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### **Shakespeare's Paintings of the Prodigal Son – But There are no Paintings...**

In this paper, I will focus on the paintings of the prodigal son in Shakespeare's *2Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In *2 Henry IV* Falstaff refers to a prodigal son's painting as a possible decoration for the walls of the Hostess' tavern and in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* the Host refers to Falstaff's chamber as being all decorated with the same story from Luke's Gospel. However, paintings are not described.

The parable of the prodigal son has enjoyed an unprecedented iconographic afterlife ever since the Middle Ages: over the years the story of the prodigal's adventures and homecoming has become one of the most privileged visual narratives all over the Western World.

Ever since 1935 the parable of the prodigal son has been acknowledged as "the most frequently mentioned parable of the Gospels in the plays" (Noble, 1935) of Shakespeare. While research has focused on the paradigm of the prodigal son and its use for the description of characters and their behaviour, very little has been said on the prodigal's "absent pictures" in Shakespearian plots. We know that the prodigal son is the subject of the paintings, yet we don't exactly know what these paintings depict, nor what scenes are figured in them. To some degree they are "blank"/unekphrastic paintings that require the audience to project onto them what they think ought to be there, they demand the reader's meditation in order for the plays – namely Falstaff – to be understood. Because we don't know exactly what's in them, they offer an opportunity for a dynamic audience engagement in that they are free to "visualize" his/her own narrative of the prodigal son, the only influence upon them being the link between the picture and the play as well as its source in the Gospels. Thus, members of the audience are invited to project something highly idiosyncratic onto the text, they can weave their own experience of the "subject" (a picture they've seen in life or a sermon they might have heard in church) into the fiction. In short, they are encouraged to choose their own adventure.

The use to which Shakespeare puts visual objects such as the reference to prodigal son's paintings shows how visual art can contribute to a better understanding of the plays point to problematic aspects of Falstaff. In this way, visual criticism becomes part of literary criticism and art can be considered a form of literary commentary.