by Falstaff in the next chapter:

If you want to come at the truth of a single event you had better allow for at least three stabs at it, and then allow for the fact that you may still have missed the heart in some way. That is why I have given you *three* versions of how the Battle of Gadshill was won. I do not claim that any single one of them is true. But I do claim that if you add the three together, and look at them closely, you will see what I have been driving at all along, and why I speak of this engagement as *a victory*. (362)

By having Falstaff insisting on three versions of the same event in his memoirs, and then insist that neither one of them might be true in its entirety, Nye demonstrates an acute understanding of Falstaff's character while at the same time allowing his account of the Gad's Hill incident to remain surprisingly conservative. The fact that we have Falstaff himself admitting that his retelling of Gad's Hill is not strictly factual means that it does not stand to threaten or contradict Shakespeare's account in *1 Henry IV*. Much like Stoppard did in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Nye merely takes advantage of the blank spaces left there by the ambiguity of Falstaff's response in the original play, and uses this a starting point from which to make a comment on the events and perhaps make a case in favor of the fat rogue's version by his highlighted use of buckram.⁴⁹ Yet, at the same time, Nye makes sure to poke fun at the receiver's reverence for the canon in Shakespeare as he makes his Falstaff affirm that the truth is never contained in a single account; the unspoken message is of course that this applies as much to Shakespeare's version as it does to Nye's.

2.3.2.2 Nye on the question of who killed Hotspur

Another such incident where Nye's novel reappropriates Shakespeare is in chapter 66 which bears the title "Who killed Hotspur?" In it we are given Falstaff's version of the battle at Shrewsbury and his philosophical musings on the matter of the contrast between his own counterfeit death and the (most likely real) death of Hotspur. But Falstaff does not repeat his immortal speech from *1 Henry IV* scene 5.4. Instead we get a wonderfully inventive modern take on Falstaffian logic as he struggles to come to terms with his current predicament:

My problem was thus gradually reduced by itself to these three heads:

- 1) Was Hotspur dead?
- 2) If Hotspur was dead, who killed him?
- 3) If Hotspur was not dead, who was going to kill him?

I realized in a blinding flash of sack that by answering the third and final question, I could settle the other two.
(406)

And so, having stabbed the prone body of Hotspur, Falstaff is safe to make the following conclusions:

- 1) Hotspur was now *definitely* dead.
- 2) If he had not been dead before I killed him, then I had killed Hotspur.
- 3) There was no further point in anyone else killing Hotspur. (406-407)

Though the words are different from those found in Shakespeare's play, Nye succeeds in keeping the essence of Falstaff's reasoning and then translate it to a more modern expression of point by

⁴⁹ It was the emphasis on the same word in Shakespeare's version which made Dover Wilson ask rhetorically "Why this sudden singling out of 'two rogues in buckram suits', if not to inform us that he knows, well enough, who they were?" (53).

point deduction.

And subsequently, as we are shown Falstaff confronted by Prince Hal, Nye makes one of his more insightful commentaries on the source material by having Falstaff realize the full implications of his own claim:

Hal had his heart set on high heroism now. His dad had watched him from the hilltop. He had won his spurs. More, he had won Hotspur's spurs. Or had he?

He never forgave me for being the one gentleman in England who provided the living excuse for those three little words: *Or had he?* (408)

In moments such as these Nye's Falstaff reveals himself as something more than simply the boastful, jovial braggart. He exhibits a kind of insight akin to melancholy which is the same that we find in Henriad-Falstaff when he gives his catechism on honor. Moreover, Nye tries to answer the question of why Prince Hal would agree to give credit to Falstaff's lie, when he had so much to gain from claiming the honor of killing Hotspur. He does so by having Falstaff suggesting that Prince Hal may never have been completely certain that it was indeed he who had killed Hotspur: "Hal *may* have killed Hotspur. He *thought* he had. He apparently left him for dead. But then he apparently left me for dead too. And if he was wrong about me, how can anyone be sure he was right about Hotspur?" (407). If nothing else, it seems a plausible explanation as to why the Prince so magnanimously agrees to let Falstaff have the glory, and it lends an even deeper layer to the complex relationship between the two we see depicted in Shakespeare.

2.3.2.3 Nye's Rejection of Falstaff

Though we have already affirmed that Nye's elaboration is more concerned with playful reappropriation of Shakespeare and celebration of Falstaffian invention, there are moments, like the previous conflict in the aftermath of the battle of Shrewsbury where Nye appears to be commenting more seriously on the Henriad by bringing new elements to the forefront, and so change the way in which we view the scenes in their original context. The most powerful example of this, where I would argue he rivals Stoppard in insight, is in his recounting of the rejection of Falstaff. Nye's version of the event is sober and follows the account in Shakespeare closely. Some of the lines have been cut, and he inserts details here and there to emphasize the drama, such as having Falstaff embrace the leg of King Henry V only to have his hand cut by Hal's spurs, but overall the confrontation is the same as in *2 Henry IV*. Nye's invention lies in his added commentary on the famous final line of the confrontation:

'Set on!' said King Henry V.
The black horse lunged at me. I fell aside.
The glorious procession passed on its way.

'Mr. Shallow,' I said, 'I owe you a thousand pounds.'
Poor Shallow thought I meant him. I did not. (444)

This highlighting of the ambiguity in Falstaff's line seems so ingenious that it seems safe to assume that someone must have noticed it before Nye, and the way it ties to Falstaff's earlier claim that Hal owes him a thousand pounds, if not a million, for his love (*1 Henry IV* 3.3.134-136), but though that might be the case, I have not yet found anyone other than Nye to pick up on it. Regardless, it stands as an inventive reading of the scene and succeeds in standing as a viable interpretation. In short it is an example of successful elaboration where Nye's literary reappropriation is able to challenge the way in which we view the responses of the character in his original conception.

2.3.3 Closing remarks on Nye's *Falstaff*

Nye's elaboration still has its faults. Falstaff is positively obsessed with sex and spends a great deal of his memoirs describing his various exploits in excruciating detail (though he later admits that they are all made up), and the penultimate chapter of the book takes the form of a written confession from Falstaff to a Friar Brackley, wherein the reader is confronted with a Falstaff so remorseful and repentant that he appears completely incompatible with the boisterous, old rogue most readers find in Shakespeare. But, though many readers are bound to feel that Nye's Falstaff appears incompatible with their own conception, his strategy in having Falstaff as narrator undermine the authenticity of his memoirs from the very start makes it possible for the reader to be reconciled with these errors. They can safely be disregarded as more lies from Falstaff or even slanderous documents inserted by his resentful step-son Scrope. In fact it is Scrope who provides the key to the novel when he makes the following statement in another chapter:

But I have heard that in his days with Prince Henry they called him 'Falstaff', and that his *real* name might even be 'Oldcastle', a Lollard, a brand plucked from the burning.
And that he was a *Knight* already in those days, as well as already an old man, so that whatever he intends to say in these pages about how he eventually came by his knighthood will again be lies.
Lies about a living lie. (475)

If there is one thing that is certain about Shakespeare's Falstaff it is that he has a very relaxed attitude to the concept of truth, and that he places a greater value on wit and inventiveness of story, than on factuality and order. By making Falstaff the narrator of his own story, Nye is thus freed from both factual constraints and the established conceptions of Henriad-Falstaff. Instead, he allows Falstaff to stay true to his character by constantly reinventing himself, and by working against the order of the novel. After all, though the blurb on the back of the book promises that by reading the old knight's memoirs we will learn who really killed Hotspur, what really went on at the Battle of

Agincourt and what it was that made the wives of Windsor so merry,⁵⁰ at the end of the book we realize that we have learnt no such thing. But most readers still appear to be in agreement that they have had a genuine encounter with Shakespeare's Falstaff, and not an impostor.

2.4 Chapter conclusion

We have seen that the character of Falstaff challenges the notion of each play as a separate self-contained narrative. Within the history plays Falstaff is shown in a state of continual change as he constantly reinvents himself and upsets expectations by playing the coward one minute and making wise soliloquies on the worthlessness of honor the next. It is possible to regard him as Riot personified, a dangerous exploiter of other people, a false friend, but also to see him as a good-natured rogue, a charitable scoundrel and a loyal follower. This polarized ambiguity is similar to the one found in the roles of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, though Falstaff's role is much larger and more fleshed out. Critics have tried different strategies to argue for this or that interpretation of Falstaff, and he has been made out to be both a Devil and a Christ-like figure. What all the different interpretations have in common is that they draw from all three plays of the Henriad in order to find evidence to support their claims, and that with the notable exceptions of T. H. Craik and Dover Wilson they all wholeheartedly reject *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and the iteration of Falstaff contained within when they debate the “true” nature of his character. The number one reason for their rejection is that they can find no examples of the “wit” that is so typical of the character, and by wit they are usually referring to the manner in which Falstaff upsets the expectations of either the characters around him or the audience by saying something that is astonishing either in its undeniable wisdom or in its poignant inventiveness.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* he is not allowed to exhibit any inventiveness, and what is arguably worse, in the end his role as villain in a comedy appears to necessitate that he must stand before the audience silent and defeated and that the other characters emerge triumphant at his expense. Though, it should be noted that the success and approval of Verdi's opera *Falstaff* suggests that it might not be so easy to blame the failure of *Merry Wives-Falstaff* on the confines of the plot. Either way, the critics' disregard for *The Merry Wives of Windsor* clearly demonstrates that it is possible to make the claim that Shakespeare was unable to write his character right, and that when there is a perceived conflict between a conception of character and the authority of that character's creator it is possible to reject the authority of the creator. We have seen that different strategies have been used to justify this rejection of Shakespeare's authority, ranging from apocryphal stories that he wrote the play in a hurry or that the queen demanded an “impossible” sequel depicting Falstaff in

⁵⁰ What little we hear of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are of the various explicit activities Falstaff claims to have undertaken with the Mistresses Ford and Page (20).

love to more poetical assertions that the Falstaff appearing in *Merry Wives* is a rank impostor who has stolen the good name of Sir John Falstaff.

Finally, we have examined a more modern attempt at elaborating Falstaff in Robert Nye's novel *Falstaff*. Here we saw how Nye adopts a clever strategy by making Falstaff the untrustworthy narrator of his novel, making sure that he is given more or less free reign with his elaboration, as any conflict between the receiver's perception of Falstaff and his iteration in the book can be reconciled on account of the many blatant lies and errors made apparent throughout the course of the narrative. In spite of this unabashed deceitfulness Nye is arguably still able to successfully elaborate on the character of Falstaff and our conception of him in the *Henriad*, by occasionally giving sober accounts of events from Shakespeare wherein he is careful to remain true to the source material for the better part, and to resort to reinterpretation and recontextualization rather than pure invention. In these instances he demonstrates the same strategy we saw Stoppard apply to *Hamlet* with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

If there is one thing the example of Falstaff demonstrates it seems to be that the more fleshed out the character is in its original conception, the clearer the expectations are from the audience as to how the character will react in a given situation. Moreover, these expectations can be more consequential than the elaboration's reverence to the plot and biography established in the source material, when the elaboration's eventual assimilation or rejection is decided on.

3 Conclusion

3.1 Chapter introduction

The focus of my thesis has been on character elaboration and how characters can change and develop through the course of different works, and in the hands of different authors, but it still remains to explain what my analyses can tell us about the concept of character and how this knowledge could be used in continued research. In this brief final chapter I will attempt to bring together my findings from the previous two and try to demonstrate how these findings relate to the larger question of how we understand terms such as “character tradition” and “canon”

3.1.1 Defining character

It has already been made clear that it is no easy task to firmly establish how we can define a character within a given work. In the introduction we saw how Wolfgang Iser made the suggestion that a character comes to life through “meaning”. This meaning is not a solid constant that can be found on its own on the printed page or outside the text, but is instead a gradually shifting concept that springs to life through “interaction between the textual signals and the reader's acts of comprehension” (9). The suggestion is that a character cannot merely be defined by its physical traits or the sum all its spoken and unspoken thoughts, but that there is a deeper “meaning” or “essence” that can only be brought to light when the character is made to interact with receivers. What this means is that if we wish to examine a character and attempt to define it, it is not enough to merely seek it out in the text, we must also examine how that character has interacted with its audience and what meaning has been attributed to its actions.

It is this proposition I have attempted to demonstrate in the chapters dealing with Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Falstaff. In the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern we have seen how two minor characters with little actual impact on their original plot found themselves at the center of a polarized debate surrounding the nature of their characters and their motives. For a long time, most critics seemed content to accept that their role as villainous henchmen was self-evident, but then a gradual shift of perception began to take place as some people, such as Charles F. Johnson, began to take notice of the ambiguity of their situation. There were blank spaces within the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern which for a long while had been unconsciously filled out in the most probable way by making them villains so that Hamlet could emerge just and heroic when he doomed them to suffer death in England. But now that these blank spaces began to be pointed out, it sparked a debate, as critics were forced to re-examine the way in which the

characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had been defined. However, since the debate revolved around blank spaces, which is to say that there was no definite answer within the text of *Hamlet* to settle the dispute once and for all, it was possible for both sides to find support for their views in Shakespeare's text. This demonstrates Iser's point that "meaning" is shaped through textual interaction or interpretation, rather than located as a fixed constant.

Then Stoppard wrote his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which arguably brought the debate surrounding the "true" nature of the two courtiers to a threshold. By linking his play inextricably to Shakespeare's and simultaneously making a case for his Ros and Guil as innocent bystanders caught up in the action of *Hamlet*, the audience found themselves faced with another text to consider. Stoppard's play functions as an elaboration of *Hamlet*, and while much of the action is easily divorced from Shakespeare's text by its very nature as meta-theatre, the fact that it depicts so many scenes lifted directly from *Hamlet* and presents it from the point of view of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern forces the audience to re-examine the way in which they view the original play. And since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Shakespeare's creations, the audience has to form an opinion as to whether they find Stoppard's iteration of the two characters to be in concord with their original iterations. They have to decide whether Stoppard has remained true to the "meaning" or "essence" of the characters.

We saw some examples of how this judgment was made in the section on the critical reception of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, noticing that while there were those who remained unable to accept Stoppard's elaboration on account of their rejecting his depiction of the two courtiers as sympathetic and whimsical instead of scheming and villainous, the majority accepted Stoppard's version. This has not only led to the play becoming a great success with the theatre-going public, but more importantly, it has allowed the play to become part of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's "canon". Whereas before the critics could only turn to *Hamlet* when they were debating on the nature of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and their relationship to Prince Hamlet, now proponents of their innocence have found in Stoppard another sort of primary text which reinforces their conception of the pair. One could even argue that the success of the play can be used as legitimate evidence to help settle the question of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's innocence.

We still do not know to what extent this is true. Would it be possible for another elaboration, depicting a villainous pair of courtiers, to enjoy the same kind of success that Stoppard's has? And would such a play be able to peacefully exist side by side with Stoppard's play, or would one of the two be embraced by the public as a more valid interpretation; as a truer iteration of the two characters? We know that canonization happens, but do we know the particulars of the process and what causes some elaborations to be rejected and others to be assimilated?

3.1.2 Assimilation and rejection

In Chapter 1 we saw how Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* was an example of an elaboration fading into relative obscurity with no real lasting impact on the audience's perception of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. There could be many reasons for this, but one important suggestion was that Gilbert may have strayed so far away from the origins in *Hamlet* that his iterations of the characters only resembled their original counterparts in name and dress. Unsurprisingly this suggests that conception of character is closely linked to its original iteration, but it is still worth asking to what extent this link exists and to what extent subsequent character elaborations must conform to the source material to be considered as “valid” interpretations.

With Rosencrantz and Guildenstern this is incredibly hard to determine. Their roles are so small and their defined traits few, though evidence would suggest that the “essence” of their characters is located not in anything they say or do, but is instead informed by their relationship to Hamlet. Any meaningful iteration of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would have to show them in conjunction with Hamlet, and one gets the impression that if one were to show the two courtiers removed from the actions at the court of Elsinore, they would probably cease to function as characters since their whole point of reference would be removed.

This is why we went on to examine Falstaff in Chapter 2, in order to see what happens when elaboration was attempted with a much more complex and fleshed out character. In contrast to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Falstaff is a character whose Shakespearean origin is rooted in no less than four separate plays; meaning that anyone attempting to define his character will have an extensive selection to go through in order to do so. In one sense Falstaff may very well be the perfect subject for such an examination, since his performance through the course of the Shakespearean plays is subject to much change. The manner in which critics found it possible to assign Falstaff both the role of principal villain and dramatic hero carried an echo of the polarized debate surrounding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but whereas the disagreement surrounding the roles of the two courtiers was the point of interest in our examination, in Falstaff's case it is the things on which his critics agree which should seize our attention.

The debate surrounding Falstaff's character made it apparent that though there was much disagreement among the critics as to the question itself, an overwhelming majority still agreed on the character's “canon”, that is to say, which iterations of his character that were deemed relevant to their discussion. We observed how *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was left out of the canon, while *Henry V*, a later play, was assimilated. Dover Wilson rightly pointed out that though it is possible to regard the two parts of *Henry IV* as one play, and so claim the entirety of *Part One* and *Part Two* as the rightful origin for Falstaff, *Henry V* should still be considered as an elaboration. This was

important for Wilson, since Falstaff's indirect portrayal in *Henry V* (he is never shown on stage) potentially carries a great impact on the ways in which we interpret his rejection at the end of *Part Two*. The evidence of the epilogue in *Part Two* demonstrates that Shakespeare originally envisioned another future for his character, but that he somehow changed his mind, and then made choices in *Henry V* which retroactively changed the severity of events in *Henry IV*, as it became possible to claim that Falstaff died from his rejected love of Prince Hal.

But *Henry V* was not regarded as an elaboration by most critics. There are many possible reasons for this, among which the status of *Henry V* as a continuation of Harry of Monmouth's story, as well as the fact that it was Shakespeare himself who was responsible for the continuation. And yet the same is true of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, though there are a multitude of plot details that make it much harder to integrate the comedy within the chronological sequence of events that unfold throughout the Henriad. What the case of Falstaff seems to demonstrate, however, is that chronology and authorship can be arbitrary when the original canon of a character is determined. Instead we see that the critics all seem to agree on a set of traits that define Falstaff, and then uphold these traits as a condition that must be met in order to recognize a character-iteration as legitimate.

We have also seen that in Falstaff's case it is no easy task to clearly define what these traits actually are, but that there is a general agreement that one of his main characteristics can be termed "wit", and that this has to do with the way Falstaff seems to always upset the expectations of the other characters and the audience. However, this definition of "wit" is provisory and I believe the problem of defining "wit" illustrates well the complexity of Falstaff and makes it apparent how hard it is to accurately define what constitutes the "essence" of a character. His forceful nature does however fill the audience with a set of unspecified expectations as to how he will act and what he will say, so that when critics look at *Merry Wives*-Falstaff, they are able to claim that he is not an accurate depiction of Falstaff.

The problem of *Merry Wives*-Falstaff also highlights another important aspect of elaboration which is that while a character may successfully be transferred into other settings and other situations, they may not successfully take on any kind of role in the plot. In Falstaff's case it was already pointed out early that the apocryphal request to show the knight in love in *Merry Wives* was an impossible one, since "Falstaff could not love but by ceasing to be Falstaff" (Samuel Johnson 133). A character is defined by a set of limits, and these limits must again be inextricably bound by that character's "essence", the core by which that character is defined. And yet, with Falstaff we seem unable to accurately explain why it would be an ill fit with his character to show him in love. Is it on the basis of his character as we see him *1 Henry IV*? Or perhaps in *2 Henry IV*? As we read Johnson's sentence we suspect that what he says is true, but are we able to give a sufficient

explanation as to why it is so?

3.1.3 Character and plot

But *The Merry Wives of Windsor* does not show Falstaff in love, and so at least that cannot be given as an explanation of its failure. The most obvious explanation would perhaps be the general perception of *Merry Wives* as a mediocre play, as one would suspect that Falstaff's depiction within the play would be much harder to dismiss if the play had been more highly regarded by the critics. This is, however, an issue I have deliberately chosen to disregard in my thesis, not because of irrelevance to the discussion, but due to spatial constraints; though it should be noted that the later example of Nye's *Falstaff* arguably demonstrates that a work can be of low literary quality and still be successful if the character elaboration is found to be accurate in its depiction. Instead we examined the notion that his role in the plot as a comedic villain who must ultimately be ridiculed and defeated possibly worked to limit Falstaff's freedom to function as himself. This sentiment is supported by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan who states that "characters may be subordinated to action when action is the center of attention, but action can become subordinate to character as soon as the reader's interest shifts to the latter" (36). This could describe the situation in *Merry Wives* if we picture a situation wherein Shakespeare was given the choice between compromising the aesthetic demands of the plot in his comedy or the demands of Falstaff's character. Whether anything like it was actually the case is impossible to say, but Shakespeare's ability to later write a continuation of his Falstaff character in *Henry V* which was accepted by the audience at least seems to prove that Shakespeare had not simply lost his understanding of how Falstaff was perceived by his audience.

The question of Falstaff's incompatibility with the plot in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is further complicated by the success of Verdi's opera *Falstaff* which repurposes the plot and setting from Shakespeare's comedy while still being able to produce a character which at least Auden feels is a valid iteration of Falstaff. I have not been able to examine the opera in this thesis, but if any further research were to be done on the canon of Falstaff, one would have to look closely at Verdi's treatment, especially with regards to what passages and elements of Henriad-Falstaff Verdi incorporates into his opera. We do know that Verdi chose to let Falstaff perform his speech on honor from *I Henry IV* (5.1.125-140), but there might also be other instances where Henriad-Falstaff is allowed to come forth to demonstrate his particular brand of gaiety mixed with gravity. If this is correct, it could support the notion that Falstaff is a character who must be allowed precedence over plot.

This tendency is to some extent demonstrated by Robert Nye in his novel *Falstaff*. By casting the fat, boastful knight as the principal narrator in his own memoirs, Nye subjects his readers to a conflict between the established "facts" they know from Shakespeare and the vivid

imagination of the Falstaff-character. In the same manner as Henriad-Falstaff, who displays blatant disregard for consistency in his retelling of the events that transpired at Gad's Hill, the novel's narrator again and again contradicts both himself and Shakespeare; he finds his pleasure in inventiveness instead of accurate auto-biographical chronicling.

We did see, though, that Nye, like Stoppard, from time to time tries to accurately reproduce scenes from Shakespeare and attempt to recontextualize them. In doing so, he is elaborating so as to further change our conception of both his iteration of Falstaff and, retroactively, Shakespeare's. Though, his strategy of placing Falstaff's character downstage and closer to the audience could be said to mitigate the effectiveness of his elaboration, owing to the fat knight's unreliability as a narrator. After all, we did see how this element of his character makes it possible for the audience to almost seamlessly assimilate the whole novel into Falstaff's "canon" since any discrepancies with the pre-existing conception can be easily dismissed as exaggerated lies from the mouth of Falstaff. And yet, by having his Falstaff contradict Shakespeare as clearly and blatantly as he sometimes does, one could argue that Nye gives more legitimacy to his narrator whenever he is in close agreement with the Henriad.

It would require closer examination to determine this question, and it is interesting to note that Nye's novel has received little scholarly attention. I have already suggested that this might be owing to its perceived lack of literary quality, but that should not exclude its relevance to the topic of Falstaff's "canon" and the development of our perception of his character. The fact that Nye's novel has stayed in circulation for more than 35 years, and has enjoyed stage adaptations as late as in 2013, demonstrates that it still continues to influence audiences, and as such should be worthy of attention.

3.2 Closing remarks

In this thesis I have tried to show that there is a need to re-examine the way in which we define characters and the process through which they take their shapes. Throughout history critics have fluctuated between treating characters as living entities made up of factual, biographical details ("Sherlock Holmes lives in 21 B Baker Street"), and treating them as structural mechanisms whose function is realized through name, appearance and spoken lines. Today most definitions of character are less binary and usually combine elements from both sides of this spectrum, but we are still not able to give a satisfying answer as to what constitutes the bare minimum of a character's identity or "essence". I believe I have sufficiently proved the existence of such an essence by investigating the ways in which various elaborations of characters have succeeded and failed. There is a process by which a majority of the audience, or receivers, make a decision on whether to assimilate the

proposed elaboration into their pre-existing conception of the character(s) in question, or to reject it.

That this process of assimilation/rejection happens is certain, but I would argue that we are still unable to account for much of it. The rejection of *Merry Wives*-Falstaff proves that certain elements such as name, physical appearance and the involvement of the original creator do not guarantee assimilation, while on the other hand, Nye's Falstaff could be shown to prove that it is possible to contradict facts from the original iteration without suffering immediate rejection. And then of course there is the manner in which the different iterations of a character continue to exist side by side; the way they exercise influence over each other and the nature of this hierarchy, and the question of which iteration will take precedence if there is a perceived conflict in the way they each present their character. In my thesis I have tried to examine these problems and point at possible explanations as to how these characters have taken form in the public consciousness. However, this process deserves a much more thorough examination than the one I have been able to account for within these pages. While I have only been able to point out tendencies, continued research may help to expand the way in which we analyze and define a character. I hope that my findings in this thesis have sufficiently demonstrated this and will encourage further in-depth analysis of character elaboration with specific focus on the reasons for assimilation and rejection.

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