

# *Perceiving Falstaff: An Exploration of the Clown Image*

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**Abstract:** Among the many roles in Western drama that originated in ancient Greece, fools occupy a significant place, and its image has been gradually enriched with the development of drama. Beyond simply making the audience laugh, the words and deeds of clowns seem to have a deeper meaning, which can arouse people's resonance and reflection. Starting from the origin of drama and the development analysis of the image of clowns, this article aims to analyze the complex connotation behind Falstaff, the classic fool chosen from Shakespeare's play *Henry IV*, in detail from multiple perspectives. The vivid image of Falstaff in Shakespeare's work is a transcendence of the early clowns. At the same time, Falstaff also conveys the humanist ideals of the author.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare's fool, Falstaff, theater, *Henry IV*, renaissance

## 1. Introduction

In the long history of Western theater, the Renaissance is often mentioned. And humanism emerges as the time requires, which denotes the liberation of the human faculties from the constraints of religion and authority, as well as the overcoming of the obstacles to knowledge and the arts that have been placed in the way of the human mind [1]. The power of 'liberator' has also, to some extent, become a driving force for the prosperity of dramatic art, which makes many famous playwrights during this period. Among them, a large number of the great works of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) became treasures in the world drama treasury, providing rich inspiration and far-reaching influence for the later drama creation. Among the many characters created by Shakespeare, Sir John Falstaff is undoubtedly one of the most memorable comedic images. However, most research on Falstaff has focused on general analysis, a single feature of the character, or comparisons with other clowns, which makes it difficult to gain a comprehensive and profound understanding of this important clown. By examining the origin of western play, the portrayal of clowns and Shakespeare's fools, this article gradually focuses on Sir John Falstaff in *Henry IV* to explore the values and reflection hidden in this character regarding morality, class and politics, as well as the transmission of Shakespeare's humanistic views.

## 2. Origin of Western Drama and the Dionysian Spirit

Dramas, which are often referred to as plays, are intended to be performed on a stage by a cast of actors who take on the roles of the characters [2]. Opinions vary as to the origin of drama. And one of the most influential is Aristotle's view [3]. Both tragedy and comedy began as simple

improvisations. The former was created by the Dithyrambic writers, and the latter by those who created phallic tunes [4]. The Dithyramb, which can be thought of as an orgy in a drunken state, has the characteristics of joy and is actually the self-consolation produced by the Greeks for the pain of life. The willingness of people to express strong emotions, whether happiness or pain, is what makes drama a carrier born out of the Dithyramb. It is likely that early humans staged the earliest plays at religious rituals or festivals [2]. In ancient Greece, people's emotional expression was naturally connected with gods they believed in, which undoubtedly made drama influenced by sacrificial ceremonies from the day of its birth. And the ancient Greeks and Romans later staged comedies and tragedies, which can be considered as the influence of Greek drama on Western drama [2].

Among the sacrificial rites of the gods in ancient Greece, the sacrifice ceremony of Dionysus became an important part of the breeding and development of drama due to its particularity, including the bizarre and complex origins of Dionysus and the use of masks in worship rituals [3]. The uncertainty of origins and the contradiction of identity make Dionysus mysterious. On the other hand, it also proves the artistic value of this deity. Additionally, the Dionysian spirit perfectly captures the qualities of the ancient Greek soul, which permeates both Greek tragedy and comedy [3]. As for masks, they act as a bridge connecting actors and characters, which helps complete the role transition. After wearing the mask, people strive to imitate and perceive the deity, and finally transcend the secular identity to the realm of integration with the role, which has great guiding significance for the formation of drama, because this is the fundamental pursuit of the script, actors, and action instructions in any period of drama.

### 3. Analysis of Clowns and Two Questions

The birth of a clown begins with the influence of a certain emotion. Further, the essence of this emotion is contradiction, that two intertwined forces produce an urgent confusion in his rather dubious smile [5]. The funny smile on the mask imprisons his emotions, but it is the only place he can live and the meaning of his existence. As regards the archetype of the clown, it degenerates from the antinomy between man and God [5]. All kinds of contradictions and struggles between man and God form an awkward situation of confusion, which provides the original position and opportunity for the molding of the clown image. A clown thus finds himself in a position of ambiguity between being a real person, an archetype, and mythological, folkloric, or artistic imagery [6].

A question about the object of a clown's humor is raised [6]. Clowns' performances and farce are often thought to represent laughter and a lack of seriousness. However, one of the reasons we fail to understand deeply is that we tend to overlook the subject of laughter-human beings. In other words, this critical point may even be the default. Smiling, laughter, and play must be ruled out as indices of humor in animals, as these are the exclusive privileges of human [6]. Therefore, the clown's behavior can be recognized as a kind of mock-aggression, that is, the self-denial of laughter through laughter and humor [6]. This view makes the artistic image and value of clowns clearer, and also provides support for further research. Instead of fighting with the real world, the reflection on humor from clowns is more about real world feelings and thoughts. This kind of thinking does not belong to the real-world, but to the world related to art [6].

Besides the analysis of humans who take clowns for fun, another interesting part is worth studying. The imitation of inferior people that occurs more often in comedies is what makes people laugh, because the ludicrousness comprises of an imperfection or ugly feature that is neither unpleasant nor damaging [4]. Then the question arises as to who is imitating the inferior. The understanding of this problem cannot be merely superficial; otherwise, it would affect our cognition of the clown image. After a series of inquiries, it is concluded that the authors of comic texts and their audiences are the ones who mimic inferior people, portraying them in caricatured form in an effort to mock them, not comedy performers [7]. In addition, a similar viewpoint can be found, which argues a clown is just a

clown, he does not represent anyone, and he does not and cannot have any concrete prototype in the real world [7]. Imitating the inferior people in the real world is also not against the world, which links to the previous question. The clown's performance is a choice of mankind; the role of this particular clown is to make people see reality from the perspective of art.

#### 4. Shakespeare's Fool

As mentioned before, jesters and harlequins, as contradictory existences, have both adorned and dishonored stages, rites, royal courts, and aristocratic households since the beginning of time [8]. Undoubtedly, Clowns are a natural resource for every budding author, including William Shakespeare. Clowns in Shakespeare's plays can be divided into fools and jesters. It is worth noting that the classification of clowns is aimed at the more typical images that appear in the works and this method is artificial, perhaps for the purpose of better differentiation and analysis. The history of the fool can be traced back to the popular 'fool's festival' in Europe between the 12th and 16th centuries, which is also closely related to the festival of the ancient Romans [5]. They pretend to be crazy and silly in the carnival, then this amusing behavior forms the image of fools. That's an early understanding of fools. It's clear that Shakespeare reworked these people when he created them. Shakespeare's preference for impure complications over pure funny and his frustration with it [8]. Thus, the strict, hierarchical rules of society were cleverly used by him. Education and the manners of the upper classes are symbols of status, while the country folk and the lower classes are defined as fools for their lack of these. For example, Bottom the weaver in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he bumbles around illogically and has a blast. When awaking, he seems to be rehearsing. When a lowly illiterate machine glimpses the sublime, it produces a rare vision [8]. His stupidity is touching and resonates with people. When it comes to jesters, the representative one is in *King Lear*. He does not have a definite name, but this does not mean that he can be equated with the lowly fool. He is considered a 'wise fool' who could criticize and ridicule others without being punished because 'Sportive humor' is his job [8]. And even a jester's casual joke has more than one meaning [8]. However, this permission is only temporary and he will accept the punishment unconditionally. "Take heed, sirrah: the whip," warns Lear [8]. This kind of court jester can't give the audience a real laugh, because the laugh is sad and fleeting. They are kept in the palace, where the upper environment allows them to think more deeply but is still a tool for fun, which is the source of their suffering. The identity and social class represented by the jester are very vague. Just one interesting description: this is a foolosophy, which is staring into the abyss while wanting to look away [8]. In short, Shakespearean fool is a nice rhetorical term for ambiguous or 'figure of sence uncertain', whose contradictions are actually highly self-reflective [8]. If you believe them to be serious, you are misguided; if you believe them to be joking, you are deluding yourself.

#### 5. Falstaff in *Henry IV*

Falstaff, traditionally regarded as the greatest comic character in English literature, is also a popular bone of contention among bourgeois Shakespeare scholars. It would be unreasonable to consider placing Falstaff in either of Shakespeare's categories of fools, even though it may have been done. Selfish, lazy, timid, optimistic, witty, and humorous-all these words can be used to describe him. Besides, his appearance and character fit well with the idea of a clown. For example, from Prince Hal's description: "Falstaff sweats to death. And lards the lean earth as he walks along; were 't not for laughing, I should pity him" [9]. The 'old white-bearded Satan' stands out among Shakespearean fools because he offers people a new perspective on the real world, which is closely related to his complex identity. All binding rules seem invalid to him, and there might be a shadow of everyone on his body. In a sense, his image is in tune with the spirit of the whole era. He reflects a desire of which

the masses are vaguely aware and he represents a certain degree of resistance and liberation. His actions and words struck a chord in the hearts of millions of his contemporaries. In other words, Shakespeare tries to show the whole picture of human nature to the world through Falstaff. A close reading of *Henry IV* and an explanation of the morality, class, and political mysteries associated with Falstaff help to fully understand this famous clown, which is perhaps one of Shakespeare's most important tasks for the audience.

### 5.1. Focus on Morality: “Wrenching the True Cause the False Way”

This speech comes from the Chief Justice in *Henry IV*, which is helpful to understand Falstaff's moral views. Because of the entertaining nature of Falstaff's image, scholars tend to find all kinds of excuses for his behavior and forget that he was a moral rebel. Is the truth true? Can the moral code in society be in the interest of everyone and satisfy everyone? Falstaff continually exploited this gap between ‘the true cause’ and ‘the false way’, distorting the real cause in the wrong way and confounding the supposed unity of language [10]. Rebellion does not mean creation, and Falstaff neither creates new moral codes nor is willing to abide by existing ones. He is just using it, making morality work for him, through the rendering of clownish language. The argument can be supported by Falstaff's persistent biblical mockery. When lecturing to Hal, Falstaff makes reference to a tree and its fruit from the Bible [10]. “If then the tree may be known by the fruit, as the fruit by the tree, then peremptorily I speak it, there is virtue in that Falstaff” [9]. Similar speeches: “’tis my vocation, Hal”, “Tis no sin for a man to labor in his vocation” and “God give thee the spirit of persuasion and him the ears of profiting”, which is in the case of persuading Prince Hal to steal [9]. He disdained moral authority, and in the eyes of the outside world he assumed the formal position of a mislead in the moral tradition [11]. In fact, Falstaff's moral code can be seen as a form of rebel self-preservation. Stories of Falstaff do not ask people to believe but they refuse to be discarded [11]. The moral chaos brought by the rebellion reveals the difficult situation of morality in the real world, and it might be also a vivid portrayal of the author's ultimate pursuit of morality. Falstaff has nothing to affirm, and therefore never lies [11].

### 5.2. Focus on Class: Falstaffian Background

In *Henry IV*, Falstaff has multiple identities. He is Prince Hal's wild drinking buddy and a braggart; He is also a poor feudal aristocrat Who has strong feudal parasitic life characteristics: wine excessive drinking and indulge in sensuality, as well as a soldier, but the lack of a feudal knight concept of honor and courage. He is in a vague class, which is close to the noble Prince Hal from the upper class, as well as to the figures of the lower class. The concept of Falstaffian Background was introduced by Engels in a letter in 1859 [12]. Through the activities of this character, Shakespeare truly depicts the living conditions and ideals of various classes, from the court to pubs (The Boar's-Head Tavern), and various characters, reappearing a “colorful” civilian society [12]. In other words, in a setting typical of the times, Sir John Falstaff is speaking for all, which is also the pursuit of truth. For example, some speeches in Act 1, Scene 2, “shall there be gallows standing in England when thou art king?” and “Do not thou, when thou art king, hang a thief” [9]. Falstaff is in fact speaking on behalf of the lower class, expressing the resentment of many silent citizens over the hangings and the corruption of the government. Moreover, He conveys the people's hatred and disgust of war. As long as the stomach is full, it doesn't matter which side you support. War is a sea of fire and “pitiful rascals” can “fill a pit as well as better” [9]. Nevertheless, for Falstaff, the disaster of war is only one aspect, as it is also a good opportunity to make a fortune. “I have misused the king's press damnably”, “I press me none but good house-holders, yeoman's sons”, the poor are “good enough to toss” and “food for powder” [9]. Falstaff is a complex and impure character, especially in the vast and rich social context. Social

reality is often reflected in his behavior and humor, which are the sustenance of Shakespeare's distant ideal of class.

### 5.3. Focus on Politics: Gambling with Authority

The story of Falstaff's death is the key to interpreting the gamble of political ideas. After the prince has ascended to the throne, Falstaff and his friends visit Hal outside of Westminster. He has placed great expectations on the future reign of the crown prince, which has now finally been fulfilled. However, the change of the prince makes his expectations brutally shattered. Facing "My king! my Jove! I speak to thee, my heart!", Hal says to Falstaff: "I know thee not, old man" [13]. And it links to an earlier verse by Hal, specifically referring to "I know you all" [10]. The word 'know' in the two sentences need to be paid attention. Does Hal really not know Falstaff? What is the king refusing? Actually, Hal (or any decent Tudor ruler) must reject Falstaff's paradigm if his semiotics transfer meaning into the hands of the recipient [10]. If Hal chooses to 'know' Falstaff, it would be interpreted as relinquishing power. Because of the meaning of Falstaff's semiotics [10], Hal's refusal is another reflection of his betrayal of the trust of the people and a seize, including his power and control of interpretation. In front of the absolute authority, Falstaff is no longer allowed to be interpreted. And it also confirms that those in power always seek to contain and curb their distribution [10]. Falstaff is defeated at gambling and his end seems predictable. Creating a character by not creating him, giving him life by destroying him [14]. At his end, his last words are fragmented and incoherent. And he seems a shrunken, dying old man, who is no longer able to hide behind fictional language as a clown [14]. This is a political setback and an irony. Shakespeare recognizes Falstaff's challenge to the existing political order, but also points out that his own limitations and stage in history inevitably lead to failure. Falstaff's defeat, however, does not represent the final setback for all resistance forces, that is what people need to think about.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, following the footsteps of history, this paper has discussed the origin of theater and a specific role-clowns. And these are closely related to the research of Shakespeare's plays and also provide great help and theoretical support for the in-depth study of Falstaff's story. In the process of shaping this plump clown image, Shakespeare's consideration of morality, class, and politics is worth exploring and analyzing rationally, which perhaps the author's most important intention instead of making fun and making people laugh. Instead of pressuring people to accept a particular point of view, humanist principles allow for a diversity of, and at times opposing, orientations in morality, philosophy, class and politics. In the case of Falstaff, the lack of a truly comprehensive understanding of a vital role not only leads to confusion and even misunderstanding about the work as a whole, but also affects the whole body of research surrounding that role. A clear and detailed understanding is an important prerequisite for showing and developing the value and charm of a character, which is the purpose of this article. However, the ideas and academic materials in this paper may not be enough to support the whole of Falstaff. There are many interesting perspectives to be discovered, such as linguistics, philosophical and psychological analysis, which can be studied and discussed in the future.

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