

## 1 Henry IV (Winter–Spring 2008)

I have no interest in reducing the brilliant, bustling, occasionally baffling two parts of *Henry IV* to an Elizabethan morality play, whose theme, as J. Dover Wilson argues in *The Fortunes of Falstaff*, is the education of “the ideal king.” By this reading, before Prince Hal grows up to sack France and hang his old drinking buddies, he is merely an impressionable young man, around whom, per Wilson, Shakespeare sets “attendant spirits: Falstaff typifying Vanity in every sense of the word, Hotspur Chivalry, of the old anarchic kind, and the Lord Chief Justice the Rule of Law or the new ideal of service to the state” [202]. With all due respect to the Lord Chief Justice (who, as we shall see in Part Two, is an unexpectedly decent man), I will take Falstaff and Hotspur every day and twice on matinees—from the safety of the audience, at least, the fat knight and his fiery opposite are indispensable antidotes to their calculating foil, that “double man” [V.iv.136], the future King Henry V.

That said, I cannot join with Harold Bloom in proclaiming the *Henry IV* plays “the Falstaffiad” [*Shakespeare*, 276]. However great Falstaff’s spirit, however necessary his presence, one must don blinders the size of Sir John to see him at the center of this magnificent drama in ten acts. Both *I Henry IV* and its sequel are clearly structured around Hal—there is no rule that we like the protagonist best—and one of their many themes is the education of a king. The stumbling block is that word *ideal*. As the grit and sweat and blood begin to stick, the question we find ourselves asking of Hal—with an urgency that increases with his power—is not whether he is living ideally as “God’s substitute”<sup>1</sup> but whether he is living well as a man. Not *Is he effective?* but *Is he*

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<sup>1</sup> *Richard II* [I.ii.37], to borrow from a play with a much greater investment in ideals

*admirable?* Of course, we cannot answer this question without asking similar questions of Falstaff, Hotspur, and King Henry IV, to name the most important “attendant spirits” in Part One. But let us begin at the center,

### Prince Hal

If the soliloquy is the central window into a Shakespearean character, then it is surely significant that Hal speaks in soliloquy only once in *1 Henry IV*<sup>2</sup>; Hal’s soliloquy caps his introduction to us, though we first hear of him long before we meet. Late in *Richard II*, the recently crowned King Henry IV laments—to the soon-to-be rebel Hotspur, establishing the rivalry that shall dominate the ensuing play—the antics of his rebellious heir:

Can no man tell me of my unthrifty son?  
 ’Tis full three months since I did see him last.  
 If any plague hang over us, ’tis he.  
 I would to God, my lords, he might be found.  
 Inquire at London, ’mongst the taverns there,  
 For there, they say, he daily doth frequent,  
 With unrestrained loose companions,  
 Even such, they say, as stand in narrow lanes  
 And beat our watch and rob our passengers,  
 Whilst he, young wanton and effeminate boy,  
 Takes on the point of honor to support  
 So dissolute a crew.

[*Richard II*, V.iii.1–12]

Hotspur recalls a conversation he had recently with the young prince, in which they discussed the upcoming tournaments celebrating King Henry’s ascension to the throne.

Hal, according to Hotspur, vowed to plunge into the brothels,

And from the common’st creature pluck a glove

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<sup>2</sup> I am not including Hal’s “eulogies” to the dead Hotspur and (presumed) dead Falstaff [V.iv.86–109], for Hal, though he believes himself alone, is addressing their departed spirits—he is apostrophizing rather than soliloquizing—and I find nothing in these speeches that he would not just as likely say in public.

And wear it as a favor, and with that  
 He would unhorse the lustiest challenger.  
*King:* As dissolute as desperate! Yet through both  
 I see some sparks of better hope, which elder years  
 May happily bring forth.

[*Richard II*, V.iii.17–22]

If Henry Bolingbroke were at all good-humored, we might suppose the “sparks of better hope” he espies in his son to be the spirited—if perverse—wit gleaming beneath Hal’s satirical image of chivalry. Hotspur’s anecdote is not exaggerated—when at last we meet Hal, in the second scene of *I Henry IV*, we find that peculiar mix of spirit and perversity on full display, though the king’s “unrestrained loose companions” does small justice to Hal’s foremost mate, the overstuffed knight Sir John Falstaff. Hal and Falstaff jest of wenches and hangmen, play at reformation, and plot a midnight robbery of “pilgrims going to Canterbury with rich offerings, and traders riding to London with fat purses” [I.ii.122–4]. It is worse than the father feared—not only is the heir apparent dallying with profligates and scoundrels who, as Hotspur shall memorably put it, “daffed the world aside / And bid it pass” [IV.i.96–7], but this dallying and daffing is so much more pleasurable than the politicking and scheming at court, the business of kings.

And then Falstaff is gone, and we are left alone, for the first and only time, with the prince. And this is what he says:

I know you all, and will awhile uphold  
 The unyoked humor of your idleness.  
 Yet herein will I imitate the sun,  
 Who doth permit the base contagious clouds  
 To smother up his beauty from the world,  
 That, when he please again to be himself,  
 Being wanted, he may be more wondered at  
 By breaking through the foul and ugly mists  
 Of vapors that did seem to strangle him.

[I.ii.188–96]

In switching from the prose of the Falstaffian underworld to the blank verse of his father's court, Hal likewise adopts his father's mindset—Falstaff and his cronies are “base contagious clouds,” “foul and ugly mists” that obscure the natural beauty of Hal's royal self. Not merely obscure but *strangle*, as Hal returns to the language of the hangman that so unnerves Falstaff. (Few plays are as obsessed with the gallows as *Henry IV*.) It is an arrogant, condescending beginning—and it is perfectly characteristic of Hal, even at his most gregarious, as we shall see. In an instant fun, however reckless, is reframed—a mere stratagem—and companions, however dissipated, become pawns to be manipulated by kings. . . .

For a moment Hal seems to regret his words. He protests,

If all the year were playing holidays,  
To sport would be as tedious as to work;  
But when they seldom come, they wished-for come,  
And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.

[I.ii.197–200]

This seems to contradict the previous nine lines—now, Hal claims, he is simply taking a holiday from responsibility, sporting with Falstaff and the lower classes because they *please* him, because he is young and he *wishes for* pleasure. These are sentiments we happily credit to Hal, for we are happy ourselves to holiday in Eastcheap, though we sense the danger in its vices. Alas, the moment is fleeting, and suddenly—illogically—Hal returns to his main theme. “So,” he reasons,

. . . when this loose behavior I throw off  
And pay the debt I never promised,  
By how much better than my word I am,  
By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;  
And, like bright metal on a sullen ground,  
My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,  
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes  
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.

I'll so offend to make offense a skill,  
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

[I.ii.201–10]

End of speech, end of scene . . . yet our ambivalence toward Hal is just beginning. Can we applaud his conclusion, littered as it is with such words as “falsify,” “show,” “offend”—words which themselves serve as foils to better words like “hopes” and “skill”? Balance such phrases as “falsify men’s hopes” or “make offense a skill” and which side proves weightier, the negative or positive? And that phrase “pay the debt I never promised”—is it generous or resentful, the Shakespearean equivalent of “I didn’t *ask* to be born a prince”? We should also remember the insight of King Richard, imprisoned in Pomfret Castle: “I wasted time, and now doth time waste me” [*Richard II*, V.v.49]. Hal seems sharper, more formidable than Richard, but time is a mighty adversary, and we wonder if Hal’s confidence is merely a trick of language, the unwarranted substitution of “redeeming” for “wasted.” Does time permit us such distinctions? More to the point, are we permitted to *stage manage* such distinctions?

The answers to these questions do not come immediately—in some cases, not until *Henry V*, if then. For now, I would like to return to a line that comes early in the speech, Hal’s notion of “when he please again to be himself . . .”; later he shall tell his father, “I shall hereafter . . . / Be more myself” [III.ii.92–3]. For us as for Hal—as for everyone he touches and pushes away (at times simultaneously)—the crucial question is: *Who is this self?* King Henry, at the end of *Richard II*, suggests one possibility: the prodigal son. Hal in his soliloquy suggests a variation: the *intentionally* prodigal son, prodigal by craft. Hal’s troubled, troubling relationships with Falstaff and Hotspur offer additional possibilities. The time has come, then, to examine each of these relationships;

in the process, we shall consider Hal's self-appointed foils as exceptional individuals in their own right. And we begin with arguably the most exceptional of all,

### Falstaff

Is there a more polarizing figure in all Shakespeare than Falstaff? “Thou compound of sense and vice,” writes Samuel Johnson; “of sense which may be admired but not esteemed, of vice which may be despised but hardly detested” [198]. Those who love Falstaff are inclined to excuse these vices—he is a liar, a glutton, a thief, a parasite—as knowing, affectionate parodies, of himself as well as others; they find their proof in his brilliant speeches on Honor; in his famous pronouncement: “I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men” [2 *Henry IV*, I.ii.9–10]—proof of a mind too perceptive, a spirit too capacious, to be guilty of such petty crimes. *But*, comes the retort, *he is guilty of these crimes, and others, leaving Hal/Henry V no choice in the end but to forsake him.*

Perhaps . . . though this may indict Hal as much Falstaff. What seems undeniable is that no character as beloved as Falstaff has been through the centuries can be essentially vicious. (Find me one person who loves Richard III or Iago, compelling monsters though they be.) Equally undeniable is that wholly virtuous characters are rare—even as the butts of jokes—in Shakespeare. One of the most useful perspectives may come from Falstaff himself (though, as always with Falstaff, it can be difficult to separate performance from man): “Dost thou hear, Hal? Thou knowest in the state of innocency Adam fell, and what should poor Jack Falstaff do in the days of villainy? Thou seest I have more flesh than another man, and therefore more frailty” [III.iii.164–6].

Hal and Falstaff make their first entrance together—thick as thieves, we presume (or so King Henry presumes). Yet Hal unsettles this assumption immediately.

Responding to Falstaff's innocuous request for the time of day (he appears to have just woken up), Hal is strangely hostile:

Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon, 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, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-colored taffeta, I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of the day.

[I.ii.2–12]

No reason, except perhaps to offer Hal an opening through which to strike. Falstaff chooses to parry the attack, transforming Hal's hot sun into cooling moonshine:

*Falstaff:* 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. 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—

*Prince:* What, none?

*Falstaff:* No, by my troth; not so much as will serve to be prologue to an egg and butter.

[I.ii.13–21]

Falstaff returns the favor here, suggesting that Hal, for all his haughty majesty, lacks grace. Yet how different are their styles! Where Hal bludgeons, Falstaff gently corrects, as though the prince were a boy who'd made a mess of his tea. The point scored, he plunges back into his nighttime vision:

*Falstaff:* 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.

*Prince:* Thou sayest well, and it holds well too; for the fortune of us that are the moon's men doth ebb and flow like the sea, being governed, as the sea is, by the moon. As, for proof now: a purse of gold most resolutely snatched on Monday night and most dissolutely spent on Tuesday morning; got with swearing "Lay by," and spent with crying "Bring in"; now in as low an ebb as the foot of the ladder, and by-and-by in as high a flow as the ridge of the gallows.

[I.ii.23–38]

This is more like we imagined—for the moment, Falstaff's poetry tames Hal; as they banter the puns lay thick and the metaphors unwind, and all is delightful. But Hal will not be tamed long—without warning we are back under the gallows. Falstaff's reply is one of the more blatant non sequiturs in Shakespeare: "By the Lord, thou say'st true, lad—and is not my hostess of the tavern a most sweet wench?" [I.ii.39–40]. William Hazlitt cites this as an instance of Falstaff's "dissolute carelessness of what he says" [paragraph 2], but I hear in this line great care to *avoid* a certain subject, namely death by hanging. The prince has struck a nerve and he knows it; Hal refuses either to alleviate Falstaff's fear or to join with the knight in jesting it away:

*Falstaff:* But I prithee, sweet wag, shall there be gallows standing in England when thou art king? and resolution thus fubbed as it is with the rusty curb of old father antic the law? Do not thou, when thou art king, hang a thief.

*Prince:* No; thou shalt.

*Falstaff:* Shall I? O rare! By the Lord, I'll be a brave judge.

*Prince:* Thou judgest false already. I mean, thou shalt have the hanging of the thieves and so become a rare hangman.

[I.ii.57–67]

Hal's puns are typically ambiguous—"thou shalt have the hanging of the thieves and so become a rare hangman" could mean "you shall not be judge but executioner," which is how Falstaff chooses to interpret it; however, it could just as easily mean "you shall hang



like a thief.” Even before his confessional soliloquy, then, Hal signals he has grown weary of the Falstaffian lifestyle and, perhaps, he is ready to exchange it for something more respectable.

If we perceive these signals, so too does Falstaff; abruptly he stops jesting and, for one of the few times in the play, gives in to a darker emotion. Hal is unsympathetic:

*Falstaff:* ’Sblood, I am as melancholy as a gib-cat or a lugged bear.<sup>3</sup>

*Prince:* Or an old lion, or a lover’s lute.

*Falstaff:* Yea, or the drone of a Lincolnshire bagpipe.

*Prince:* What sayest thou to a hare, or the melancholy of Moorditch?

*Falstaff:* Thou hast the most unsavory similes, and art indeed the most comparative, rascaliest, sweet young prince.

[I.ii.73–81]

Improbably, wonderfully, Falstaff recovers, and through his generosity Hal’s cold barbs become “unsavory similes” (such a delicious phrase!) and the usurper’s son a “sweet young prince.” What’s more—and so effortlessly he might be ordering breakfast—Falstaff subverts the very thing that shall drive Hal from the taverns and temptations of Eastcheap: desire for reputation. Hal attempts to top the master, only to find his wit absorbed in Falstaff’s vast, unflappable self:

*Falstaff:* But, Hal, I prithee trouble me no more with vanity. I would to God thou and I knew where a commodity of good names were to be bought. An old lord of the council rated me the other day in the street about you, sir, but I marked him not; and yet he talked very wisely, but I regarded him not; and yet he talked wisely, and in the street too.

*Prince:* Thou didst well, for wisdom cries out in the streets, and no man regards it.

*Falstaff:* O, thou hast damnable iteration, and art indeed able to corrupt a saint. Thou hast done much harm upon me, Hal—God forgive thee for it! Before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing; and now am I, if a man should speak truly, little better than one of the wicked. I must give over this life, and I will give it over! By the Lord, an I

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<sup>3</sup> *Lugged* means “tied to a stake,” as in a bearbaiting arena—as Falstaff increasingly seems to be around Hal.

do not, I am a villain! I'll be damned for never a king's son in Christendom.

[I.ii.81–97]

So much to say about these lines! Falstaff appropriates the language of the morality play—in which the innocent hero is tempted by the figure of Vice—that some would apply to *I Henry IV*. Only Falstaff reverses the roles typically assigned by his critics—in Sir John's vision *he* is the hero and Hal the corrupting Vice. But Falstaff is no mere Everyman: He has cast himself in the archetypal morality play, the Fall of Adam, who lived in Edenic ignorance (“Before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing ...”) until he was offered the apple—not by Lucifer but by his love, Eve.

At the risk of overanalyzing a brief few lines of dialogue, the implications of Falstaff making Hal his Eve are profound. Understand, I do not mean there is anything sexual in Falstaff's feelings for Hal (and certainly not vice versa); rather, I would argue that we can neither understand nor judge Falstaff (and consequently Hal) without acknowledging the depth and poignancy of the *love* Falstaff feels for the young prince. Consider how Falstaff measures two people he clearly does not love: his fellow roisterer Bardolph (he of the chronically flushed face), and the long-suffering hostess of his favorite tavern in Eastcheap, Mistress Quickly (who is anything but quick, at least when deciphering Sir John's double entendres):

*Falstaff*: Do thou amend thy face, and I'll amend my life. Thou art our admiral, thou bearest the lantern in the poop—but 'tis in the nose of thee. Thou art the Knight of the Burning Lamp.

*Bardolph*: Why, Sir John, my face does you no harm.

*Falstaff*: No, I'll be sworn. I make as good use of it as many a man doth of a death's-head or a memento mori. I never see thy face but I think upon hellfire and Dives that lived in purple; for there he is in his robes, burning, burning. If thou wert any way given to virtue, I would swear by thy face; my oath should be “By this fire, that's God's angel.” But thou art altogether given over, and wert indeed,

but for the light in thy face, the son of utter darkness. When thou ran'st up Gad's Hill in the night to catch my horse, if I did not think thou hadst been an ignis fatuus or a ball of wildfire, there's no purchase in money. O, thou art a perpetual triumph, an everlasting bonfire-light! Thou hast saved me a thousand marks in links and torches, walking with thee in the night betwixt tavern and tavern; but the sack that thou hast drunk me would have bought me lights as good cheap at the dearest chandler's in Europe. I have maintained that salamander of yours with fire any time this two-and-thirty years. God reward me for it!

[III.iii.24–48]

*Hostess:* There's neither faith, truth, nor womanhood in me else.

*Falstaff:* There's no more faith in thee than in a stewed prune, nor no more truth in thee than in a drawn fox; and for womanhood, Maid Marian may be the deputy's wife of the ward to thee. Go, you thing, go!

*Hostess:* Say, what thing? what thing?

*Falstaff:* What thing? Why, a thing to thank God on.

*Hostess:* I am no thing to thank God on, I would thou shouldst know it! I am an honest man's wife, and, setting thy knighthood aside, thou art a knave to call me so.

*Falstaff:* Setting thy womanhood aside, thou art a beast to say otherwise.

*Hostess:* Say, what beast, thou knave, thou?

*Falstaff:* What beast? Why, an otter,

*Prince:* An otter, Sir John? Why an otter?

*Falstaff:* Why? She's neither fish nor flesh; a man knows not where to have her.

[III.iii.110–28]

I have quoted these two passages at length because it is precisely their length that cries out against Falstaff; given enough breath, his wit turns merciless, cruel. The inexhaustible barrages recall Hal's earlier attacks on him, yet cause precious little wit in the drunkenly amiable Bardolph or the thick hostess. Still Falstaff keeps firing, oblivious if not unsympathetic to the inability of his targets to retaliate in kind. We hear this same casual disinterest—more troubling now—in his appraisal of the ragtag crew he presses to send (I do not say “lead”) against Hotspur and the rebels:

*Prince:* But tell me, Jack, whose fellows are these that come after?

*Falstaff:* Mine, Hal, mine.

*Prince:* I did never see such pitiful rascals.

*Falstaff:* Tut, tut! good enough to toss; food for powder, food for powder. They'll fill a pit as well as better. Tush, man, mortal men, mortal men.

[IV.ii.60–6]

One may explain away these lines as Falstaff merely satirizing the absurdities of war for the benefit of the future warrior-king Henry V. Yet Falstaff is just as contemptuous of his “mortal men” earlier in the scene, when speaking in soliloquy:

If I be not ashamed of my soldiers, I am a soused gurnet. I have misused the king's press damnably ... and now my whole charge consists of ancients, 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 dishonorable ragged than an old fazed ancient; 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.

[IV.ii.11–37]

Dead indeed—the Battle of Shrewsbury shall mow down all but two of Falstaff's troops, and, he tells us, “they are for the town's end, to beg during life” [V.iii.36–8]. How do these lines jibe with his grand proclamation “Give me life” [V.iii.59]? Where is that respect for life he claims for himself, when he argues that “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” [V.iv.115–18]? Where is that famous generosity of which he and his legions of admirers (myself included) boast?

The answer is simple enough: For the vast majority of people, Falstaff cares very little. “Him keep with,” he advises the prince (“him” refers, quite naturally, to himself); “the rest banish”—and again, “banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poin . . .” [II.iv.415 & 459]. This is not to suggest that “Sir John Sack and Sugar” [I.ii.111] is a misanthrope. Nor do the objects of his ridicule love him less for it—for proof look no further than Mistress Quickly’s heartbreaking account of his death, itself prompted by Bardolph’s “Would I were with him, wheresome’er he is, either in heaven or in hell!” [*Henry V*, II.iii.7–25]. Certainly if pleasure may be had without such disagreeable things as conscription or banishment, so much the better, but when push comes to shove and only one person can remain standing, Falstaff does everything in his power to ensure he is that person. The idea of sacrificing himself for some greater good is almost paradoxical—a good greater than Falstaff? O monstrous!

Unless that good were a prince—one capable not merely of feeding his riots (presumably Falstaff managed to procure sack and sugar long before he met Hal) but of matching his wit. For Hal, raised by his father to believe in such serious things as Virtue and Honor (or at least in their outward show), it is easy to imagine how the attraction would be mutual. (We saw a similar attraction in the courtship of Kate and Petruchio.) Falstaff’s relationship with Hal may initially have been no more complicated than two jokers trading insults and alcohol. In time, however, it seems to have given the old man more than he bargained for—more than he ever took from Bardolph or Gadshill. Feelings of pride, for example. Spying on Hal’s climactic battle with Hotspur, Falstaff turns cheerleader: “Well said, Hal! to it, Hal! Nay, you shall find no boy’s play here, I can tell you” [V.iv.74–5]. More poignant are the brief moments during the long build-up to war

when Falstaff dares reveal his vulnerable side. He fears for his own life, to be sure—“I would ’twere bedtime, Hal, and all well,” he confesses on the eve of battle (to which the prince, ever unsympathetic, replies, “Why, thou owest God a death”) [V.i.125–6]. Yet he fears for someone else’s life now, too. Though Hal would cover his own nerves with adolescent bravado, Falstaff pushes for a more authentic connection:

*Prince:* Why then, it is like, if there come a hot June, and this civil buffeting hold, we shall buy maidenheads as they buy hobnails, by the hundreds.  
*Falstaff:* By the mass, lad, thou sayest true; it is like we shall have good trading that way. But tell me, Hal, art not thou horrible afraid? Thou being heir apparent, could the world pick thee out three such enemies again as that fiend Douglas, that spirit Percy, and that devil Glendower? Art thou not horribly afraid? Doth not thy blood thrill at it?  
 [II.iv.349–58]

All of which culminates in this exchange—one it is impossible to imagine Falstaff having with anyone else in King Henry’s England:

*Hostess:* So he doth [slander] you, my lord, and said this other day you ought him a thousand pound.  
*Prince:* Sirrah, do I owe you a thousand pound?  
*Falstaff:* A thousand pound, Hal? A million! Thy love is worth a million; thou owest me thy love.  
 [III.iii.133–7]

The legend that Queen Elizabeth commissioned *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in order to see Falstaff “in love” is redundant. Shakespeare had already written this play—in fact, he wrote two: the first and second parts of *King Henry IV*. The epitome of self-centeredness, Falstaff is doomed to fall for his antithesis, a young man whose self is so fragmented and shifting we wonder if it exists at all. In an instant Falstaff loses paradise—one cannot exist in a perpetual bubble of pleasure when pleasure depends on another, especially not when that other is increasingly ambivalent. To return to those

wonderful lines in which Falstaff vows to “give over this life,” clearly he does not mean his life of carousing and roguery, for his declaration is followed by one of the funniest reverses in Shakespeare:

*Falstaff:* I must give over this life, and I will give it over! By the Lord, an I do not, I am a villain! I’ll be damned for never a king’s son in Christendom.

*Prince:* Where shall we take a purse tomorrow, Jack?

*Falstaff:* Zounds, where thou wilt, lad! I’ll make one. An I do not, call me villain and baffle me.

*Prince:* I see a good amendment of life in thee—from praying to purse-taking.

*Falstaff:* Why, Hal, ’tis my vocation, Hal. ’Tis no sin for a man to labor in his vocation.

[I.ii.95–104]

Falstaff is surely aware that by his own reasoning he is a villain, whether he “amends” his life or not. Yet he seems to miss—or perhaps chooses to ignore—the frightening irony in “I’ll be damned for never a king’s son in Christendom.” As Hal will admit in soliloquy, he has already marked Falstaff for destruction, and it is not for Sir John to say otherwise—he is the Vice that must be sacrificed on the altar of princely reformation. Falstaff’s true vocation is self-love—whether this be a sin is for the virtuous to decide, though it must be conceded that in pleasing himself Falstaff usually pleases others as well. In falling in love he finds himself in a play no longer of his making, his fate for once in someone else’s hands. He shall suffer for his fall as grievously as any sinner.

Still, the main part of his suffering is to come; in the meantime he treats us—and Hal, when he deigns to pay attention—to a masterful show, the centerpiece of which is Act II, scene iv, our first glimpse of the Eastcheap tavern where Falstaff holds court. The prologue to this scene is the adventure at Gad’s Hill, in which Falstaff and his fellow

“gentlemen of the shade” rob a band of travelers, only to be robbed in turn by Hal and Poins, disguised in suits of buckram. “The virtue of this jest,” explains Poins to a curiously reluctant Hal, “will be the incomprehensible lies that this same fat rogue will tell us when we meet at supper: how thirty, at least, he fought with; what wards, what blows, what extremities he endured; and in the reproof of this lives the jest” [I.ii.179–83].

There are several things to note here. First is that, contrary to the madcap reputation he has been cultivating, the prince needs convincing to join in the fun. Certainly he has no intention of actually *robbing* anyone<sup>4</sup>—he takes pains to announce that any such villainy would be his first:

*Falstaff:* Hal, wilt thou make one?

*Prince:* Who, I rob? I a thief? Not I, by my faith.

*Falstaff:* There’s neither honesty, manhood, nor good fellowship in thee, nor thou cam’st not of the blood royal if thou darest not stand for ten shillings.

*Prince:* Well then, once in my days I’ll be a madcap.

*Falstaff:* Why, that’s well said.

*Prince:* Well, come what will, I’ll tarry at home.

[I.ii.133–40]

Poins revises the script with his practical joke, yet Hal continues to quibble over easily resolvable details: “How shall we part with them in setting forth?” he objects, and “’tis like that they will know us by our horses, by our habits, and by every other appointment, to be ourselves” [I.ii.162 & 168–70]. Most revealing is his final objection, for it suggests that Poins—an inconsequential, even forgettable, character—understands Falstaff better than Hal does:

*Prince:* Yea, but I doubt they will be too hard for us.

*Poins:* Well, for two of them, I know them to be as true-bred cowards as

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<sup>4</sup> The victims turn out to be transporting “money of the king’s . . . to the king’s exchequer” [II.ii.52–3]; in effect, then, Hal is “robbing” himself.



ever turned back; and for the third, if he fight longer than he sees reason, I'll forswear arms.

[I.ii.175–8]

This last detail is important, for it distinguishes the “true-bred” cowardice of Peto and Bardolph (the fourth robber, Gadshill, also proves a coward) from what might be called the *sensible* cowardice of Falstaff, a distinction Shakespeare confirms in a stage direction—when the robbers are set upon by the disguised Hal and Poins, “*They all run away, and Falstaff, after a blow or two, runs away too, leaving the booty behind them*” [II.ii.98–9]. Falstaff, a former knight, undoubtedly knows how to defend himself; in his prime, he may well have been a formidable adversary. (In Part Two, a rebel surrenders to him merely upon hearing his name [2 *Henry IV*, IV.iii.10–17].) Old now and out of shape, he is not so foolish as to think himself a match for two young men. Life, as he repeatedly reminds us, is worth more than a sack of gold.

Still, he knows what is expected of him, and he enters the tavern in a fine roar:

*Prince:* Welcome, Jack. Where hast thou been?

*Falstaff:* A plague of all cowards, I say, and a vengeance too! Marry and amen! Give me a cup of sack, boy. Ere I lead this life long, I'll sew netherstocks, and mend them and foot them too. A plague of all cowards! Give me a cup of sack, rogue. Is there no virtue extant?

[II.iv.107–12]

This he repeats—“A plague of all cowards!”—three times over the next fifty lines, with several other “plagues” and “cowards” tossed in for good measure. (One of his best: “I call thee coward? I'll see thee damned ere I call thee coward, but I would give a thousand pound I could run as fast as thou canst. You are straight enough in the shoulders; you care not who sees your back” [II.iv.139-42]—as Harold Bloom exclaims, this time with justification, “Does anyone else, in all of literature, enjoy what he is saying as much as Falstaff does?” [*Genius*, 21].) *I dare you*, he seems to be saying, *to fling that word*,

“coward,” *back in my face* . . . and of course no one does—far more entertaining to watch him dig his hole deeper. In no time he has re-peopled Gad’s Hill with dozens of fierce bandits—“A hundred upon poor four of us!” [II.iv.154–5].

Still, he drops several hints he knows exactly what transpired during the double robbery, the most intriguing being his reply to Hal’s mock-serious “Pray God you have not murdered some of them.” Says Falstaff,

Nay, that’s past praying for. I have peppered two of them. Two I am sure I have paid, two rogues in buckram suits. I tell thee what, Hal—if I tell thee a lie, spit in my face, call me horse. Thou knowest my old ward. Here I lay, and thus I bore my point.  
[II.iv.182–7]

Can it be merely coincidence that Falstaff says he *paid* “two rogues in buckram suits”? For “paid” is just what he did in fleeing the buckram-clad Hal and Poins, leaving his ill-gotten treasure for them to pocket. And should Hal prove Falstaff a liar, which epithet should he spit at Fat Jack—*horse*? As in the horse Hal and Poins hid before the robbery, the horse for which Falstaff called so desperately: “A plague upon you all! Give me my horse, you rogues! give me my horse and be hanged”? [II.ii.27–8]. (There’s that word “rogues” again.) Finally, where else would Hal have seen Falstaff’s “old ward” (or fighting stance) if not while dueling him at Gad’s Hill (by Hal’s admission his first time robbing). In Falstaff’s Eastcheap, the weapon of choice is language.

Of course, it is one thing to believe Falstaff is (secretly) in command during his ritual humiliation; it is quite another to play it that way. The scene is funniest when Falstaff really does appear to have backed himself into an impossible corner. One cannot wink at the audience in the midst of such a gut-busting performance:

*Falstaff*: Here I lay, and thus I bore my point. Four rogues in buckram let drive at me.

*Prince:* What, four? Thou saidst but two even now.  
*Falstaff:* Four, Hal. I told thee four.  
*Poins:* Ay, ay, he said four.  
*Falstaff:* These four came all afront and mainly thrust at me. I made me  
no more ado but took all their seven points in my target, thus.  
*Prince:* Seven? Why, there were but four even now.  
*Falstaff:* In buckram?  
*Poins:* Ay, four, in buckram suits.  
*Falstaff:* Seven, by these hilts, or I am a villain else.  
*Prince:* Prithee let him alone. We shall have more anon.  
*Falstaff:* Dost thou hear me, Hal?  
*Prince:* Ay, and mark thee too, Jack.  
*Falstaff:* Do so, for it is worth the list'ning to.

[II.iv.187–202]

Once again the give-and-take is genial, affectionate—the world outside the tavern disappears, taking with it our memory of Hal's soliloquy, and reality becomes as wonderfully fluid as any child's play. So charmed is the atmosphere that even Hal's return to aggression causes more pleasure than discord:

*Prince:* These lies are like their father that begets them—gross as a  
mountain, open, palpable. Why, thou clay-brained guts, thou  
knotty-pated fool, thou whoreson obscene greasy tallow-keech—  
*Falstaff:* What, art thou mad? art thou mad? Is not the truth the truth?

[II.iv.216–21]

When at last Falstaff drops his bewildered pose and fires back, our pleasure is complete:

*Prince:* I'll be no longer guilty of this sin; this sanguine coward, this bed-  
presser, this horseback-breaker, this huge hill of flesh—  
*Falstaff:* 'Sblood, you starveling, you eel-skin, you dried neat's-tongue,  
you bull's pizzle, you stockfish—O for breath to utter what is like  
thee!—you tailor's yard, you sheath, you bowcase, you vile  
standing tuck!

[II.iv.232–8]

Finally, as though to acknowledge he cannot out-slander the old master, Hal confronts Falstaff with the “plain” truth—at the same time challenging him to turn it inside-out:

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 bullcalf. 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?

[II.iv.243–54]

Falstaff, to no one's surprise, has just such a trick; the crucial question is how long he pauses, as though desperately racking his brains, before answering. Somewhat paradoxically, the more we are convinced Falstaff did not know the robbers—so that Hal's revelation appears to catch him completely off his guard—the more impressive becomes his victory, his grace under pressure. “By the Lord,” he begins, and the whole theater leans in,

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.

[II.iv.256–64]

It is easy to read this outrageous defense as nothing more than an inspired bit of foolery. Yet Falstaff dwells on that final phrase, “true prince,” and each repetition is a barbed reminder that Hal, strictly speaking, is *not* the true prince but the eldest son of Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford and Lancaster, dethroner and murderer (by proxy) of the anointed king. It would be naïve to think a mind as sharp as Hal's has not contemplated the full implications of this fact—is this speech Hal's payment for demanding Falstaff make himself the butt of the joke? Yet again, how subtly Sir John

tweaks—one can easily imagine, were the roles reversed, Hal hurling such word-bombs as “crown-breaker” and “gluttonous belcher of kings”; Falstaff, having made his point, is happy to call a truce:

But, by the Lord, lads, I am glad you have the money. Hostess, clap to the doors. Watch tonight, pray tomorrow. Gallants, lads, boys, hearts of gold, all the titles of good fellowship come to you! What, shall we be merry? Shall we have a play extempore?

[II.iv.264–8]

Falstaff gets his play, though less merry than he anticipates, for before the hostess can shut the doors there arrives a most unwelcome guest: “a noble man of the court” [II.iv.275–6], come to speak with the prince about the impending civil war. Falstaff rightly guesses that Hal “wilt be horribly chid tomorrow” by King Henry; “If thou love me,” he begs, “practice an answer” [II.iv.360–2]. What follows is perhaps the most celebrated scene in the play, as Hal and Falstaff alternate between the roles of prince and king, son and father. The argument centers at first upon Hal—specifically his reckless, irresponsible behavior, so far beneath his station. (Falstaff, in the role of King Henry, puts it more wittily than the real king ever could: “For though the camomile, the more it is trodden on, the faster it grows, yet youth, the more it is wasted, the sooner it wears” [II.iv.386–9].) As so often happens, however, the topic soon turns to the fat knight; naturally, Falstaff gives a more spirited defense of himself than would be expected of Hal (let alone Hal’s father):

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. And tell me now, thou naughty varlet, tell me where hast thou been this month?

[II.iv.407–17]

Only Hal doesn't want to talk about himself, though the whole point of this exercise was to "practice an answer" for the next day's interview. Perhaps he feels compelled to rebalance the scales after Falstaff tips them so completely in his favor; perhaps he feels uncomfortable playing himself so publicly—regardless, the prince assumes the role of king and proceeds to tear into Falstaff with such savageness, he shifts the tone of the scene, if not the entire play, irrevocably:<sup>5</sup>

*Prince:* Now, Harry, whence come you?

*Falstaff:* My noble lord, from Eastcheap.

*Prince:* The complaints I hear of thee are grievous.

*Falstaff:* 'Sblood, my lord, they are false! Nay, I'll tickle ye for a young prince, i' faith.

*Prince:* Swearst thou, ungracious boy? Henceforth ne'er look on me.

Thou art violently carried away from grace. There is a devil haunts thee in the likeness of an old fat man; a tun of man is thy companion. Why dost thou converse with that trunk of humors, that bolting hutch of beastliness, that swoll'n parcel of dropsies, that huge bombard of sack, that stuffed cloakbag of guts, that roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly, that reverend vice, that gray iniquity, that father ruffian, that vanity in years? Wherein is he good, but to taste sack and drink it? wherein neat and cleanly, but to carve a capon and eat it? wherein cunning, but in craft? wherein crafty, but in villainy? wherein villainous, but in all things? wherein worthy, but in nothing?

[II.iv.425–44]

The comic spirit is wholly absent from this catalogue of sins, which becomes a kind of exorcism of the great wit, no longer needed now that Hal has been called to join his biological father on the battlefield. Indeed, the prince has begun to move decisively toward his plan to "redeem time" at the expense of Hotspur ... and Falstaff. This will

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the real King Henry, in his interview with Hal, scarcely mentions Falstaff, and never by name—just a few passing references to the "rude society" and "vulgar company" Hal keeps [III.ii.14 & 41].

require killing them both—the one physically, the other (if he cannot be hanged or marched to an honorable soldier’s end) spiritually. Although Falstaff is permitted to defend himself—eloquently and convincingly—the prince insists on the last word:

*Falstaff:* My lord, the man I know.

*Prince:* I know thou dost.

*Falstaff:* But to say I know more harm in him than in myself were to say more than I know. That he is old (the more the pity), his white hairs do witness it; but that he is (saving your reverence) a whoremaster, that I utterly deny. If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked! If to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old host that I know is damned. If to be fat be to be hated, then Pharaoh’s lean kine are to be loved. No, my good lord: banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poins; but for sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff, and therefore more valiant being, as he is, old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry’s company, banish not him thy Harry’s company. Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world!

*Prince:* I do, I will.

[II.iv.449–65]

I defy anyone to hear this and not be moved. Yet we must not lose ourselves, for however much our hearts may side with Falstaff, our heads note several objections. To begin: Falstaff’s protests notwithstanding, “whoremaster” is not one of Hal’s many accusations—the prince focuses almost solely on the sins of gluttony and drunkenness (though “swoll’n parcel of dropsies”—i.e., watery swellings—may imply venereal disease). Granted, this is not a crucial distinction—to the moralizer, a sin is a sin—yet it evinces a sloppiness with language uncharacteristic of Falstaff, and perhaps indicative of the extent to which Hal’s sudden attack has disturbed him. His next three arguments, though charming, are not really arguments at all—we may envision Hal nodding in agreement: *You are correct, Sir John, God must help the wicked, for I shall not, and your merry old hosts are damned indeed.* And we do not hate fatness in cattle when we are leading them to slaughter.

The most damning objection, however, is this: ostensibly, Falstaff is playing Hal begging that Falstaff be pardoned by King Henry IV (who is himself played by Hal, and, as we have seen, never actually threatens to banish *anyone* from his son's company). Really, though, Falstaff is playing himself begging his own pardon by Hal. Whatever affection Hal feels—or has felt—toward him has been won through wit, yet at this crucial moment Falstaff abandons wit (indeed, this may be his least witty speech in the play) and speaks directly to Hal's heart. The problem is that, as his soliloquy makes clear, Hal has already closed his heart to Falstaff. Then too, as though in revenge of the old man's blithe disregard for "the time of day," Falstaff's own timing deserts him. No sooner has Hal pronounced his doom—"I do, I will"—then the scene is interrupted by a sudden knocking—like the crack of doom—upon the tavern door. Falstaff bellows in protest, but to no avail:

*Bardolph:* O, my lord, my lord! the sheriff with a most monstrous watch is at the door.

*Falstaff:* Out, ye rogue! Play out the play. I have much to say in the behalf of that Falstaff.

[II.iv.466–9]

The sheriff has come looking for the Gad's Hill robbers, one of whom, we learn, "is well known, . . . / A gross fat man" [II.iv.493–4]. For a moment, Falstaff's fear of the hangman gets the better of him—but only for a moment, and his cry of desperation gives way to genuine courage in the face of Hal's ever-increasing ambivalence:

*Falstaff:* Dost thou hear, Hal? Never call a true piece of gold a counterfeit. Thou art essentially mad without seeming so.

*Prince:* And thou a natural coward without instinct.

*Falstaff:* I deny your major. If you will deny the sheriff, so; if not, let him enter. If I become not a cart as well as another man, a plague on my bringing up! I hope I shall as soon be strangled with a halter as another.

[II.iv.475–82]



Regardless of whether this last line is a threat, it gives Hal pause—what is there to gain from delivering Falstaff to the hangman under such sordid circumstances, away from the public eye? The informant’s way does not lead to glory and honor. And so Hal bids Falstaff hide behind the arras and turns the sheriff away with a lie (and a promise to repay the money “with advantage” [II.iv.530]). He then pulls aside the arras . . . and reveals Falstaff “[f]ast asleep . . . and snorting like a horse” [II.iv.511–2]. Need we further proof that Falstaff is no coward? It is inconceivable that Bardolph, Peto, even Poins would be so self-composed, so secure in their essential freedom from the outside world, as to doze with nothing but a cheap tapestry between themselves and the gallows.

Still, Falstaff’s ability to shelter himself in his tavern is waning. “We must all to the wars,” Hal declares. “I’ll procure this fat rogue a charge of foot, and I know his death will be a march of twelve score” [II.iv.526–9]. The smell of blood is in the air, and the fat old man must again take up sword and pistol (or pistol case, at least). Hal’s holiday has ended, and though Falstaff remains very much in the play, the focus shifts, and so must ours, to the second grand foil of Hal’s imagining—“my factor,” as he tells his father, “To engross up glorious deeds on my behalf” [III.ii.147–8]: the rebel Henry Percy, better known to the world as

### **Hotspur**

As with Hal, we hear rumors of Hotspur before we meet him, excepting his brief appearances in *Richard II*, in which he is more important as Northumberland’s son than as his own man. (He appears in most cast lists as “Henry Percy” and describes himself as “tender, raw, and young; / Which elder days shall ripen and confirm / To more approved service and desert” [*Richard II*, II.iii.42–4])—a more politic speech than he shall prove

capable of making in *I Henry IV*.) By the time the *Henry* plays begin, he seems to have made good on his word—the tales of his valor and victories against rebel Scots in the north cause the new king to “sin / In envy that my Lord Northumberland / Should be the father to so blest a son:

A son who is the theme of honor’s tongue,  
 Amongst a grove the very straightest plant;  
 Who is sweet fortune’s minion and her pride;  
 Whilst I, by looking on the praise of him,  
 See riot and dishonor stain the brow  
 Of my young Harry.

[I.i.78–86]

Of course, Hotspur is troubling his king for other reasons that have nothing to do with patrimony. In defeating the Scots, he captured some very important prisoners, whom he is refusing to cede to King Henry. The sympathetic lord Westmoreland cautions against laying too much blame on the young warrior: “This is his uncle’s teaching, this is Worcester, / Malevolent to you in all aspects, / Which makes him prune himself and bristle up / The crest of youth against your dignity” [I.i.96–9]. Worcester, recall, was King Richard’s Lord Steward and one of the last of the nobles to revolt to Bolingbroke, apparently more from loyalty to his brother Northumberland than from any love for the future King Henry [*Richard II*, II.iii.21–30].

Two scenes later Hotspur, Worcester, and Northumberland assemble before the king to plead their case. Northumberland we also met in *Richard II*—the “haught, insulting man” [IV.i.254] to whom the deposed Richard prophesied:

Thou shalt think,  
 Though [Bolingbroke] divide the realm and give thee half,  
 It is too little, helping him to all.  
 He shall think that thou, which knowest the way  
 To plant unrightful kings, wilt know again,  
 Being ne’er so little urged another way,

To pluck him headlong from the usurped throne.

[*Richard II*, V.i.59–65]

Needless to say, these one-time allies do not take long to prove Richard right. Before the Percies can so much as open their mouths, Henry—in haught, insulting terms of his own—puts them on the defensive:

My blood hath been too cold and temperate,  
 Unapt to stir at these indignities,  
 And you have found me, for accordingly  
 You tread upon my patience; but be sure  
 I will from henceforth rather be myself,  
 Mighty and to be feared, than my condition,  
 Which hath been smooth as oil, soft as young down,  
 And therefore lost that title of respect  
 Which the proud soul ne'er pays but to the proud.

[I.iii.1–9]

The king miscalculates, for the proud Worcester is unimpressed by royal bluster.

At risk of losing face before more loyal subjects, Henry orders Worcester from the room:

*Worcester:* Our house, my sovereign liege, little deserves  
 The scourge of greatness to be used on it—  
 And that same greatness too which our own hands  
 Have help to make so portly.

*Northumberland:* My lord—

*King:* Worcester, get thee gone, for I do see  
 Danger and disobedience in thine eye.  
 O, sir, your presence is too bold and peremptory,  
 And majesty might never yet endure  
 The moody frontier of a servant brow.  
 You have good leave to leave us: when we need  
 Your use and counsel, we shall send for you.

[I.iii.10–21]

Henry's arguments would have amused the deposed Richard, who as king not only "endured" the bold disobedience of his subjects (Henry among them)—he lost both crown and life to it. Yet we hardly sympathize with the Percies, who ought to have realized an ambitious man like Bolingbroke, once king, would never allow them to

behave like kings themselves. There must be one law for all England if England is not to fracture into warring fiefdoms.

We might expect Hotspur to speak in his uncle's voice on the matter of the disputed prisoners: We gave you the crown and therefore owe you nothing. Instead, he fixates on an event so comically beside the point, we can't help but love him on the spot. I am tempted to quote all forty-one lines of his speech, it is such a marvelously clear window into his character—not only his values but his childlike assumption that these seasoned politicians, with their competing interests, must share his values:

My liege, I did deny no prisoners.  
 But I remember, when the fight was done,  
 When I was dry with rage and extreme toil,  
 Breathless and faint, leaning upon my sword,  
 Came there a certain lord, neat and trimly dressed,  
 Fresh as a bridegroom, and his chin new reaped  
 Showed like a stubble land at harvest home. . . .  
 And as the soldiers bore dead bodies by,  
 He called them untaught knaves, unmannerly,  
 To bring a slovenly unhandsome corse  
 Betwixt the wind and his nobility.<sup>6</sup>  
 With many holiday and lady terms  
 He questioned me, amongst the rest demanded  
 My prisoners in your majesty's behalf.  
 I then, all smarting with my wounds being cold,  
 To be so pestered with a popinjay,  
 Out of my grief and my impatience  
 Answered neglectingly, I know not what—  
 He should, or he should not; for he made me mad  
 To see him shine so brisk, and smell so sweet,  
 And talk so like a waiting gentlewoman  
 Of guns and drums and wounds—God save the mark! . . .

[I.iii.29–56]

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<sup>6</sup> We may note that the sentiments of this “certain lord” are not dissimilar to Falstaff's (justifiably) more celebrated “There's honor for you!” [V.iii.32–3]. Both make the point that a corpse on a battlefield is just that, and nothing to sentimentalize. The crucial difference is that the fop prefers not to be *near* the corpse, whereas Falstaff prefers not to *be* the corpse. “Give me life,” Falstaff exclaims, to which the fop might reply, “Give me perfume!”

A rich vein of comedy runs through this, as through all his speeches, though rarely on purpose, for Hotspur believes himself to be a very serious fellow (indeed, it is one of the funniest things about him). At the same time, his anger is refreshingly authentic—emotions burst from him in half-lines, unchecked by the expediency that governs the older generation (as well as Prince Hal). The more Hotspur talks the greater his passion swells, in inverse proportion to his ability to express it coherently; his uncle and father know this, of course, and conspire to whip him into a frothing rage against King Henry:

*Hotspur:* Why, look you, I am whipped and scourged with rods,  
 Nettled, and stung with pismires when I hear  
 Of this vile politician, Bolingbroke.  
 In Richard's time—what do you call the place?  
 A plague upon it! it is in Gloucestershire;  
 'Twas where the madcap duke his uncle kept,  
 His uncle York—where I first bowed my knee  
 Unto this king of smiles, this Bolingbroke—  
 'Sblood!—when you and he came back from Ravenspurgh—

*Northumberland:* At Berkeley Castle.

*Hotspur:* You say true.

Why, what a candy deal of courtesy  
 This fawning greyhound then did proffer me!  
 “Look when his infant fortune came to age,”  
 And “gentle Harry Percy,” and “kind cousin”—  
 O, the devil take such cozeners!

[I.iii.238–53]

Remaking Hotspur's perception of Henry—from “my sovereign liege” to “this king of smiles, this Bolingbroke”—is not a task that requires much skill, though Worcester and Northumberland manage it ably enough, with some unwitting assistance from the king. Hotspur's god is not incarnate in kings, anyway: “By heaven,” he cries, as though to Mars himself,

methinks it were an easy leap  
 To pluck bright honor from the pale-faced moon,

Or dive into the bottom of the deep,  
 Where fathom line could never touch the ground,  
 And pluck up drowned honor by the locks,  
 So he that doth redeem her thence might wear  
 Without corrival all her dignities;  
 But out upon this half-faced fellowship!

[I.iii.201–8]

If Hotspur disdains the sharing of honor—“this half-faced fellowship”—how much he must loathe the *withholding* of honor. Yet this is precisely what Henry has done—Henry who never raised his sword in battle against Richard, who “won” his crown through patient smiles and flattering words. The honor in question belongs to Edmund Mortimer, Hotspur’s brother-in-law and one-time captain in Henry’s army, who lost a hard-fought battle to Welsh rebels and was captured, only to marry the daughter of his captor, Henry’s great enemy, Owen Glendower. Naturally Henry sees this as treason by “revolted Mortimer” [I.iii.92], but Hotspur sees only the battle, none of the politics behind it. In his mind a kinsman in the prime of youth has been slandered by an aging politician—how could anyone who fights like Mortimer be “revolted”?

He never did fall off, my sovereign liege,  
 But by the chance of war. To prove that true  
 Needs no more but one tongue for all those wounds,  
 Those mouthed wounds, which valiantly he took  
 When on the gentle Severn’s sedgy bank,  
 In single opposition hand to hand,  
 He did confound the best part of an hour  
 In changing hardiment with great Glendower.  
 Three times, they breathed, and three times did they drink,  
 Upon agreement, of swift Severn’s flood;  
 Who then, affrighted with their bloody looks,  
 Ran fearfully among the trembling reeds  
 And hid his crisp head in the hollow bank,  
 Bloodstained with these valiant combatants.  
 Never did bare and rotten policy  
 Color her working with such deadly wounds;  
 Nor never could the noble Mortimer  
 Receive so many, and all willingly.

Then let not him be slandered with revolt.

[I.iii.94–112]

Never mind that Hotspur was not actually present to confirm this report, or that the battle, with its single combat and negotiated breaks, sounds more like an exhibition between peers (or future in-laws)—epic poetry rather than history. “He apprehends a world of figures here, / But not the form of what he should attend” [I.iii.209–10], Worcester shall say of his nephew, following Northumberland’s equally apt diagnosis: “Imagination of some great exploit / Drives him beyond the bounds of patience” [I.iii.199–200]. Such a man could never sit still long enough to occupy a throne, yet Hal shall pick him out as the man whose “budding honors . . . / I’ll crop to make a garland for my head,” proclaiming “England [cannot] brook a double reign / Of Harry Percy and the Prince of Wales” [V.iv.65–6 & 71–2]. In truth England could well brook, if not a double reign, then a mutually beneficial coexistence. Hotspur never indicates a desire to rule, but he’d be a fearsome general in any king’s army, provided said king threw him an occasional parade.

For all that, Hotspur is as obsessed with Hal as Hal is with him. When Hotspur vows, “All studies here I solemnly defy / Save how to gall and pinch this Bolingbroke,” we can at least understand his frustration, even if it seems excessive. But what of the lines that follow, concerning “that same sword-and-buckler Prince of Wales”?

But that I think his father loves him not  
And would be glad he met with some mischance,  
I would have him poisoned with a pot of ale.

[I.iii.227–32]

These are not the sentiments of a great warrior wishing to “pluck bright honor from the pale-faced moon.” They reveal a petty, vindictive child—but for what cause? The king

himself admits the prince is “wanton and effeminate,” “as dissolute as desperate”—why should Hotspur, “the theme of honor’s tongue,” waste even a thought on this non-rival? Defeating the Hal of *1 Henry IV* would bring scarcely any honor at all; when at last they confront each other, in Act V, Hotspur laments, “[W]ould to God / Thy name in arms were now as great as mine!” [V.iv.68–9]. Yet as the climactic battle for his family’s fortunes and England’s future approaches, Hotspur can think of nothing so much as single combat with the prince:

*Hotspur:* My cousin Vernon! welcome, by my soul.  
*Vernon:* Pray God my news be worth a welcome, lord.  
 The Earl of Westmoreland, seven thousand strong,  
 Is marching hitherwards; with him Prince John.  
*Hotspur:* No harm. What more?  
*Vernon:* And further, I have learned  
 The king himself in person is set forth,  
 Or hitherwards intended speedily,  
 With strong and mighty preparation.  
*Hotspur:* He shall be welcome too. Where is his son,  
 The nimble-footed madcap Prince of Wales,  
 And his comrades, that daffed the world aside  
 And bid it pass?  
 . . . Come, let me taste my horse,  
 Who is to bear me like a thunderbolt  
 Against the bosom of the Prince of Wales.  
 Harry to Harry shall, hot horse to horse,  
 Meet, and ne’er part till one drop down a corse.

[IV.i.86–123]

Moments before the fighting begins, he learns Hal has issued the desired challenge—only not in the expected manner:

*Hotspur:* Tell me, tell me,  
 How showed his tasking? Seemed it in contempt?  
*Vernon:* No, by my soul. I never in my life  
 Did hear a challenge urged more modestly,  
 Unless a brother should a brother dare  
 To gentle exercise and proof of arms.  
 He gave you all the duties of a man;  
 Trimmed up your praises with a princely tongue;



Spoke your deservings like a chronicle;  
 Making you ever better than his praise  
 By still dispraising praise valued with you;  
 And, which became him like a prince indeed,  
 He made a blushing cital of himself,  
 And chid his truant youth with such a grace  
 As if he mastered there a double spirit  
 Of teaching and of learning instantly.  
 There did he pause; but let me tell the world,  
 If he outlive the envy of this day,  
 England did never owe so sweet a hope,  
 So much misconstrued in his wantonness.

[V.ii.49–68]

An astounding speech, for in fact we have already witnessed the scene Vernon describes. This is rarely the case in Shakespeare—elaborate descriptions such as Vernon’s usually take the place of scenes that occur offstage (as when, earlier in the play, we hear of Hotspur’s victory over the Scots and Mortimer’s loss to Glendower). Thus we may compare Vernon’s recollection of the event to the event itself. Here is what Hal actually says:

In both your armies there is many a soul  
 Shall pay full dearly for this encounter,  
 If once they join in trial. Tell your nephew  
 The Prince of Wales doth join with all the world  
 In praise of Henry Percy. By my hopes,  
 This present enterprise set off his head,  
 I do not think a braver gentleman,  
 More active-valiant or more valiant-young,  
 More daring or more bold, is now alive  
 To grace this latter age with noble deeds.  
 For my part, I may speak it to my shame,  
 I have a truant been to chivalry;  
 And so I hear he doth account me too.  
 Yet this before my father’s majesty—  
 I am content that he shall take the odds  
 Of his great name and estimation,  
 And will, to save the blood on either side,  
 Try fortune with him in a single fight.

[V.i.83–100]

Let us set aside the question of whether Hal means any of this (though it is a fair question in light of his soliloquy—Hal’s plan to “redeem time” depends on his ability to exploit the perception that he and Hotspur are at opposite extremes of Honor’s scale). His onstage audience at least is ignorant of his secret, and—if Vernon is any indication—takes his words at face value. But is Vernon’s appraisal of these words just? Hal seems appropriately modest and respectful; his praise is qualified only by the fact that Hotspur is a rebel. Still, do a few vague allusions to “noble deeds” constitute Vernon’s “chronicle,” or “all the duties of a man”? Does Hal say anything that could even tenuously be interpreted to make Hotspur “ever better than his praise / By still disparaging praise valued with [Hotspur]”? (That is, praise itself depreciates beside Hotspur.) As for Hal’s critique of himself, it fills all of three lines; yes, an actor may blush while speaking them, but do they really justify Vernon’s conviction that this young man, with nary a praiseworthy deed to his name, has not only been “misconstrued in his wantonness” but is in truth *the sweetest hope England has ever had?!*

Remember, at this point in his career Shakespeare had composed the superb lyric triad of *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Richard II*; he had created Faulconbridge and Falstaff and was on the verge of creating Rosalind and Hamlet—in other words, he was a poet-playwright at the peak of his craft, and thus unlikely to mistake a serviceable monologue for evidence of greatness. Remember too, the speaker is not a loyal subject praising his future king—Hotspur and Worcester both address Vernon as “cousin” [IV.i.86 & V.ii.24], and in the final scene King Henry sends him, along with Worcester, to his death, though other rebel leaders such as Douglas are pardoned. Why then does Vernon fall so completely and irrationally under the prince’s spell? Others have

so fallen, it is true, not only Falstaff but everyone—beginning with the Chorus of *Henry V* (of whom we shall have much to say in time)—who so uncritically anoints this troubling figure “the mirror of all Christian kings” [*Henry V*, II.o.6].

And then there is Hotspur, who accepts without question that he and Hal are rivals, and that he has anything to gain from this rivalry that he does not already possess. For all their differences, the two Harrys share one tendency in addition to their burning desire for “bright honor”: a readiness to discard the blessings they have—including love. For Hotspur, love comes not from a dissolute old man but from his wife,

### Lady Percy

There is not much for women to do in the worlds of Henrys IV and V save be victimized by men—as Mistress Quickly is mocked and jilted by Falstaff; as Glendower’s daughter and, later, Katherine of France are forcibly wed to alien warriors—yet Hotspur’s wife presents a different perspective. Though she suffers for love of a man who, if nothing else, is guilty of taking her for granted, still she *loves*—no small victory in the cold Lancastrian universe. She may even be loved in return.

If we credit Lady Percy, the thought of rebellion unnerves Hotspur far more than he would admit to in waking life. “In thy faint slumbers I by thee have watched,” she confesses,

And heard thee murmur tales of iron wars,  
 Speak terms of manage to thy bounding steed,  
 Cry “Courage! to the field!” . . .  
 Thy spirit within thee hath been so at war,  
 And thus hath so bestirred thee in thy sleep,  
 That beads of sweat have stood upon thy brow  
 Like bubbles in a late-disturbed stream,  
 And in thy face strange motions have appeared,  
 Such as we see when the men restrain their breath  
 On some great sudden hest. O, what portents are these?

Some heavy business hath my lord in hand,  
And I must know it, else he loves me not.

[II.iii.46–63]

Lady Percy's concern for her restless husband is a clue—ordinarily, we assume, he sleeps soundly. Indeed, she makes the contrast explicit in her very first lines:

O my good lord, why are you thus alone?  
For what offense have I this fortnight been  
A banished woman from my Harry's bed?  
Tell me, sweet lord, what is't that takes from thee  
Thy stomach, pleasure, and thy golden sleep?  
Why dost thou bend thine eyes upon the earth,  
And start so often when thou sit'st alone?  
Why hast thou lost the fresh blood in thy cheeks  
And given my treasures and my rights of thee  
To thick-eyed musing and cursed melancholy?

[II.iii.36–45]

The cause of this transformation, though hidden from her, is known to us; we suspect the conscience of this great warrior distinguishes between what might be termed “an honest day's fight” (his victory over the Scots on behalf of his king, for example) and dishonorable scheming—even against so despised a king as Bolingbroke. Whatever else he may be, Hotspur is no schemer—he lacks both the patience and the discretion. We see this in his comic inability to keep quiet as father and uncle plot for him, all the while admonishing him with “Peace, cousin, say no more” and “Hear you, cousin, a word” [I.iii.187 & 226]. Oh, he can rail against Bolingbroke when railing feeds his passion; yet he is just as likely to curse his supposed ally Glendower, who “angers me / With telling me of the moldwarp and the ant, / Of the dreamer Merlin and his prophecies, / . . . And such a deal of skimble-skamble stuff / As puts me from my faith” [III.i.146–53]. It is not the object of his passion that matters but the passion itself, particularly when it leads to the battlefield.

All of which returns us to Lady Percy. Her descriptions of their marriage—“For what offense have I this fortnight been / A banished woman from my Harry’s bed?”; “Why hast thou . . . given my treasures and my rights of thee / To thick-eyed musing and cursed melancholy?”—are rich with the memory of shared passion; when Hotspur does not respond, a playful quality emerges, as though to distract her from her intuitions:

*Lady Percy:* But hear you, my lord.  
*Hotspur:* What say’st thou, my lady?  
*Lady Percy:* What is it carries you away?  
*Hotspur:* Why, my horse, my love—my horse!  
*Lady Percy:* Out, you mad-headed ape!  
 A weasel hath not such a deal of spleen  
 As you are tossed with. In faith,  
 I’ll know your business, Harry; that I will!  
 I fear my brother Mortimer doth stir  
 About his title and hath sent for you  
 To line his enterprise; but if you go—  
*Hotspur:* So far afoot, I shall be weary, love.  
*Lady Percy:* Come, come, you paraquito, answer me  
 Directly unto this question that I ask.  
 In faith, I’ll break thy little finger, Harry,  
 An if thou wilt not tell me all things true.

[II.iii.72–87]

Presumably here she gives his finger a twist. To this point Hotspur has encouraged—even adopted—his wife’s playfulness, but a threat is a threat, however trivial. His tone hardens—the man must rein in the woman—and there is fear in her reply:

*Hotspur:* Away, away, you trifler! Love? I love thee not;  
 I care not for thee, Kate. This is no world  
 To play with mammets and to tilt with lips.  
 We must have bloody noses and cracked crowns,  
 And pass them current too. Gods me, my horse!  
 What say’st thou, Kate? What wouldst thou have with me?  
*Lady Percy:* Do you not love me? do you not indeed?  
 Well, do not then; for since you love me not,  
 I will not love myself. Do you not love me?  
 Nay, tell me if you speak in jest or no.

[II.iii.88–97]

Her vulnerability seems to move him. “Come, wilt thou see me ride?” he teases. “And when I am a-horseback, I will swear / I love thee infinitely” [II.iii.98–100]. Of course, this “concession” gets him exactly where he wants—namely, galloping from home—yet something about that half-line, “Come, wilt thou see me ride?” is irresistibly romantic; how could “gentle Kate,” as he affectionately calls her [II.iii.104 & 110], not be charmed? Besides, he concludes, “Whither I go, thither shall you go too; / Today will I set forth, tomorrow you. / Will this content you, Kate?” [II.iii.113–15]. Her reply (“It must of force”) sounds unenthusiastic, yet this is a real concession on his part; it is a long ride from their castle in the north to Glendower’s base in Wales, and Hotspur surely does not think his wife will contribute anything to the war council or the ensuing battle. His primary motive seems to be a desire to be near her.

Once arrived in Wales, they share a brief scene in which they bicker amusedly—and bawdily. The occasion is a request made by Glendower’s daughter to sing for her new husband, Mortimer, “the song that pleaseth you” (according to her father’s translation),

And on your eyelids crown the god of sleep,  
 Charming your blood with pleasing heaviness,  
 Making such difference ’twixt wake and sleep  
 As is the difference betwixt day and night  
 The hour before the heavenly-harnessed team  
 Begins his golden progress in the east.

[III.i.213–19]

It is a lovely image, though perhaps more appropriate to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* than a history play, an opinion that Hotspur would probably second. (He has already protested, “I had rather be a kitten and cry mew / Than one of these same meter ballet-mongers,” and likened “mincing poetry” to “the forced gait of a shuffling nag” [III.i.127–

33].) “Sit, and attend,” Glendower commands, but Hotspur’s attention is not on the music:

*Hotspur:* Come, Kate, thou art perfect in lying down. Come, quick, quick, that I may lay my head in thy lap.  
*Lady Percy:* Go, ye giddy goose.

*The music plays.*

*Hotspur:* Now I perceive the devil understands Welsh.  
 And ’tis no marvel he is so humorous,  
 By’r Lady, he is a good musician.  
*Lady Percy:* Then should you be nothing but musical, for you are altogether governed by humors. Lie still, ye thief, and hear the lady sing in Welsh.  
*Hotspur:* I had rather hear Lady, my brach, howl in Irish.  
*Lady Percy:* Wouldst thou have thy head broken?  
*Hotspur:* No.  
*Lady Percy:* Then be still.  
*Hotspur:* Neither! ’Tis a woman’s fault.  
*Lady Percy:* Now God help thee!  
*Hotspur:* To the Welsh lady’s bed.  
*Lady Percy:* What’s that?  
*Hotspur:* Peace! she sings.

*Here the Lady sings a Welsh song.*

Come, Kate, I’ll have your song too.  
*Lady Percy:* Not mine, in good sooth.

[III.i.224–45]

If their banter does not sparkle like that of Falstaff and Hal, it is gentler, though Kate’s mild “sooth” works Hotspur into an inspired rant on par with anything Sir John might say on the subject:

Not yours, in good sooth? Heart! you swear like a comfit-maker’s wife. “Not you, in good sooth!” and “as true as I live!” and “as God shall mend me!” and “as sure as day!”  
 And givest such sarcenet surety for thy oaths  
 As if thou never walk’st further than Finsbury.  
 Swear me, Kate, like a lady as thou art,  
 A good mouth-filling oath, and leave “in sooth”  
 And such protest of pepper gingerbread  
 To velvet guards and Sunday citizens.  
 Come, sing.

[III.i.246–56]

Beneath Hotspur's extravagance, I hear a sincere fondness for his wife. Though deaf to the Welsh lady's song, and apparently scornful of musicians in general, Hotspur twice asks to hear Kate sing. Alas, whether due to modesty, timidity, or the suspicion she is merely being mocked, she twice declines. The mood broken, Hotspur marches off to make war instead:

*Lady Percy:* I will not sing.

*Hotspur:* 'Tis the next way to turn tailor or be red-breast-teacher. An the indentures be drawn, I'll away within these two hours; and so come in when ye will.

*Exit.*

[III.i.257–60]

\* \* \* \* \*

Hal's rejection of Falstaff, as we have seen, is a conscious decision to reject a love that no longer serves the prince's purpose. In contrast, Hotspur's ambivalence toward Kate reveals a pitiful ignorance of love's true worth. Hotspur leaves his wife to "come in when ye will," unaware that "when ye will" must come too late, for he is riding off to his death. No doubt he assumes he shall survive Shrewsbury and return to a conqueror's bed, yet a half-line he lets slip as the battle approaches suggests something darker—a blindness to the value of life itself:

*Hotspur:* What may the king's whole battle reach unto?

*Vernon:* To thirty thousand.

*Hotspur:* Forty let it be.

My father and Glendower being both away,

The powers of us may serve so great a day.

Come, let us take a muster speedily.

Doomsday is near. Die all, die merrily.

[IV.i.129–34]



*Die all, die merrily*. . . . How does a young man blessed with wealth, power, vitality, love, arrive at such a ghastly philosophy? As Doomsday draws still nearer, he offers a seemingly more positive alternative:

O gentlemen, the time of life is short!  
 To spend that shortness basely were too long  
 If life did ride upon a dial's point,  
 Still ending at the arrival of an hour.  
 An if we live, we live to tread on kings;  
 If die, brave death, when princes die with us!  
 Now for our consciences, the arms are fair,  
 When the intent of bearing them is just.

[V.ii.81–8]

In other words (specifically Falstaff's), "honor pricks me on" [V.i.129–30]. Honor, reputation—these are Hotspur's guarantors against living basely. Only Falstaff has more to say:

Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? How then?  
 Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief  
 of a wound? No. Honor hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is  
 honor? A word. What is that word honor? Air—a trim reckoning!  
 Who hath it? He that died a 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. Honor is a mere scutcheon—and so ends  
 my catechism.

[V.i.130–40]

Hearing this, we cheer Falstaff's victory over Hotspur's idol. Who could prefer "a mere scutcheon"<sup>7</sup> to plump Jack's "true and perfect image of life itself"? Surely not Hal . . . except Hal is not onstage to hear with us. No matter—he is there to give Hotspur his death wound, and to hear the final, rending words of that honorable man, who once seemed incapable of silence:

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<sup>7</sup> A shield displaying a nobleman's coat of arms (such as one might find at a nobleman's funeral)

O Harry, thou hast robbed me of my youth!  
 I better brook the loss of brittle life  
 Than those proud titles thou hast won of me.  
 They wound my thoughts worse than thy sword in flesh.  
 But thoughts the slaves of life, and life time's fool,  
 And time, that takes survey of all the world,  
 Must have a stop. O, I could prophesy,  
 But that the earthy and cold hand of death  
 Lies on my tongue. No, Percy, thou art dust,  
 And food for—

[V.iv.76–85]

This is the last gasp of one realizing too late he has spent his life on a lie—his glorious reputation, his gleaming Honor, must molder with his corpse ... or gild a rival's scutcheon. In death he gains a measure of wisdom, but only a measure, corrupted by bitterness and regret and a wholly unfamiliar impotence that leaves him unable to “prophesy.” Hotspur, the ultimate man of action, has no say over what may come. Still, Hal is no fool—he might complete Hotspur's prophesy as easily as he completes his monologue (“For worms, brave Percy” [V.iv.86]). Such a prophesy would foretell both ascension and decline—an empire to be won in France, followed by its disintegration. For Hal too is food for worms, and it shall not be a Lancaster who applauds *Henry V* from the chair of state.

Hotspur, then, is no more suitable a model than is Falstaff for a future king. One last foil remains to examine: Hal's father,

### King Henry IV<sup>8</sup>

We have seen how early in the play (and in *Richard II* also) Henry Bolingbroke despaired that Hal would ever redeem his apparently wasted youth and prove himself a worthy son, soldier, prince. Yet there is Hal at Shrewsbury Field, in Act V, fighting

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<sup>8</sup> For simplicity, all references in this section to “Henry” are to the father, and “Hal” the son.

valiantly over his fallen and defenseless father, saving the king from the rebel Douglas, prompting Henry to cry out, “Thou hast redeemed thy lost opinion, / And showed thou mak’st some tender of my life, / In this fair rescue thou hast brought to me” [V.iv.47–9]. It is arguably Hal’s finest moment, full of spontaneous valor (unlike his all-but-prearranged date with Hotspur), yet still he resists affection—ambivalent to the end, he sounds less gracious with each line he speaks:

O God, they did me too much injury  
 That ever said I hearkened for your death.  
 If it were so, I might have let alone  
 The insulting hand of Douglas over you,  
 Which would have been as speedy in your end  
 As all the poisonous potions in the world,  
 And saved the treacherous labor of your son.

[V.iv.50–6]

Protesting too much, perhaps, Hal leaves the impression he has considered his father’s death more closely than Henry might care to believe. I shall try not to be *too* critical of Hal here, for Henry’s own words are scarcely warmer than his son’s: “Thou hast redeemed thy lost opinion, / And showed thou mak’st some tender of my life.” In our hotness to reach the climax, we may miss how strange Henry’s line is. Hal has just saved his father’s life, at considerable risk to his own, and all the father concedes is that Hal “mak’st *some* tender” of his life?

It is easy to assume such coldness between father and son is typical, yet in fact Shakespeare provides few windows into their relationship. (This may itself be evidence of the gulf between them.) Prior to the battlefield scenes of Act V, Henry and Hal—though very much on each other’s minds—share the stage only once: Act III, scene ii, the exact center of the play. This is the interview for which Falstaff prepares Hal during the great playacting sequence in Eastcheap, though for all but twelve-and-a-half of the

interview's first hundred-and-twenty-eight lines, Hal stands quietly as his father lectures. Henry has clearly come prepared—unfortunately, his arguments are more style than substance. “I know not whether God will have it so,” he begins, “For some displeasing service I have done, / That, in his secret doom, out of my blood / He'll breed revengement and a scourge for me” [III.ii.4–7].

This is quite the understatement—if the deposition, imprisonment, and arranged murder of one's king and kinsman rate no worse in Henry's England than “some displeasing service,” it is no wonder the crown prince cavorts with highwaymen. Henry, of course, would claim otherwise. “Tell me else,” he demands of Hal,

Could such inordinate and low desires,  
Such poor, such bare, such lewd, such mean attempts,  
Such barren pleasures, rude society,  
As thou art matched withal and grafted to,  
Accompany the greatness of thy blood  
And hold their level with thy princely heart?

[III.ii.11–17]

Formidable words ... yet how great is the blood, how princely the heart, of their speaker? In *Richard II* Henry Bolingbroke seemed almost passive, at times merely the instrument of rebellious energies stirred up by “[t]he skipping king” (as he now calls Richard), who “ambled up and down / With shallow jesters and rash bavin wits” [III.ii.60–1].

Confronted with a son who appears determined to follow Richard to an early, disreputable grave, King Henry re-imagines his role in the coup:

Had I so lavish of my presence been,  
So common-hackneyed in the eyes of man,  
So stale and cheap to vulgar company,  
Opinion, that did help me to the crown,  
Had still kept loyal to possession  
And left me in reputeless banishment,  
A fellow of no mark nor likelihood.  
By being seldom seen, I could not stir

But, like a comet, I was wondered at;  
 That men would tell their children, "This is he!"  
 Others would say, "Where? Which is Bolingbroke?"

[III.ii.39–49]

I say "re-imagines" because, though we never actually witnessed it, we heard Richard bitterly describe a scene that seems to contradict Henry's remembrance:

Ourself and Bushy, Bagot here, and Green  
 Observed his courtship to the common people;  
 How he did seem to dive into their hearts  
 With humble and familiar courtesy;  
 What reverence he did throw away on slaves,  
 Wooing poor craftsmen with the craft of smiles  
 And patient underbearing of his fortune,  
 As 'twere to banish their affects with him.  
 Off goes his bonnet to an oyster wench;  
 A brace of draymen bid God speed him well  
 And had the tribute of his supple knee,  
 With "Thanks, my countrymen, my loving friends" ...

[*Richard II*, I.iv.23–34]

Even if Richard's description is exaggerated—and it is worth noting we also never witness Henry behaving as *he* remembers—we have a man whose vision of himself shifts with his present need. Contrast Henry with Hotspur, whose self remains fixed till the very end, or Falstaff, whose self is so expansive it fills and shapes each moment, and then consider which of the three Hal most resembles.

Henry's need in this particular scene is to convince Hal that he, Henry, possesses the superior understanding of politics, and especially political survival—the future of the royal house of Lancaster depends on it. Despite his professed concern for Hal's "princely heart," Henry's words are intended neither to inspire nor reform, but rather to awaken the prince to the brutal reality of a kingdom on the verge of civil war. After all, who better to quash rebellion than the former rebel?

And then I stole all courtesy from heaven,

And dressed myself in such humility  
 That I did pluck allegiance from men's hearts,  
 Loud shouts and salutations from their mouths  
 Even in the presence of the crowned king.  
 Thus did I keep my person fresh and new,  
 My presence, like a robe pontifical,  
 Ne'er seen but wondered at; and so my state,  
 Seldom but sumptuous, showed like a feast  
 And won by rareness such solemnity.

[III.ii.50–9]

This advice seems tailor-made for Hal. Kingship, authority, “divine right”—these are scarcely more than roles played by a master politician (to Hotspur, a “vile politician”; to Falstaff, one easily parodied, reducible to “a villainous trick of thine eye and a foolish hanging of thy nether lip” [II.iv.390–2]). Yet Hal is more than the crown prince, more than a junior Machiavel; part of him is simply Henry Bolingbroke’s son—just as part of Henry can tell Hal, with apparent sincerity, “Not an eye / But is aweary of thy common sight, / Save mine, which hath desired to see thee more; / Which now doth that I would not have it do— / Make blind itself with foolish tenderness” [III.ii.87–91]. How must the son feel to hear his father dismiss his legacy (and inheritance) as little more than a sophisticated con? The fine words that dress up Henry’s lecture are actually quite cynical: “stole all courtesy from heaven”; “pluck allegiance from men’s hearts”; “won by rareness”—rather than desert—“such solemnity.” Are these the prizes for which Hal should give up his carefree tavern existence and risk his life—stolen courtesy and plucked allegiance? In response Hal is cryptic as ever, saying only, “I shall hereafter, my thrice-gracious lord, / Be more myself” [III.ii.92–3]. And again we must ask: *Who is this self?*

To answer this question we must return to the great tavern scene from Act II. Here is where Falstaff claims Hal is most himself—“Thou art essentially mad without seeming

so,” he cries as Hal contemplates siding with the forces of law and order against the roisterers of Eastcheap [II.iv.470–88]. Yet for me Hal’s freest, sincerest moment comes well before the fat knight’s entrance, at the very beginning of the scene, which opens not with Falstaff, nor even with talk of the Gad’s Hill robbery and ensuing prank, but with a prank of a different kind:

*Prince:* Ned, prithee come out of that fat room and lend me thy hand to laugh a little.

*Poins:* Where hast been, Hal?

*Prince:* With three or four loggerheads amongst three or fourscore hogsheads. I have sounded the very bass-string of humility. Sirrah, I am sworn brother to a leash of drawers and can call them all by their christen names, as Tom, Dick, and Francis. They take it already upon their salvation that, though I be but Prince of Wales, yet I am the king of courtesy, and tell me flatly I am no proud Jack like Falstaff, but a Corinthian, a lad of mettle, a good boy (by the Lord, so they call me!), and when I am King of England I shall command all the good lads in Eastcheap. They call drinking deep, dyeing scarlet; and when you breathe in your watering, they cry “hem!” and bid you play it off. To conclude, I am so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour that I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life. I tell thee, Ned, thou hast lost much honor that thou wert not with me in this action.

[II.iv.1–20]

This is probably the closest we get to seeing Hal drunk—at least, we sense an uninhibited quality, a giddiness, as he relives his great success. To drink with the common folk, to absorb their language and win their affection, is policy more pleasing than his father’s calculated aloofness and safer than Richard’s contemptuous aloofness. But it is not just policy—Hal seems genuinely delighted to learn that “drinking deep” is called “dyeing scarlet,” and more importantly, to be accepted into the society of men so far beneath his station. There is even a certain “honor” in the act.

Yet for all Hal’s delight, these men—the semi-proverbial “Tom, Dick, and Francis”—are not *really* his friends. In fact, a waiter named Francis has already attracted

Hal's attention—not as mate but as mark. Where is “the king of courtesy” as Hal describes this “under-skinker”?

But, sweet Ned—to sweeten which name of Ned, I give thee this pennyworth of sugar, clapped even now into my hand by an under-skinker, one that never spake other English in his life than “Eight shillings and sixpence,” and “You are welcome,” with this shrill addition, “Anon, anon, sir! Score a pint of bastard in the Half-moon,” or so—but, Ned, to drive away the time till Falstaff come, I prithee do thou stand in some by-room while I question my puny drawer to what end he gave me the sugar; and do thou never leave calling ‘Francis!’ that his tale to me may be nothing but “Anon!” Step aside, and I’ll show thee a precedent.

[II.iv.20–32]

Ned is happy to help. What follows would be among the funnier sequences in the play if it were Falstaff playing the role of Francis. When the victim is truly a fool, however, he elicits our sympathy; Hal's cleverness is just condescension propped up by an authority he has not earned:

*Prince:* Come hither, Francis.  
*Francis:* My lord?  
*Prince:* How long hast thou to serve, Francis?  
*Francis:* Forsooth, five years, and as much as to—  
*Poins:* Francis!  
*Francis:* Anon, anon, sir.  
*Prince:* Five year! by'r Lady, a long lease for the clinking of pewter. But, Francis, darest thou be so valiant as to play the coward with thy indenture and show it a fair pair of heels and run from it?  
*Francis:* O Lord, sir, I'll be sworn upon all the books in England I could find in my heart—  
*Poins:* Francis!  
*Francis:* Anon, sir.  
*Prince:* How old art thou, Francis?  
*Francis:* Let me see: about Michaelmas next I shall be—  
*Poins:* Francis!

[II.iv.38–54]

This is simply outrageous. The same man who refused to go robbing with Falstaff (until Poins reframed the robbery as a chance to humiliate the great wit), who shall



announce his virtue by repaying the stolen money “with advantage,” now encouraging the hapless Francis to break his indentured servitude? The same man who runs from the responsibilities of adulthood even as he plots to “redeem” those responsibilities, like so many prizes in a tournament, now urging Francis to forsake his own duties—duties he cavalierly dismisses as “the clinking of pewter” even as he conspires with Poins to impede them? Did not Hal just boast he could “drink with any tinker in his own language”? Now he twists language as far as it will allow, for no reason but “to drive away the time till Falstaff come”:

*Francis:* Anon, sir. Pray stay a little, my lord.

*Prince:* Nay, but hark you, Francis. For the sugar thou gavest me—’twas a pennyworth, was’t not?

*Francis:* O Lord! I would it had been two!

*Prince:* I will give thee for it a thousand pound. Ask me when thou wilt, and thou shalt have it.

*Poins:* Francis!<sup>9</sup>

*Francis:* Anon, anon.

*Prince:* Anon, Francis? No, Francis; but tomorrow, Francis; or, Francis, a Thursday; or indeed, Francis, when thou wilt. But, Francis—

*Francis:* My lord?

*Prince:* Wilt thou rob this leathern-jerkin, crystal-button, not-pated, agate-ring, puke-stocking, caddis-garter, smooth-tongue, Spanish-pouch—

*Francis:* O Lord, sir, who do you mean?

*Prince:* Why then, your brown bastard is your only drink; for look you, Francis, your white canvas doublet will sully. In Barbary, sir, it cannot come to so much.

*Francis:* What, sir?

*Poins:* Francis!

*Prince:* Away, you rogue! Dost thou not hear them call?

*Here they both call him. The Drawer stands amazed, not knowing which way to go.*

[II.iv.55–76]

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<sup>9</sup> Poins misses a chance to force Hal down the Falstaffian path of improvisation; instead he mindlessly plays along with the prince, and Francis never does find a moment to catch his breath and demand his thousand pounds.

This stage direction—comparatively long, for Shakespeare—gives the lie to the more charming part of Hal’s performance. Far from “command[ing] all the good lads in Eastcheap,” Hal aspires only to confound them; far from proving himself “a lad of mettle,” he reveals a meanness of spirit more consistent with the “sullen ground” of his soliloquy. Even the always game Poins fails to discern Hal’s purpose: “But hark ye,” he asks, “what cunning match have you made with this jest of the drawer? Come, what’s the issue?” Hal’s answer is revelatory: “I am now of all humors that have showed themselves humors since the old days of goodman Adam to the pupil age of this present twelve o’clock at midnight” [II.iv.86–91]. What if, as Northrop Frye speculates, this line means more than simply “I’m up for anything right now”? Might Hal be suggesting, whether consciously or no, that he “is very close to completing his ‘madcap prince’ act, and that what he has got from putting it on is a sense of having soaked himself in every social aspect of the kingdom he is going to rule” [78]? He has matched wits with the brilliant Falstaff (and is on the verge of besting him, or so he believes), and raised a toast with “the very bass-string” of society. In the morning he shall win his father’s forgiveness; shortly thereafter he shall kill Hotspur and win his country’s respect. In “soak[ing] himself in every social aspect of the kingdom he is going to rule,” Hal is learning something about what it means to play each role in its proper context. At last it is “twelve o’clock at midnight,” the moment when old becomes new, and with the dawn shall come (as Vernon shall testify) a prince the likes of whom has not been seen before.

*Who is this self?* The answer is, every self—and none. No matter that Henry IV’s crimes against Richard tarnish his crown—Henry V shall scour it in blood at Agincourt. Thus it is not his father’s sentimental desire “to see thee more” that moves Hal to protest

he has been wronged; the turning point, for father and son, is Henry's accusation that, far from symbolizing a new day, Hal is a redundancy, a pawn of history:

For all the world,  
As thou art to this hour was Richard then  
When I from France set foot at Ravenspurgh;  
And even as I was then is Percy now.  
Now, by my scepter, and my soul to boot,  
He hath more worthy interest to the state  
Than thou, the shadow of succession; ...  
But wherefore do I tell these news to thee?  
Why, Harry, do I tell thee of my foes,  
Which art my nearest and dearest enemy?  
Thou that art like enough, through vassal fear,  
Base inclination, and the start of spleen,  
To fight against me under Percy's pay,  
To dog his heels and curtsy at his frowns,  
To show how much thou art degenerate.

[III.ii.93–128]

Of course, the parallels Henry draws between himself and Hotspur cut both ways, and a case could be made that Hal's animus toward his honorable peer is sublimated—the true target is the father-king, who sees in Hotspur's present-day rebellion the pattern of his own youth. Regardless, Hal's immediate concern is more straightforward. His father has insulted him past endurance: no longer the charismatic prodigal—no longer even the second coming of Richard—Hal has been relegated to a minor role in Hotspur's power play. How could Henry know the truth—that Hotspur is marked for sacrifice in *Hal's* drama of redemption—when Hal has never bothered to reveal it? No matter; the time has come, and Hal seizes the opportunity:

Do not think so. You shall not find it so.  
And God forgive them that so much have swayed  
Your majesty's good thoughts away from me.  
I will redeem all this on Percy's head  
And, in the closing of some glorious day,  
Be bold to tell you that I am your son,  
When I will wear a garment all of blood,



already “twelve month old” when the play begins [I.i.28]), the dissipation of his eldest son, and the gathering storm of civil war. Now, with the prince at his side (princes, really, for the younger John of Lancaster also fights at Shrewsbury—we shall come to know him all too well in Part Two), Henry not only stares down rebellion with renewed confidence, he awakens within himself a more generous spirit, even toward the scheming Worcester:

No, good Worcester, no!  
 We love our people well; even those we love  
 That are misled upon your cousin’s part;  
 And, will they take the offer of our grace,  
 Both he, and they, and you, yea, every man  
 Shall be my friend again, and I’ll be his.

{V.i.103–8}

No matter that Worcester (with good reason) mistrusts Henry’s “grace” and refuses to yield—Henry makes the gesture, and if we have learned anything from his rise to power (and even more so from his son’s), it is that politics is often more performative than substantive. Had Henry spoken so well to Hotspur in Act I, Worcester and Northumberland would have found a less pliable banner for their grievances.

\* \* \* \* \*

The play ends, at last, with Henry and Hal’s great victory. Though Hal does not actually say to his father, “I am your son,” he takes a page from Henry’s book and offers mercy to an enemy—indeed, Hal does the king one better, for his mercy is unconditional:

*Prince:* At my tent  
 The Douglas is, and I beseech your grace  
 I may dispose of him.

*King:* With all my heart.

*Prince:* Then, brother John of Lancaster, to you  
 This honorable bounty shall belong.  
 Go to the Douglas and deliver him  
 Up to his pleasure, ransomless and free.  
 His valors shown upon our crests today  
 Have taught us how to cherish such high deeds,

Even in the bosom of our adversaries.

[V.v.22–31]

What Falstaff would say to this we never learn, for the great wit is not onstage at the time. Hotspur perhaps would approve—he expresses a similar regard for one of *his* enemies, King Henry’s envoy, Sir Walter Blunt:

Welcome, Sir Walter Blunt, and would to God  
 You were of our determination.  
 Some of us love you well; and even those some  
 Envy your great deservings and good name,  
 Because you are not of our quality,  
 But stand against us like an enemy.

[IV.iii.32–7]

The ability to recognize valor in the opposing camp may be common to both Hotspur and Hal, but the language with which they hail it is very different. Even at his most consciously diplomatic, Hotspur is a disaster—his gaze is self-centered (“would to God / You were of our determination”), his syntax is tangled (“even those some / Envy your great deservings and good name” seems to be missing a word), his thinking embarrassingly naïve (Blunt is not “like an enemy,” he *is* an enemy—to prove it, the Douglas shall run him through the next day on the battlefield). By contrast Hal’s words are smooth, almost perfectly iambic, as though he were already considering how they shall sound to posterity. They are the words of a king.

The play ends, then, with the prodigal son returning to his father’s house, having exorcised not one but two pesky ghosts. The penultimate scene features a pair of eulogies: the first to Hotspur, his blood still warm; the second to Falstaff, playing possum at Hal’s feet. Both have served their purpose, and though Falstaff shall famously “resurrect” himself moments after Hal’s exit, in due course neither shall weigh much on the prince’s mind. There will be moments when the old fires threaten to blaze again in

Eastcheap, but by the time Hal invades France as Henry V they will have burned out for good. For now we are left with the image of Hal and his father riding together “towards Wales / To fight with Glendower and the Earl of March,” accompanied by the king’s stirring prophesy (which in two generations shall prove as naïve as anything uttered by Hotspur):

Rebellion in this land shall lose his sway,  
Meeting the check of such another day;  
And since this business so fair is done,  
Let us not leave till all our own be won.

[V.v.39–44]

“If then the tree may be known by the fruit, as the fruit by the tree,” Falstaff said once. His meaning was self-promotional, yet a variation of this proverb comes to mind: like father, like son. It is on this note, more than Falstaff’s, that the first part of *Henry IV* ends.

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