

The Character of Falstaff in Henry IV Part One

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The character of Falstaff was based upon a real historical personality, namely Sir John Oldcastle (c.1378-1417), High Sheriff of Herefordshire, who became Lord Cobham by marriage in 1409. Oldcastle was a lollard, and became a martyr of Protestantism after he was hanged and burnt as a heretic in 1417, even Foxe mentions him in his famous work "Actes and Monuments".(1)

The resemblance between him and Falstaff is not very strong, in fact the only similarity is that he was a friend of the historical Prince Hal. The negative aspects of his character came from poems and chronicles written by anti-Wycliffites and Papists, who were hostile towards him. The most important fabricators of his disrepute as a coward were the poet Hoccleve and chroniclers from Walsingham to Polydore Vergil. In the sixteenth century Oldcastle's reputation was rehabilitated by Protestant writers like Bale, Halle and Foxe.(2)

In the earliest acted versions of Henry IV Part One, Falstaff was called Oldcastle, but in the Epilogue to Part Two Shakespeare distinguishes the two figures. It was obviously a response to complaints from the descendants of Oldcastle, who were powerful nobles of Elizabeth's court.

Since the historical Oldcastle was a warrior he could not be unmilitary or fat. We also know that he died at the age of thirty-nine so he probably never became a "white-bearded Satan". It is rather his name that suggests the he was old, Shakespeare even puns on it when he calls him the "old lad of the castle" (Henry IV, Part One, I.2.41). The reason for these attributes of Falstaff is the mixing of the hostile tradition and features of the popular Morality Vice (both a clown and a villain).(3)

As we know, in the morality play the hero has to choose between good and evil. In this case the hero is Prince Hal and it is Falstaff who tries to draw him towards evil. (The

critic Dover Wilson even called 'Henry IV' Shakespeare's greatest morality play.)

There are several other elements of Falstaff's character: he is a witty parasite, a miles gloriosus (a soldier who is boasting of courage but avoids combat), like Parolles in All's Well That Ends Well) and also a fool. His quality as Fool is very important, because he shares not only some of the Fool's superficial features, like dexterity with words, mock moralizing, deliberate mistakings, absurd actions, but also the Fool's deeper significance as liberator from convention.(4)

We could also mention that the figure of Falstaff constitutes some kind of internal opposition to the ethical conventions, political priorities and structures of authority and power. This kind of 'opposition' represented by Falstaff is often compared with the other oppositional tendencies in the play: Falstaff's moral rebelliousness and illegality are seen as analogous to the political rebellion of the Percies.(5)

His attitude to authority is always parodic and satirical, his original lifestyle is a kind of answer to the pressures of social duty. He creates his own world and his own principles, which can be appealing and repulsive at the same time. His language and behaviour expresses the common sense of the good soldier Schweik against the suicidal violence of the military hero when he sets feasting against fighting and carnival against chivalry.

Falstaff as a whole is far greater than the sum of his parts (Vice, Parasite, Miles Gloriosus (Bragging Soldier), Fool), because his nature is unified of paradoxical opposites. He is vicious, but his vices are quite human. He exploits his dependants, but they remain attached to him. He lies, but he never expects his audience to believe it. He is always complaining about his age and corpulence, but he can act with the agility of youth when it is necessary.(6)

It is also difficult to answer whether he is a coward or not. On the one hand, he leads his men into danger and philosophizes coolly on the battlefield. On the other hand, as Poins foretells, he runs at Gad's Hill and boasts afterwards, having his sword hacked and his garments slubbered. We should also mention that the way he pretends to have killed Hotspur is one of the expected features of the Coward on the stage.(7)

The relationship between Falstaff and Prince Hal is also very interesting. At the end of Act II they rehearse Hal's excuses in the tavern. First, Falstaff, the King of Misrule plays King Henry (also a King of Misrule, because of his act of usurpation) and Hal plays himself in his twin roles as legitimate son to his father and 'spiritual son' to his 'tavern father', Falstaff. If we carefully examine their dialogue, we will find that some of the points Falstaff makes in comic form are repeated by the King himself two scenes later. Of course he takes the opportunity to praise himself too.(8)

At this point they change roles. Now the prince takes the part of his own father, and in that role criticizes himself and his weaknesses in the person of Falstaff. It becomes clear that Falstaff tends to be the Prince's 'vicious self', while we can find Prince Hal in Falstaff's character too. We could say that Hal is committed to the associations Falstaff personates by his conscious decision to separate himself from the illegality of his father's reign.

As this second play proceeds Hal 'deposes' his father, Falstaff and 'casts out his devil' by turning away from the old Vice. This part of their dialogue foreshadows Falstaff's rejection in the Second Part. Apparently, nowhere are Hal's position of aloneness and the isolation he feels made more clear than when he utters his banishment of Jack Falstaff and 'all the world'.(9)

Apart from the morality Vice, Falstaff embodies the tradition of carnival in folk culture. He is very similar to figures of the ancient mythology, like Bacchus or Silenus for preferring instinct and desire over reason and self-control. Being free of all the conventions, codes and moral ties that control us as members of a human society, Falstaff himself became a modern mythological hero.(10) His healthy appetite for physical pleasure instead of idealizing discipline and heroic sacrifice has always been sympathetic to the audience, just as much in Shakespeare's time as it is today.

Unlike the Prince, Falstaff was not a historical person, so Shakespeare had much more freedom at forming his character, while he had to be very careful not to spoil the myth while creating the Prince's personality. Actually, parts of Falstaff role, like the Puritan repentance, should belong to Prince Hal, but they were transferred to Falstaff in order to protect the good reputation of the Prince.

(The historical figure of Oldcastle could also influence Falstaff's Puritanism.)

Another possible approach of Falstaff's character is to describe him as an 'actor' and to say that all the components of his nature are just roles, which could be separable from his character.(11) If we accept this theory, we will realize how little we know about his real personality. Every role he plays is a kind of mask to conceal himself and he does not let us to see behind it.

On the one hand, if judged realistically, Falstaff is an inconsistent personality. On the other hand, we must not forget about the fact that he is a figure of a dramatic comedy, so the contradictions of his nature can be attributed to his 'Dramatic Ambiguity'.

In other words, Falstaff, though he is quite a 'living' character, is not like any single real man. But he is symbolically like life itself, the comedy of humanity is embodied in him. He expresses the spirit of fun we all need if we want to survive. When he runs away the fun is at him, when he does not run away, the fun is through him. The consistency lies not in the harmony between any of his actions, but in the whole function of providing happiness and a liberating irreverence.(12)

As we touched upon it above, Falstaff is a brilliant actor. Now, we could also mention the languages he uses: the cant of criminals, the accents of anti-Puritan parody and satire, the language of tavern and high-road, which all derive from popular culture.(13) This latter fact also proves his strong relations to popular traditions of the sixteenth century.

Finally, in order to complete the frame of Falstaff's story, we have to mention his necessary rejection at the end of the second part, the fall of the sinner and the tempter, the devil haunting Prince Hal, which was determined by the rules of morality:

"Shakespeare's audience enjoyed the fascination of Prince Hal's 'white-bearded Satan' for two whole plays, as perhaps no character ever been enjoyed before. But they knew, from the beginning that the reign of this marvellous Lord of Misrule must have an end, that Falstaff must be rejected by the Prodigal Prince, when the time for reformation came. And they no more thought of questioning or disapproving of that finale, than their ancestors would have thought of protesting against the vice being carried off to Hell at the end of the

interlude."(14)

1)

A. R. Humphreys : Falstaff

p.

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2)

Ibid.

p.

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3)

Ibid.

p.

224

4)

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p.

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5)

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p. 130

6)

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7)

Ibid.

8)

N. Sanders

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p. 30

9)

Ibid.

p.

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10)

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11)

Ibid.

p.

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12)

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13)

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14)

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