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Shakespeare's Falstaff as Parody

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I

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *parody* as "a composition in prose or verse in which the characteristic turns of thought and phrase in an author or class of authors are imitated in such a way as to make them appear ridiculous, especially by applying them to ludicrously inappropriate subjects; an imitation of a work more or less closely modelled on the original, but so turned as to produce a ridiculous effect." Arguably the most complex and dramatic parody of the English Renaissance is Shakespeare's *King Henry IV, Part 1*, with its central portrait of Falstaff, published in 1598 in a quarto now only a fragment (Q0 or Q1) and—in that same year—Q2, followed by Q3 in 1599; Q4 in 1604; Q5 in 1608; Q6 in the year of Shakespeare's death, 1613, as if in tribute to him, and Q7, possibly a second tribute, a year before the grand First Folio of 1623. In print—and likely on the stage as well—it was one of Shakespeare's first big hits, challenged only by *Richard III*.

For this, Falstaff must be given much of the credit; "No character in all drama has seemed so much a creature of real flesh and blood as this figment of a man's imagination," the play's editor, P. H. Davison, tells us.[1] His effect on audiences, and on us, is immense. He is, for instance, Harold Bloom's favorite character in the whole corpus of Shakespeare except for his rival Hamlet, and he surpasses Hamlet for Bloom in this: "The sage of Eastcheap inhabits Shakespearean histories but treats them like [has the power to transform them into] come-

dies."[2] Scorned by Price Hal in their opening lines together, his sheer vitality and wit make him Harry's equal and sustain the scene:

> Indeed you come near me now, Hal, for we that take purses go by the moon and the seven stars, and not 'By Phoebus, he, that wand'ring knight so fair.'[3] And I prithee, sweet wag, when thou art a king, as God save thy grace—'majesty' I should say, for grace thou wilt have none—[...]. Marry then, sweet wag, when thou art king let not us that are squires of the night's body be called thieves of the day's beauty. Let us be 'Diana's foresters', 'gentlemen of the shade', 'minions of the moon', and let men say we be men of good government, being governed, as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal. (1.2.11-15; 20-26)[4]

His quick repartee is heavily grounded in alliteration, repetition, and classical allusion that characterized euphuism, the sophisticated language of an earlier Elizabethan court; from the start, he is parodic.

Such forceful, clever talent will, however, come to a sad end. While he is a center of *1 Henry IV*, balancing the heroic Hotspur as a choice between serviceable action and indulgent sloth as directions for Prince Harry, he will see young Harry only twice in all of *2 Henry IV* and, by *Henry V*, be pushed offstage altogether, his death reported in the earthy London dialect of an Eastcheap hostess, Mistress Quickly:

> He's in Arthur's bosom, if ever men went to Arthur's bosom. A made a finer end, and went away an it had been any christom child. A parted ev'n just between twelve and one, ev'n at the turning o'th'tide—for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his finger's end, I knew there was but one way. For his nose was as sharp as a pen, and a babbled of green fields. 'How now, Sir John?' quoth I. 'What, man! Be o' good cheer.' So a cried out, 'God, God, God', three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him a should not think of God; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So a bade me lay more clothes on his feet. I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone. Then I felt to his knees, and so up'ard and up'ard, and all was as cold as any stone. (*H5* 2.3.9-23)

Falstaff's death has inspired her too to alliteration and repetition and an allusion to the pseudo-classical King Arthur, but the speech is euphuism flattened out, a paltry imitation, a parody, of Falstaff's. Still

it is superior in depth of feeling and insight to Falstaff's later epitaph, provided on the French battlefield when the Welsh captain Fluellen says to the English captain Gower in a derogatory comparison to Cleitus, the friend of Alexander the Great, that "Harry Monmouth, being in his right wits and his good judgements, turned away the fat knight with the great-belly doublet—he was full of jests and gipes and knaveries and mocks—I have forgot his name" (*H5* 4.7.38-42). Mockery (or parody) has reduced the knight who was once the prince's own companion to solipsism. I want to trace how this happens.

II

To begin, we need to recognize that the name and character of Prince Hal's fat knight Sir John Fall/staff—what some critics have thought to be a pun on Shake/spear[5]—is a parody of the historic English past. In the English chronicles, a Sir John Falstolfe is erroneously portrayed as a cowardly commander in the French wars as in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 1*, where his flight results in the wounding and capture of the brave Talbot (1.1.130-40). Even more importantly—and more tellingly—textual traces, such as a reference to Falstaff as "my old lad of the castle" (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.37), strongly suggest that in an earlier version of the play, the character we know as Falstaff was named Sir John Oldcastle. The historic, authentic Oldcastle (c. 1378-1417), High Sheriff of Herefordshire made Lord Cobham in 1409, was a knight who served Henry IV in war against France and against Wales; according to Holinshed, he was "A valiant capteine and a hardie gentleman" who was "highly in the king's favour."[6] But he was also a Lollard, part of a splinter religious group seen as forerunners to English Protestantism and advocates of a vernacular Bible and therefore critics of Henry's Catholic church. Although Henry IV treated Oldcastle at first with tolerance, he later sent him to the Tower of London where he was condemned as a heretic by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Subsequently, Oldcastle escaped and was thought to be leading

his own forces against Henry when he was captured and, in 1417, hanged in chains and then burned on the gallows.[7]

Oldcastle's reputation long outlived the man, although it developed along two opposing paths of tradition. The path of anti-Wycliffite orthodoxy was hostile, promulgated by the poet Hoccleve,[8] in popular political verses, and in chronicles from that of Walsingham to that of Polydore Vergil. According to this line of thought, Oldastle was frequently absent from Henry's wars and thought a coward; his Lollardism was seen as presumptuous and even diabolical, and his friendship with the King restricted to Henry's unregenerate early years.[9] One of Falstaff's best-known speeches, his self-defense of counterfeiting death on the battlefield to protect himself against further attack, can be seen as a direct parody of the Lollard Oldcastle's reputed cowardice:

> Embowelled? If thou embowel me today, I'll give you leave to powder me, and eat me too, tomorrow. 'Sblood, 'twas time to counterfeit, or that hot termagant Scot had paid me, scot and lot [in full] too. Counterfeit? I lie, I am no counterfeit. To die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man. But to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed. The better part of valour is discretion, in the which better part I have saved my life. Zounds, I am afraid of this gunpowder Percy, though he be dead. How if he should counterfeit too, and rise? By my faith, I am afraid he would prove the better counterfeit. Therefore I'll make him sure; yea, and I'll swear I killed him. Why may not he rise as well as I? Nothing confutes me but eyes, and nobody sees me. Therefore, sirrah, [*stabbing* HOTSPUR] with a new wound in your thigh, come you along with me. (*1H4*, 5.4.110-25)

Falstaff's choice here of religious oaths—"Sblood," "By my faith," referring to the blood and wound of Christ on the cross—is carried out of the common lexicon of oaths into the vision of the resurrection not of Christ but of Hotspur and, as a consequence, Falstaff will stab him in the thigh, much as Christ was wounded on the Cross. The parodic character Falstaff, that is, uses parodic religious language common to Lollards. Since the Lollard faith was opposed to that of the Catholic church, the formulary they use can be seen as religious par-

ody of the dominant faith as well as a part of their own. So a parody of the Catholic tradition is linked to Oldcastle.

The Protestant tradition, though, was more favorable. According to the Tudor Protestant view of Oldcastle, he was an early martyr to their cause. This is the position promulgated by John Bale in his *Brefe Chronycle Concernynge [. . .] Syr Iohn Oldcastell* (1544), followed by the chronicler Edward Hall and reprinted nearly verbatim by John Foxe in his *Actes and Monuments* which came eventually to include a long "Defence of the Lord Cobham" and became the basis for a play by Anthony Munday, Michael Drayton, Robert Wilson, and Richard Hathaway. Here Oldcastle becomes a hero, a constant servant of God, a scholar of philosophy and theology and a popular and virtuous leader; and while "his youth was full of wanton wildness before he knew the scriptures," according to Bale, his conversion made him a candidate for martyrdom.[10] In Shakespeare, it is Falstaff who makes *himself* a 'martyr'—alongside his trickery on the battlefield, first feigning death and then taking credit for killing the dead Hotspur whom Price Hal has already slain. Falstaff as mocker, but also Falstaff as Shakespeare's agent for parody, is thus sufficiently complex that he can serve to parody both of the traditions assigned in Shakespeare's own day to the historic Oldcastle.

But this extended parody is more complicated still. *1 Henry IV* was first staged in 1596 when William Brooke, the seventh Lord Cobham, served Elizabeth I as her Lord Chamberlain[11] and, until his death in 1597, was not only the Queen's overseer of court activity but the patron of Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Why might Shakespeare initially, at any rate, cut so close to the past quarrels over Cobham's ancestors? We could argue that it was precisely the Lord Chamberlain's presence that first suggested itself to Shakespeare as a possible parodic choice within his English chronicle history plays, and that he insisted that this remain apparent when he added the line about "my old lad of the castle" in the first moments of Falstaff and Prince Hal on stage. It is after all, a most peculiar line, for the setting is a tavern in Eastcheap, not a castle, and the topic of con-

versation, highway robbery, hardly the custom of castle conversation. Such a line, with its resonances for any alert reader, moreover, is retained for the first quarto printing in 1598, a year after Lord Cobham's death. Yet it might have been no safer but just as deliciously parodic in 1598, since Brooke's son Sir Henry is joined to Falstaff in a private letter from the Earl of Essex in February of that year when young Harry Cobham, of the same given name, is referred to as "S^{r} Io. Falstaff."[12] Much of the real comedy of the *Henry IV* plays, then, what Harold Bloom sees as its successful marker, is a deliberate, and fairly open, result of Shakespearean parody.

III

The early framing of Falstaff within Oldcastle is important, for it contains the various strands of parodic development that multiply as the two-part play of *Henry IV* progresses. Tightly interwoven, these strands are just what makes Falstaff so robustly comic and universal, yet so pointedly individual, as he is also made a particular representative of a broader political and social commentary of Tudor England through various literary traditions. One such tradition is that of the *miles gloriosus*, the Plautine braggart soldier that Elizabethans traced back to Plautine farce:

> There is Percy. If your father will do me any honour, so; if not, let him kill the next Percy himself. I look to be either earl or duke, I can assure you, (5.4.135-37)

Falstaff tells Prince Hal plainly at the conclusion of the battle of Shrewsbury. Hal is not only incredulous, but plainly corrective. "Why, Percy I killed myself," he tells Fat Jack, "and saw thee dead." The exposure of counterfeiting and, in turn, Falstaff's cowardice, might bring confession from most soldiers, but it hardly penetrates a literary braggart soldier: "Didst thou?" Falstaff replies scornfully.

> Didst thou? Lord, Lord, how this world is given to lying! I grant you I was down and out of breath, and so was he; but we rose both at an instant, and fought a long hour by Shrewsbury clock. If I may be believed, so; if not, let them that should reward valour bear the sin upon their own heads. I'll take't on my death I gave him this wound in the thigh. If the man were alive and would deny it, zounds, I would make him eat a piece of my sword. (5.4.135-46)

Falstaff, unlike the traditional braggart (who brags), claims the other person is lying (not part of the braggart convention). Such a brazen retort, which attempts to turn lying away from the liar, can thus be seen as a parody of the braggart soldier's pronouncements. Shakespeare shows the barrenness of Falstaff's denial by giving him the same language he has already used—the wound in the thigh, the expletive "zounds"—so that he displays not only his continual acts of betrayal but also his ignorance of what he says and thus his actual limitation in conceptualization and in language. Falstaff as braggart soldier is given the customary come-uppance through parody of the act and the language that embodies it.

This literary parody is broadened into social commentary. It is an observation J. Dover Wilson made back in 1944 in his justly famous book *The Fortunes of Falstaff*.

> He is the Old Soldier on the make, or in a state of perpetual repair, and Shakespeare exhibits him busy upon a number of disreputable devices for raising money, which were attributed, in whispers, or even at times in printed books, to old soldiers in Elizabeth's reign, most of them connected with the recruitment of troops. For, there being neither standing army nor professional soldiery, an officer of those days, that is a gentlemen bearing Her Majesty's commission, had to impress his company before he could command it.[13]

Falstaff is more than a gentleman in *1 Henry IV*; he is a landed knight. When he is asked to recruit troops, he will see it as an opportunity to pocket money for himself even as he seems to aid the King's cause against the rebellious Percies. His actions begin, however, as a literary parody, for he repeats and mocks an earlier scene, in which Poins

teaches Falstaff how to combine recruitment and robbery as he sets forth his plan to steal from luckless—and innocent—people performing their well-intentioned religious and commercial duties. "My lads," Poins says,

> tomorrow morning by four o'clock early, at Gads Hill, there are pilgrims going to Canterbury with rich offering, and traders riding to London with fat purses. I have visors for you all; you have horses for yourselves. Gadshill lies tonight in Rochester. I have bespoke supper tomorrow night in Eastcheap. We may do it as secure as sleep. If you will go, I will stuff your purses full of crowns; if you will not, tarry at home and be hanged. (1.2.111-18)

Falstaff is the first eagerly to rise to the bait. "Hear ye, Edward, if I tarry at home and go not, I'll hang you for going" (1.2.119-20). Robbing for food and drink exposes Falstaff's self-indulgence as well as his demeaned sense of an adventure, even a campaign, and this should be made clear to him the following morning when Poins and Prince Hal reveal that they have stolen from the thieves, turning those who would steal into those who are stolen from: confidence men to be unconfident, criminals turned into victims.

In this way Falstaff is defeated. But only temporarily. Later he converts Poins's escapade with Hal into a caper of his own choosing, gathering his own troops for the more serious war through actions that reach out to parody Elizabethan practice. As Wilson puts it, "the favorite way for a captain to make money, one notorious enough to receive special mention in an act of Parliament passed in 1557, was to enroll well-to-do men, known to be reluctant to serve, and then allow them to buy themselves out at the highest price they could be induced to pay" (84-85). Falstaff does precisely this en route to Shrewsbury, but in a language that allows Shakespeare to parody both military language by deflating it and Falstaff's knightly purpose by deflating that:

> If I be not ashamed of my soldiers, I am a soused gurnet [pickled fish]. I have misused the King's press damnably. I have got in exchange of one hun-

> dred and fifty soldiers three hundred and odd pounds. I press me none but good householders, yeomen's sons, enquire me out contracted [engaged to be wed] bachelors, such as had been asked twice on the banns, such a commodity of warm slaves as had as lief hear the devil as a drum, such as fear the report of a caliver worse than a struck fowl or a hurt wild duck. I pressed me none but such toasts and butter [such weaklings], with hearts in their bellies no bigger than pins' heads, and they have bought out their services; and now my whole charge consists of ensigns, corporals, lieutenants, gentlemen of companies—slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth, where the glutton's dogs licked his sores—and such as indeed were never soldiers, but discarded unjust servingmen, younger sons to younger brothers, revolted tapsters, and ostlers trade-fallen, the cankers of a calm world and a long peace, ten times more dishonourable-ragged than an old feazed ensign, and such have I to fill up the rooms of them as have bought out their services, that you would think that I had a hundred and fifty tattered prodigals lately come from swine-keeping, from eating draff and husks. A mad fellow met me on the way and told me I had unloaded all the gibbets and pressed the dead bodies. No eye hath seen such scarecrows. (4.2.11-34)

This speech parodies religious thought and belief once again: "damnably"; "as ragged as Lazarus"; "prodigals lately come from swine-keeping"; "No eye hath seen." It not only parodies the Christian life militant but mocks and satirizes the religious-minded Lollard Oldcastle who betrayed (and then early on departed from) his King Henry. That Oldcastle may be redefined here as a braggart soldier continues when later Falstaff is so cowardly that he fears danger to his own life while not caring at all for his recruits. On the fields of Shrewsbury, he acknowledges to himself that

> Though I could scape shot-free at London, I fear the shot here. Here's no scoring but upon the pate.—Soft, who are you?—Sir Walter Blunt. There's honour for you. Here's no vanity. I am as hot as molten lead, and as heavy too. God keep lead out of me; I need no more weight than mine own bowels. I have led my ragamuffins where they are peppered; there's not three of my hundred and fifty left alive, and they are for the town's end, to beg during life. (5.3.30-37)

Joining the name "Blunt" and the personal trait of "honour" in an oxymoronic fashion, Falstaff echoes an earlier scene where *honor* is not contrasted to *vanity*, as here—"Vanity of vanities, saith the

Lord"—but is, rather, made willfully dialogic in such a way as to confirm his cowardice through parodying catechism:

> What need I be so forward with him that calls not on me? Well, 'tis no matter; honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on? How then? Can honour set-to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery, then? No. What is honour? A word. What is in that word 'honour'? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon. And so end my catechism. (5.1.128-39)

The sutcheon or heraldic shield of honour is reduced from its aristocratic and military significance to an empty word—a word arguably misused, at that—just as the word *honor* is reduced through a parody of humanist debate into insignificance much like the humanists' earlier—and still famous—praise and dispraise of folly written by Erasmus, a wellspring of humanism, of humanist form and humanistic linguistic study. It is a speech that would appeal especially to students at the Inns of Court in their debates and plays, lending it still more parodic significance, while all the time redounding on Oldcastle and on the truth, record and interpretation of chronicle history and its translation through the language of drama and play.

IV

"Falstaff is indeed a rich amalgam, a world of comic ingredients," A. R. Humphreys writes in his New Arden edition of *1 Henry IV*; "Of these the most important is the morality Vice, the ensnarer of youth."[14] He cites references to the morality play idiom—"iniquity, ruffian, vanity in years" (xlii)—and sees in Falstaff three of the seven deadly sins that often accompanied the morality plays so popular in the Tudor England of Shakespeare's youth: "gluttony, idleness, and lechery" (xlii). It is in this tradition which Shakespeare parodies through Falstaff that we see Fat Jack following a line of predecessors

of note: he brags like Sensual Appetyte, or Ambidexter in *Cambises* (1569), or Huanebango in George Peele's *Old Wives Tale*; he resembles Lust, Sturdiness, and Inclination in *The Trial of Treasure*; he shares features of Incontinence in *The Longer Thou Livest*; and he has both the greed and cowardly instincts of Dericke in *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, a popular anonymous play of the 1580s (xli). But it is the Vice of greed that most characterizes Falstaff, and characterizes him most often, in which the literary joke—itself a kind of parody—is that he tempts not Prince Hal but, and repeatedly, himself.

Falstaff's natural habitat is significant: it is not only Boars Head Tavern, where greed, drunkenness, and lechery seem the order of the day (and night), but Eastcheap, best known to Shakespeare's audience as the place for meat and drink, what Wilson calls "the London centre at once of butchers and cookshops" (26). He cites as evidence the poet John Lydgate, "writing in the reign of Henry V" the poem *London Lyckpenny*:

> Then I hyed me into Estchepe;
> One cryes 'rybbes of befe and many a pye';
> Pewter pots they clattered on a heap;
> There was a harp, pype, and minstrelsy. (26)

When the play's geography expands, at least by allusion, it still rings this single chord. Hal calls Falstaff a "Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly," an ox that is roasted whole with sausage stuffing, a custom at the annual fairs held at Manningtree, Essex. Poins extends allusion to Sir John's broad (and insatiable) girth by marking the calender: "How doth the Martlemas, your master?" he asks Bardolph.[15]

Martlemas, the feast of St. Martin, celebrated on November 11, was at the time of year, fodder being scarce, when fattened beasts were killed off and salted down for the winter, the season of huge banquets. "In calling [Falstaff] a 'Martlemas,'" Wilson notes, "Poins is at once likening [his] enormous proportions to the prodigality of fresh-killed meat which the feast brought, and acclaiming his identity with

Riot and Festivity in general" (30). Thus Vice slides through parody into a deadly sin and on into the topsy-turvy world of Carnival, Riot at its most extreme in Shakespeare's culture, a time, Jean E. Howard reminds us, when "rulers are temporarily displaced and the body's pleasures (eating, drinking, breaking wind, having sex) are celebrated before the arrival of abstemious Lent."[16] Prince Hal would go much farther. He sees Falstaff enjoying Carnival throughout the day and throughout the year. It is the focus of the first lines in the play: "Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon," he remarks even as they first come on stage,

> that thou hast forgotten to demand that truly which thou wouldst truly know. What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping-houses [brothels], and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta, I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of the day. (1.2.2-10)

The question had seemed a simple one that the Prince is answering—"Now, Hal, what time of day is it, lad?" (1.2.1)—and it may be this very coziness of the request that prompts Hal's disdain. But Hal is also ascribing to Falstaff the sins of gluttony and sloth in instructive ways that the knight fails to see but, as audience, we should. By giving Falstaff a seductive rhetoric, Shakespeare is able to extend his complicated parody with undeniable vitality and charm that, in turn, can erode the audience's sense of right and wrong before Poins clarifies matters by inviting Falstaff to contemplate the Gads Hill robbery the better to feed his ever-present appetite.

Even when the robber Falstaff is robbed in turn by Hal and Poins in disguise, his urgent gluttony remains, transformed into a third deadly sin of pride.

> PRINCE HARRY What's the matter?
> FALSTAFF What's the matter? There be four of us here have ta'en a thousand pound this day morning.
> PRINCE HARRY Where is it, Jack, where is it?

FALSTAFF Where is it? Taken from us it is. A hundred upon poor four of us.
PRINCE HARRY What, a hundred, man?
FALSTAFF I am a rogue if I were not at half-sword [dueling closely] with a dozen of them, two hours together. I have scaped by miracle. I am eight times thrust through the doublet, four through the hose, my buckler cut through and through, my sword hacked like a handsaw. *Ecce signum* [Behold the evidence]. I never dealt better since I was a man. All would not do. A plague of all cowards. (2.5.143-56)

The pride of the Vice is what even permits Falstaff to pretend to be King Henry IV—to parody a ruler in meting out justice (on himself) and in advising Hal (in another topsy-turvy act of carnival), excusing and then eulogizing himself as

A goodly, portly man, i'faith, and a corpulent; of a cheerful look, a pleasing eye, and a most noble carriage; and, as I think, his age some fifty, or, by'r Lady, inclining to threescore. And now I remember me, his name is Falstaff. If that man should be lewdly given, he deceiveth me; for, Harry, I see virtue in his looks. 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. Him keep with; the rest banish. (2.5.384-91)

Falstaff is tempted to this modulation of euphuism because he buries his ambition in language which, if not always royal, is always identified with the upper class, and might have suggested the aristocratic, courtly language of the original Oldcastle.

V

Braggart, Vice, Sin, Carnival: such literary parodies pave the way for the most encompassing literary parody in which Falstaff stars: that on the prodigal son play, the reduction of the morality play by sixteenth-century Tudor humanists into moral interlude. Wilson cites as typical of this form of literature an early specimen, the play *Youth* written around 1520.

The plot, if plot it can be called, is simplicity itself. The little play opens with a dialogue between Youth and Charity. The young man, heir to his father's

> land, gives insolent expression to his self-confidence, lustihood, and contempt for spiritual things. Whereupon Charity leaves him, and he is joined by Riot, that is to say wantonness, who presently introduces him to Pride and Lechery. The dialogue then becomes boisterous, and continues in that vein for some time, much no doubt to the enjoyment of the audience. Yet, in the end, Charity reappears with Humility; Youth repents; and the interlude terminates in the most seemly fashion imaginable. (18)

Wilson finds in these lines of Riot "the very note of Falstaff's gaiety":

> Huffa! Huffa! who calleth after me?
> I am Riot full of jollity.
> My heart is as light as the wind,
> And all on riot is my mind,
> Wheresoever I go. (18)

In this play Riot has the quick wit, and quick tongue, of the later Falstaff; he also commits highway robbery; he jests about the deed and invites a young friend to a tavern to enjoy the spoils: "Thou shalt haue a wench to kysse Whansoeuer thou wilte" (19). It is meeting up with Good Counsel that saves Youth at the critical moment, just as it is Prince Hal who attempts (but fruitlessly) to transform Falstaff.

Poins introduces the idea of repentance in *1 Henry IV* when he meets Falstaff for the first time in the play—

> What says Monsieur Remorse? What says Sir John, sack-and-sugar Jack? How agrees the devil and thee about thy soul, that thou soldest him on Good Friday last, for a cup of Madeira and a cold capon's leg? (1.2.99-103)—

and it is but a short time later, after he has been exposed in his cowardice at Gads Hill, Kent, and given another chance when he is asked, as a knight, to muster a company of men and prepares them for the Battle of Shrewsbury, that he first admits a sense of guilt:

> Bardolph, am I not fallen away vilely since this last action? Do I not bate? Do I not dwindle? Why, my skin hangs about me like an old lady's loose gown. I am withered like an old apple-john. Well, I'll repent, and that suddenly, while I am in some liking. I shall be out of heart shortly, and then I shall have no strength to repent. An[d] I have not forgotten what the inside of a

> church is made of, I am a peppercorn, a brewer's horse—the inside of a church! Company, villainous company, hath been the spoil of me. (3.3.1-9)

But the sheer exuberance of this rhetoric of repentance, and its early association with the need for and absence of sufficient food and drink makes the whole speech suspect. It is, clearly, a parody of repentance. And so it is, predictably, a repentance short-lived.

> BARDOLPH Sir John, you are so fretful you cannot live long.
> FALSTAFF Why, there is it. Come, sing me a bawdy song, make me merry. (3.3.10-12)

It is matched by the false repentance that concludes his part in the play, after Hal has forgiven his lie on the battlefield concerning the death of Hotspur. Alone as he exits, he is considerably more honest with himself and simultaneously more parodic of the repentance play of the humanists:

> I'll follow, as they say, for reward. He that rewards me, God reward him. If I do grow great, I'll grow less; for I'll purge, and leave sack, and live cleanly, as a nobleman should do. (5.4.155-157)

Repentance is finally forced on Falstaff; it is not a normal choice, but a legal (and seemingly just) imperative, given by the Lord Chief Justice who, following him, at first admonishes him—"Have you your wits? Know you what 'tis you speak?"—and then sentences him—"Go carry Sir John Falstaff to the Fleet [prison]" (*2H4* 5.5.43-44; 84-85). Yet, like boxes within boxes, this too is parodied by the Epilogue that immediately follows, in which the actor playing Falstaff, Will Kemp, mocks both the literary practice of epilogue and the particular portrayal of Falstaff:

> If you look for a good speech now, you undo me; for what I have to say is of mine own making, and what indeed I should say will, I doubt [fear], prove mine own marring [...]. Oldcastle died a martyr, and this is not the man. (Epilogue 3-6; 27)

Gulling Prince Hal at first, Falstaff in the Epilogue would gull the audience, would gull us. All of what he complexly parodies—braggart soldier, vice, sin, carnival, repentant—he puts back into the framework of Oldcastle, even as he denies it. By recalling Oldcastle, he makes himself, as literary parody, into a historical parody, and the whole exercise of chronicle history plays subject to parody, too.

VI

As if in summary of all such parodying, Harold Bloom claims to have seen Falstaff staged as "a cowardly braggart, a sly instigator to vice, a fawner for the Prince's favor, a besotted old scoundrel" (283). But this is only one of two possible kinds of parody. Matthias Bauer has written to me, electronically, that "There seem to be basically two kinds of parodies, even though the individual text may very well be a mixture: on the one hand, there are texts which look at their models with skepticism and hold them up to ridicule it with regard to its forms, its ideas, or intended effect," as we have just seen. Referring to Margaret Rose's work *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*, he goes on to say "But then there are the other parodic texts [...] in which parody serves to praise or celebrate the model at least as much as to ridicule it."[17] Just so with Falstaff: the very passages we have cited as the first kind of parody are, for some critics at least, clearly parody of the second kind. Thus Anthony Burgess claims in his book on Shakespeare that

> The Falstaffian spirit is a great sustainer of civilization. It disappears when the state is too powerful and when people worry too much about their souls [!]. [...] There is little of Falstaff's substance in the world now, and, as the power of the state expands, what is left will be liquidated.[18]

Bloom agrees.

> Falstaff's irreverence is life-enhancing [...]. Falstaff's festival of language cannot be reduced or melted down. Mind in the largest sense, more even

> than wit, is Falstaff's greatest power; who can settle which is the more intelligent consciousness, Hamlet's or Falstaff's? For all its comprehensiveness, Shakespearean drama is ultimately a theater of mind and what matters most about Falstaff is his vitalization of the intellect, in direct contrast to Hamlet's conversion of the mind to the vision of annihilation. (282-83)

Indeed, his dynamism and his inventiveness are contagious. Falstaff's greatest champion, Maurice Morgann, wrote in the later eighteenth century a whole book to defend Falstaff as courageous rather than cowardly, but his strongest and most convincing argument rests not on Falstaff's actions but on his language:

> To me [...] it appears that the leading quality in Falstaff's character, and that from which all the rest take their colour, is a high degree of wit and humour, accompanied with great natural vigour and alacrity of mind. [...] Laughter and approbation attend his greatest excesses; and, being governed visibly by no settled bad principle or ill design, fun and humour account for and cover all.[19]

Style, that is, can override substance. Serious ideas may be diminished or even erased if their examination is funny enough. Seen this way, parody is not a means of translating ideas but a means of overturning them. This is not a matter of means overcoming ends but of means becoming both means and ends, turning upside-down along the way the cherished beliefs in language taught by the humanists who, posing that language should be transparently related to substance, nevertheless saw substance as moral, educative, and finally irrevocable.

It must seem peculiar to us, if not downright wrong, to give to parody such potency. It must seem to others, too, for their ways of justifying their own responses openly display a kind of nervous wriggling. Algernon Charles Swinburne, for instance, sees a morality of the heart and of the imagination, which he assigns to Falstaff, as superior to mere social—and one must read religious—morality when dealing with Falstaff.[20] Harold Bloom excuses Falstaff's magnificent rhetoric because "his magnificent language [fails] to persuade anyone of anything" and so is essentially good harmless fun (275). For the Victorian critic John Bailey, Falstaff's humour "dissolve[s] morality"

and, furthermore, teaches us through his amoral wit which makes him a mirror of ourselves: "Not a man of us but is conscious in himself of some seed that might have grown into Falstaff's joyous and victorious pleasure in the life of the senses. There we feel, but for the grace of God, and but for our own inherent weakness and stupidity, go we,"[21] and so his educative effect excuses him. As for A. C. Bradley, the leading Shakespearean critic in the first part of the twentieth century, whom Bloom would revive as such in the first part of the twenty-first, Falstaff

> will make truth appear absurd by solemn statements, which he utters with perfect gravity and which he expects nobody to believe; and honour, by demonstrating that it cannot set a leg, and that neither the living nor the dead can possess it; and law, by evading all the attacks of its highest representative and almost forcing him to laugh at his own defeat; and patriotism, by filling his pockets with the bribes offered by competent soldiers who want to escape service, while he takes in their stead the halt and maimed and gaolbirds; and duty, by showing how he labours in his vocation—of thieving; and courage, alike by mocking at his own capture of Colevile and gravely claiming to have killed Hotspur; and war, by offering the Prince his bottle of sack when he is asked for a sword; and religion, by amusing himself with remorse at odd times when he has nothing else to do; and the fear of death, by maintaining perfectly untouched, in the face of immanent peril and even while he feels the fear of death, the very same power of dissolving it in persiflage that he shows when he sits at ease in his inn. These are the wonderful achievements which he performs, not with the sourness of a cynic, but with the gaiety of a boy. And therefore, we praise him, we laud him, for he offends none but the virtuous, and denies that life is real or life is earnest, and delivers us from the oppression of such nightmares, and lifts us into the atmosphere of perfect freedom.[22]

Bradley casts such a wide net in collecting Falstaff's humour that he fails to note what gives force to his remarks and fascination to his role: Falstaff's chief rhetorical technique, like his singularly seductive character, depends on his ingenuity, his resilience. Nowhere is this more evident than when Hal confronts Falstaff with hard evidence that undermines his rhetoric about danger, heroism, and suffering at Gads Hill.

PRINCE HARRY We two saw you four set on four, and bound them, and were masters of their wealth.—Mark now how a plain tale shall put you down.—Then did we two set on you four, and, with a word, outfaced you from your prize, and have it; yea, and can show it you here in the house. And Falstaff, you carried your guts away as nimbly, with as quick dexterity, and roared for mercy, and still run and roared, as ever I heard bull-calf. What a slave art thou, to hack thy sword as thou hast done, and then say it was in fight! What trick, what device, what starting-hole canst thou now find out to hide thee from this open and apparent shame?

POINS Come, let's hear, Jack; what trick hast thou now?

FALSTAFF By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye. Why, hear you, my masters. Was it for me to kill the heir-apparent? Should I turn upon the true prince? Why, thou knowest I am as valiant as Hercules; but beware instinct. The lion will not touch the true prince—instinct is a great matter. I was now a coward on instinct. I shall think the better of myself and thee during my life—I for a valiant lion, and thou for a true prince. (2.5.234-53)

This particular passage, Wilson recalls, reminded Samuel Johnson in a conversation with Boswell about the comic actor Samuel Foote to remark that "One species of wit he has in an eminent degree, that of escape. You drive him into a corner with both hands; but he's gone, Sir, when you are thinking you have got him—like an animal that jumps over your head." Wilson comments, "This exactly describes the kind of wit in which Falstaff excelled, and the game which the Prince and Poins play time and again with him. The quarry always succeeds in evading them; but never does he put his escape-wit to more adroit use than on this occasion. To them the crowning lie is completely unexpected and quite unanswerable" (56). The adroitness must be admired, it is true; there is some cause for seeing initial sentimentality. But a good hard look will show that Falstaff's wit subscribes not merely to inventiveness but, finally, pays allegiance to solipsism. It is wit which relies on the dictum not of Tudor humanists but of the latter-day Humpty Dumpty: "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean."[23] Such solipsism may seem to be its own reward; but it is also its own stark limitation. When denotative words can be

scrambled into any number of connotative meanings, language ceases to function in any reliable way.

Left to his own device, Falstaff is solipsistic. Shakespeare is not; and what prevents him is the reliance on parody. Parody provides a resource against which a statement (or speech or trait or event) may not merely be comprehended but against which it may be measured. It ties social communication to shared understanding. It gives to the speaker relational significance and definition. Remove such bases for language, and shaping forces—in thought, character, and event as well as in language—become indefinable. This is what captain Fluellen sees and passes along in his conversation with Captain Gower. The "fat knight [who is] full of jests and gipes and knaveries and mocks" slips into solipsism, playing with linguistic signifiers, but in the creation of Falstaff, Shakespeare realizes that parody signifies. It is the underside of parody that renders a character, a speech, utterly blank and useless. The many literary parodies in the *Henry IV* plays, like the framework of Sir John Oldcastle, are really what has made these plays endure.

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NOTES

[1]P. H. Davidson, "Introduction" to William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 31.

[2]Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998) 276.

[3]Presumambly a line from a contemporary ballad or romance.

[4]Citations and quotations are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1997).

[5]Bloom 273.

[6]Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (1577), III, 62, quoted in the introduction to *The First Part of Henry IV*, ed. A. R. Humphreys (London: Routledge, 1960) xxxix. Sections of Holinshed, Foxe, and the play by Drayton et al. dealing with Sir John Oldcastle are reprinted most conveniently in

The First Part of King Henry the Fourth: Texts and Contexts, ed. Barabara Hodgdon (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997) 360-91. Subsequent comments and quotations are from Humphreys.

[7]Jean E. Howard in *The Norton Shakespeare* 1153.

[8]See Hoccleve, "Address to Sir John Oldcastle," *Works I: The Minor Poems*, EETS, Extra Series lxi (1892) 8-24, as cited in Humphreys xxxix.

[9]Humphreys xxxix-xl.

[10]Humphreys xl.

[11]Howard in *The Norton Shakespeare* 1152-53.

[12]Humphreys xii.

[13]J. Dover Wilson, *The Fortunes of Falstaff* (Cambridge: CUP, 1944) 84.

[14]Humphreys xli.

[15]Both examples and definitions are from Wilson 30.

[16]Howard in *The Norton Shakespeare* 1154.

[17]Matthias Bauer to Arthur Kinney May 28, 2003.

[18]Anthony Burgess quoted in Bloom 282.

[19]Maurice Morgann, *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff* (London: T. Boys, 1820) 18, 20.

[20]Cited in Bloom 281.

[21]Quoted in Wilson 9.

[22]Quoted by Bloom 297.

[23]Quoted by Bloom 299.