

The episode in which Falstaff and the prince by turns undertake the role of king concludes with the prince's terse "I do; I will," spoken in response to Falstaff's plea not to banish him, and marks a major turning point in the dramatic narrative. Before this moment the play has focused alternately on the developing Percy rebellion and on the prince's adventures with his boon companions. By the end of this episode, however, the prince is looking forward to the meeting with his father at court, and thereafter the narrative orients itself toward the culminating Battle of Shrewsbury.

The play-acting episode has two distinct segments. First Falstaff enacts the king; then the prince "deposes" Falstaff and takes on the royal role himself. But this episode is only a small portion of a very long scene — one of the longest in Shakespeare — which consists of six distinct segments and a brief coda. Identification of the segments allows one to comprehend the relationship of the episode to the larger dramatic structure of which it is a part.

Analysis of Segments:

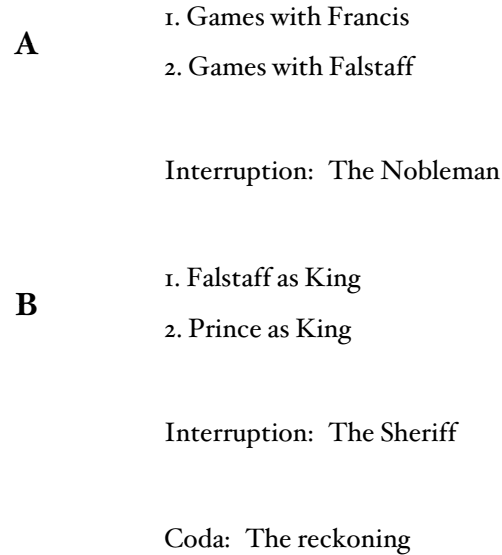
- 1) The scene begins with the game the Prince and Poins play on the tapster Francis, both demanding his attention at once.
- 2) Falstaff and his companions return empty-handed from the robbery, and the Prince and Poins tease Falstaff about his "bravery."
- 3) The Hostess interrupts their sports: a nobleman seeks the Prince.
- 4) Play-acting: Falstaff enacts the King.
- 5) Play-acting: the Prince enacts the King.
- 6) Offstage knocking interrupts their sports: the Sheriff seeks Falstaff.
- 7) Coda: the Prince examines Falstaff's tavern reckoning.

Symmetrical Patterning

The play-acting episode consists of two contrasting segments: Falstaff as king, the prince as king. This symmetrical pattern is repeated at various levels of organization. There are two parallel interruptions: the nobleman seeks the prince; the sheriff seeks Falstaff. These define two large movements: the teasing sports of the first half of the scene, interrupted by the nobleman; the

play-acting sports of the second half of the scene, interrupted by the sheriff.

Like the play-acting episode, the first half consists of two contrasting segments: the prince and Poins teasing Francis; the prince and Poins teasing Falstaff. This symmetrical patterning can be illustrated graphically:



Dramatic Climaxes

Analysis of the segments and identification of the symmetrical patterning help to reveal the way each half of the scene builds to a distinct dramatic climax. The scene opens with the prince entering alone, joined immediately by Poins, and begins to build as they play their game on Francis. The building action continues as Falstaff and his companions enter. The prince and Poins seek to expose Falstaff's cowardice, but Falstaff trumps them rhetorically with his tale of the lion and the true prince and his triumphant — and absurd — proclamation that he was a “coward on instinct” (2.4.256–66). This provides the dramatic climax of the first part of the scene.

After the Hostess interrupts the sports by announcing the nobleman at the door, the games resume with the play-acting episode. This builds through Falstaff's clowning and the prince's insults, reaching a second dramatic climax with the prince's chilling “I do; I will.” This is followed by the sheriff's interruption and the subsequent movement toward the scene's quiet end. The contrast between Falstaff's triumph at the climax of the first movement and

the prince's terse promise at the climax of the second movement measures the shift that has occurred and emphasizes a major turning point in the play.

Discussion Questions:

1. Consider the multiple ways in which the climax of the role-playing episode can be presented. Imagine yourself playing the Prince. At what moment does Hal first turn "serious" in his sporting? Examine the script of the play-acting episode closely and identify at least three different moments at which it would be possible for the actor to show the Prince first turning serious. How would each choice lead to a different understanding of the Prince?
2. The Hostess interrupts the games with word that a Nobleman is at the door asking for the prince. Later the Sheriff interrupts the games asking for Falstaff. In each case a figure of authority from the outside world — the Nobleman, the Sheriff — impinges on the tavern sports. Note that whereas the Nobleman remains offstage, the Sheriff comes onstage. How is this difference significant in relation to the dramatic trajectory of the scene?
3. The scene begins and concludes with two characters onstage (the Prince and Poins, the Prince and Peto). Trace the entrances and exits through the various segments, paying attention at each point to how many actors will be onstage at once. Does a significant pattern emerge? How is the pattern related to the dramatic structure of the scene?
4. Consider the way the scene is structured in contrasting pairs: Falstaff playing the King, the Prince playing the King, and so forth. Through this device, which is related to his training in rhetoric, Shakespeare generates meaning. At what other levels of organization is the principle of contrasting pairs employed? Consider the fundamental contrast between the young rivals Harry and Hotspur. Consider the contrast between Falstaff and the king as alternative father figures for the prince. What other character pairs can you identify? How do these pairings help to create meaning?