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NAME-CALLING AS POWER PLAY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *1 HENRY IV*

Frederick M. Burelbach

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me!" How often has that chant echoed over the playground? And yet we all know that names can hurt, and further, that name-calling is often used as a means of social control (Morgan *et al.* 3).

The main premise of this paper is that name-calling – as when youngsters call each other Fatty, Skinny, or Sissy – is a form of authorship as well as an instrument used in maintaining social norms. The name-caller is creating a specific role for the victim by use of a name with particular denotations, connotations, and assumed social values. By so doing, the name-caller is defining an appropriate scope of action or behavior, with expected patterns of response to external events – a plot, if you will – for the victim. The name is more than a "thumbnail character sketch" (Morgan 5); as the authors continue,

> a person's name and the various appellations which he acquires through life would be likely to have a considerable influence upon the kind of person he takes himself to be. A name would not perhaps be a *determining* feature of someone's personality, that is of the psychological basis of public versions of himself, but it seems reasonable to suppose that it is a basic datum to be managed by a person in his presentation system. (7)

Someone denominated Sissy, for example, can be expected – if only by the name-caller and his allies – to behave in certain ways when confronted by challenges, to run away and avoid conflict much as the Miles Glorious does in Plautine plays. In fact, the Sissy – because the name has a negative social valence – is apt to protest his courage as vigorously as does the Miles Gloriosus,.and thus complete the comparison.

The question arises whether and to what extent the act of naming precedes and creates the characterization or vice versa. Does Volpone in Jonson's play behave predatorily *because* of his vulpine naming, or did Jonson conceive of a predatory character before giving him the appropriate name, or were the conception and denomination simultaneous and mutually interacting? Charactonyms like Volpone and Spenser's Braggadoccio have obvious semiology, and, like the Sissy, these characters are stereotype-cast into roles limited to what the name reveals. Unlike real human beings, such characters don't have the flexibility to surprise us with unexpected deviations from type. This is expected and appropriate in allegory and satirical comedy, in which the point is to make undesirable characteristics obvious and ridiculous in their impotent failure to adapt to reality. And to this extent, the name-caller is an allegorist or satirist, an artist of the absurd, who attempts to impose on his victim the inhuman rigidity and ridiculousness of the character in a satirical comedy. The name-caller, whom Morgan *et al.* designate as a group leader and particular role in the group (115–116), is rewarded and the victim punished, by the laughter of the onlookers or audience, for his supposed violation of some social code or standard.

In the cases of Skinny or Fatty, the physiological deviation of the named victim from some presumed norm, possibly together with some other undesirable trait, may give rise to the name. As Andersen points out, "nicknames are crucially important in determining how one is viewed by others and how one views oneself" (88–89). How does the named person react – by attempting to correct the physiological condition toward the norm or by intensifying the physiological condition and thereby accepting the "role" defined by the name? Both possibilities have been discovered in practice by Morgan *et al.* (65, 71) together with another response – reciprocal name-calling – to which we shall return. In the case of the Sissy, the objective correlative of the name is not physiological but behavioral; however, similar contrasting reactions may result from the naming. The Sissy may attempt to prove his courage by some daring act or may become even more pusillanimous than before. The point significantly relates not only to the behavior of characters in plays, who frequently act out their names, not changing as a result of the name–calling, and so give us the concept of charactonyms. It also relates to audience response, an important concern of playwrights. For some members of the audience the presumably desired reaction of correcting one's behavior toward a norm might not occur. Instead the ridiculed behavior may persist and even intensify as a result of name–calling transference.

What happens when characters in a play — themselves already the limited creations of the author — call each other names? As mentioned, reciprocal name–calling is a very common way of managing the undesirable effects of the name (Morgan 67, 73, *et passim.*). Let us consider some examples from Shakespeare's **1 Henry IV**.

In this play there is an obvious play–within–the–play as Falstaff and Hal interchangeably role–play father and son (3.4.353–454). However, the play is full of "play," and thus corresponds to the "autonomous world" of children's play observed by Morgan *et al.* (2). We know much earlier in **1 Henry IV** that all of Hal's relationships with Falstaff are play–acting:

> I know you all, and will awhile uphold
> The unyok'd humour of your idleness.... (1.2.218–19)

Moreover, there are additional examples of role–playing in the situations where Hal and Poins rob the robbers (Falstaff *et al.*) (2.2) and run Francis the tapster ragged (2.4), and where Hal parodies a dialogue between Hotspur and his wife (2.4.113–121). Still further examples by other characters occur when Hotspur mimics an effete courtier (1.3.30–64) or imitates an epic bard (1.3.95–109), when Falstaff plays dead on the battlefield and later the conquering hero (5.4), and when Blount imitates the king in battle at Shrewsbury (5.3.1–13). In fact, one might say that the power of play–acting to effect responses in others and oneself is a major theme of this play. Role–playing joins name–calling as an instrument of social control; as seen above, both activities serve very practical functions of offense or defense, of situational definition. But there hangs about both activities something of the aura of the playground or schoolyard: both name–calling and role–playing, however functional, seem rather childish.

In this context we can observe a great deal of name–calling in the play. In 1.2 Poins calls Falstaff "Monsieur Remorse," "Sir John Sack and Sugar," and "chops," while Hal calls him "thou latter spring" and "All–hallown summer." In 2.2 Hal calls Falstaff "fat–guts" and "Sir John Paunch"; in 2.4, "woolsack" and "villain." Later in the same scene Hal and Falstaff exchange a volley of epithets:

> *Hal.* Why, thou clay–brain'd guts, thou knotty–pated fool, thou whoreson obscene greasy tallow–catch... this sanguine coward, this bed–presser, this horseback–breaker, this huge hill of flesh —
> *Fal.* 'Sblood, you starveling, you elf–skin, you dried neat's–tongue, you bull's pizzle, you stockfish...you tailor's yard, you sheath, you bow–case, you vile standing tuck! (2.4.251–274)

Still later in the scene at lines 358–9, Hal calls Falstaff "lean Jack" and "bare–bone" (using the oxymoronic naming technique that leads to calling a bald–headed man "Curly" or a tall man "Shorty"). While playing his own father (which introduces still another level of complexity and shows Hal's awareness of the social norms represented by his father), Hal refers to Falstaff as "that trunk of humours, that bolting hutch of beastliness, that swoll'n parcel of dropsie, that huge bombard of sack, that stuff'd cloakbag of guts, that roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly, that reverend vice, that grey iniquity, that father ruffian, that vanity in years...that old white–bearded Satan" (494–509). Hal and Falstaff are essentially calling each other Fatty and Skinny, but with much more imaginative variation and gusto. To this extent they are acting like adolescents; Morgan *et al.* found that "physical appearance seems to be of little interest to young children, of great importance to adolescents and only begins to fall from its position of central salience among young adults, where personal style becomes of greater importance" (41).

To the extent that that is all they are doing, Hal and Falstaff are each attempting to assert control or authority over each other. We know, partly from his begging a judge–ship in 2.2, but mostly from his conviction in **2 Henry IV** that Hal's ascension to the throne means promotion for himself, that Falstaff's chief intention in playing the clown to Hal is to gain such power over him that Hal will reward him when he becomes king. By casting Hal in the role of the skinny, sexually impotent youth (note the implications of the empty "sheath" and "bow–case," and a tailor was traditionally a weakling, so that his "yard" or penis would be worthless), Falstaff is implying his need for a strong father–figure – himself. (Morgan *et al.* report that among younger adolescents – around eleven or twelve – "greater odium attached to being too thin than to being too fat" [39], so Falstaff's gibes are intended to make Hal feel his disparate youth.) Dried neats'–tongue and stockfish (a dried, salted fish) have the same implication of sexual impotency, while "bull's–pizzle," although seeming to contradict this implication, goes together with "stockfish" and "starveling" to suggest lower social class, as a bull's pizzle was sometimes used as a whip by slave– and animal–drovers, stockfish was a cheap food for poorer people, and the result of going hungry leads to being "starveling." By casting Hal as of low social class, Falstaff makes Hal his inferior and implies Hal's need for Falstaff's protection in the social arena.

On the other hand, Hal seems to feel the need to assert control over Falstaff and all that he represents – gluttony, greed, and folly. Consequently, in his name–calling, Hal accentuates these characteristics and furthermore reduces Falstaff to a thing: a hill, a trunk, a bolting hutch, a parcel, a bombard, a cloak–bag. By emphasizing Falstaff's age in this context, Hal pokes fun at Falstaff's foolishness, which age should educate him out of. Whereas Falstaff suggests Hal's sexual impotence and childishness, Hal goes him one better and implies that Falstaff is a woman: most of the things that Hal calls Falstaff are containers for something, and therefore fulfill the female role of pregnancy. But what they are pregnant with are vile, silly, or inhuman things: humours, beastliness, dropsie, sack, guts, pudding. Not only is Falstaff a woman, he is a distorted one; he could give birth only to monsters. (The transformation of Falstaff into a woman through name–calling in this play may be the origin of his transformation into a woman through physical disguise in **The Merry Wives of Windsor**, where Falstaff becomes intimate with "woman's stuff" in the laundry–basket and dons woman's clothes to escape discovery.) Finally, as has often been pointed out, Hal calls Falstaff "vice," "iniquity," "ruffian," "vanity," and "Satan," reducing him to the limited role of a character in a morality play and thus even further asserting the power of authorship.

Shakespeare uses the name–calling to make another point. The audience is aware that Hal became good King Henry V, conqueror of France, and therefore the names that Falstaff calls him fail to characterize and delimit him. Hal has the ability to transcend the names, as real human beings, with their flexible adaptation to reality do, whereas Falstaff does not. He remains to the end of his "life" (as a dramatic character, he of course doesn't really live) what the names denote and connote him to be. Hal, on the other hand, manages his personality and character (as defined by Morgan *et al.* [4–5]); in **Henry V** he even adopts new, more powerful nicknames: Harry le Roy (4.1.48), Harry the king 4.3.53), and Harry of England (5.2.255). By indicating the difference between Hal's human flexibility and ability to control his nomination, on the one hand, and Falstaff's limitations on the other hand, which are appropriate to a character in a satirical comedy, Shakespeare not only shows Hal's superiority over Falstaff but also recommends to the audience an adaptive response to life.

Name–calling is an authorial power, by which the name–caller attempts to cast the victim in a particular role and plot. If the named person plays that role, he becomes as rigid and therefore comic and ridiculous as a character in a satirical comedy; he loses some of his humanity. If the named person rejects or transcends the role into which the name-caller attempts to place him, he demonstrates human flexibility and adaptiveness, and he moves out from the play-world into the real world as a model for human conduct.

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