

Shakespeare's True Counterfeit: *Henry IV Part 1*

Paul Dean

H*enry IV Part 1* made an immediate hit with me when I studied it for A level over forty years ago. As a fat boy desperately trying to keep his popularity afloat by being a comedian, I needed no explanations of what Falstaff was about. I endorsed A. C. Bradley's indignation at Hal's ultimate rejection of him in *Part 2* (which we also read), to the exasperation of my English master who told me not to be sentimental. I don't remember reading much criticism apart from the essays in the Macmillan Casebook, edited by G. K. Hunter, and the excellent introductions to A. R. Humphreys' Arden editions of 1960. Humphreys was at pains to defend the artistic unity of Part 1, and to argue that Shakespeare ultimately 'upholds good government, in the macrocosm of the state, and the microcosm of man'.¹ Critical fashions have changed since his day and interpretations now emphasise contradiction, tension or fragmentation rather than formal coherence; cultural-ideological contexts have elbowed literary-historical ones aside.² How might one present the play to a new generation of students? Currently it is on the syllabuses for the Cambridge Pre-U examination in 2013/14/15 and the OCR A-level syllabus until 2013. Those studying it will therefore have been born in the mid-1990s and their view of political behaviour will be a world away from that of my contemporaries: more sophisticated in many ways, and certainly far less idealistic. Hal's use of his tavern companions, which could once be read as a cynical manipulation, may seem merely commonplace to people used to hearing of the need to 'draw a line under things and move on', while Falstaff, who if taken seriously would constitute a threat,³ can be hailed as a champion of individual liberty.

One person to whom Falstaff was certainly no joke in the 1590s was Lord Cobham, the descendant of the Lollard Sir John Oldcastle (c.1378–1417) whose name Falstaff bore in early performances of the play. Oldcastle, heretical insurrectionist or proto-Protestant martyr according to your taste, was a close friend of the historical Henry V until his rebellion.⁴ He

had already been lampooned on stage in an anonymous play, *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, which was printed in a corrupt text in 1598 but dates from perhaps a decade earlier. Shakespeare clearly knew this play—from seeing it performed since its appearance in print is obviously cashing in on his own success—and his response to it is to transform Oldcastle from a minor ruffian into a major creation. Following the family's objections, Shakespeare was forced to change the character's name, influenced by a reminiscence of the cowardly Sir John Fastolf in *1 Henry VI*,⁵ but retained the mockery of pseudo-piety that had been part of the portrayal, settling some scores with Puritans over their hostility to the theatre as well as fusing two historically distinct types of religious dissent. In the Epilogue to *2 Henry IV*, Shakespeare was explicit that 'Oldcastle died [a] martyr, and this is not the man' (30–31).⁶ The Cobhams were not pacified: in 1600 their supporters retaliated with a counter-play, *Sir John Oldcastle*, apparently also in two parts but of which only the first survives. In this, Oldcastle is presented as a Christian hero and Falstaff denounced as a 'pampered glutton' and 'aged counsellor to youthful sins' who has figured in a 'forged invention' in 'former time' (Prologue, 6–7, 14). Henry remembers him by name, together with Poins and Peto (10. 53–5); and to drive the point home, the play contains a second 'Sir John', a duplicitous priest whose mistress is called Doll, and who refers to 'that foul villainous guts' who 'led [King Henry] to all that roguery there, that Falstaff' (10.82–83).⁷

This sequence of events—a fictional character, based on an historical individual, who becomes a pseudo-historical individual himself, referred to as such by another fictional character—provides a fascinating point of entry into what we should call the 'faction' of *1 Henry IV*, its imaginative re-making of historical fact.⁸ This can usefully be seen in the context of Sir Philip Sidney's distinctions, in his *Apology for Poetry*, between the 'brazen' world of Nature and the 'golden' world of poetry, between the 'bare *was*' of the historian, constrained by fidelity to the facts, and the imaginative liberty of the poet who 'nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth', since 'to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false',⁹ whereas the poet makes no claim to be showing things as they actually are, or ever were. On the contrary, poetry insists upon its own fabulation. Part of the reason why *1 Henry IV* is generally agreed to be Shakespeare's masterpiece in the mode of the history play is its exploration of faction or counterfactuals, which, like drama itself, originate in the question 'What if...?' There may be more than one kind of truth, and any one kind may be multifaceted. The dazzling tavern scene (II.4) in which Hal and Falstaff both play the king—a scene in which Hal rehearses a role he will one day actually assume, while Falstaff glories in the opportunity to indulge his fantasy of irresponsible misrule—is a more extended example

of this. But perhaps the most interesting sequence comes in the scenes in Act V which dramatise the battle of Shrewsbury. I shall therefore examine these in some detail.¹⁰

In Act V scene 3, Blount, wearing the King's colours, is killed by Douglas, who supposes him to be Henry. Douglas has already killed Stafford, who was also disguised as the King, but takes Blount for the genuine article until he is disabused by Hotspur: 'The King hath many marching in his coats' (V.3.25). This suggests the tenuous hold on power of the real King Henry, who becomes refracted into 'innumerable simulacra, a non-personal budding of kings',¹¹ each of which can be mistaken for him. Falstaff then comes upon Blount's body, remarking 'There's honour for you...I like not such grinning honour as Sir Walter hath. Give me life' (V.3.32–3, 59–60). This looks superficially attractive until we realise that Falstaff's life has been preserved at the expense of those under his command, his 'ragamuffins' who have been 'peppered' (V.3.36). Falstaff's attempts to treat the field of battle as a tavern by other means—indicated by his puns on 'scoring' (V.3.31) as both the drink tab and wounds (both equally painful to him) and by his reference to his bottle of wine as a 'pistol' that will 'sack a city' (V.3.52)—look more and more out of place when set against Hal's recognition that this is no time to 'jest and dally' (V.3.57). Hal actively seeks combat; Falstaff plays a kind of counterfactual game with it: 'if Percy be alive, I'll pierce him. If he do come in my way, so; if he do not, if I come in his willingly, let him make a carbonado¹² of me...Give me life, which if I can save, so. If not, honour comes unlooked for, and there's an end' (V.3.57–62). Much virtue in 'if'!

In Act V scene 4 Douglas finally meets the real King Henry, but ironically takes him to be another imposter, one who 'counterfeit'st the person of a king' (V.4.26). Of course, Douglas is right, in a way, given Henry's seizure of power from Richard II by what he himself will acknowledge to be 'bypaths and indirect crook'd ways' (2 *Henry IV*, IV.3.314).¹³ Henry's right to the crown depends on his ability to maintain it, so that, as James C. Bulman puts it, 'kingship depends for its authority not on God, but on performance',¹⁴ or, to use Douglas's word, on counterfeiting. Like 'counterfactual', 'counterfeit' has the sense of something made *in opposition* to the facts. To 'counterfeit the person of a king' by circulating false coins was a serious offence. Hence the image of kingship embodied by Henry is called into question, its value debased. Put to rout by Hal, Douglas re-enters in time to fight Falstaff, who plays dead (or counterfeits, to use his own word at 5.4.112), simultaneously with Hal's fatal wounding of Hotspur, for whom, as for all human beings, 'time...must have a stop' (5.4.81–82). This makes a striking stage emblem as Hal stands over

the bodies of his greatest enemy and his boon companion, both of whom he believes to be dead. Each has been a kind of monarch in his own world, as Hal is to be in his. Each has offered him a distorted reflection of himself, a psychic Other which he must slay and absorb into his own personality.¹⁵ Notoriously, however, his tone in addressing them differs greatly: eulogising Hotspur as 'brave Percy', 'great heart', a 'gentleman' and 'noble', but guying Falstaff as an embodiment of 'vanity', a 'fat...deer' to be 'embowelled' (V.4.86, 92, 109, 105 –7). Percy is a human corpse, Falstaff an animal one. Falstaff's indignant 'resurrection' moments after Hal leaves the stage is a delightful surprise to a theatre audience which, not having a text to follow, does not know that he is only shamming.¹⁶ (Incidentally, the stage directions, 'Enter DOUGLAS. He fighteth with Falstaff, who falls down as if he were dead', and 'FALSTAFF riseth up' (V.4.76 S.D., 109 S.D.) are in the original, not a later editorial addition.) This is a plain indication that the 'life', the instinctive energy and raw appetite, which Falstaff represents, is not to be killed off so easily, at least at this point. Racy prose takes over from stately blank verse, Sidney's brazen world from his golden. Initially congratulating himself on his prudent realisation that 'twas time to counterfeit', Falstaff adds:

Counterfeit? I lie; I am no counterfeit. To die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man. But to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be no counterfeit but the true and perfect image of life indeed. The better part of valour is discretion, in the which better part I have saved my life. Zounds, I am afraid of this gunpowder Percy, though he be dead. How if he should counterfeit too and rise? By my faith, I am afraid he would prove the better counterfeit. (V.4.114–123)

This is a wonderfully economical way of focusing our minds on the whole business of truth to life which is basic to historical drama. To counterfeit, to make us take the representation for reality, is the business of playwrights and actors. After all, the actor playing Percy is, at this moment, just as much pretending to be dead as Falstaff was earlier, but he is pretending, as it were, to be really dead.

Falstaff's outrageous appropriation of Hotspur's corpse issues a blatant challenge to credulity: 'I'll swear I killed him', he declares, adding deliciously, 'Nothing confutes me but eyes, *and nobody sees me*' (V.4.124–6, my italics)—this, in a public theatre! We suppose that Hal, who knows the truth, will expose Falstaff as a liar, just as he did in the tavern scene. But Hal, who believed Falstaff dead, is so startled that he no longer knows

what he can be certain of. Falstaff has risen to claim his counterfactual part in history, to promote a lie as the truth: to Hal's 'Why, Percy I killed myself, and saw thee dead', he can reply, 'Lord, Lord, how this world is given to lying!' (V.4.144 –6) because Hal's statement that he saw Falstaff dead *is* untrue, albeit not a conscious lie; whereas Falstaff can truthfully say 'I gave him [Hotspur] this wound in the thigh' (V.4.151). Part-baffled, part-indulgent, Hal can only reply, 'if a lie may do thee grace/I'll gild it with the happiest terms I have' (V.4.157 –8). Having cleared the way for reconciliation with his father, Hal at the last moment succumbs to his affection for Falstaff.¹⁷ For now, the historian's 'bare *was*' must yield to poetry's counterfactual invention, not indeed authentically golden, but gilded.

The fertility of Shakespeare's imagination in creating Falstaff threatens to make him overwhelm the chronicle material. The Cobhams' objections indicate that this was so from the start. David Scott Kastan makes the point neatly: 'Falstaff never quite fits into the restrictive frames of the history plays in which he appears. He is a conspicuously fictional character in a historical plot, an anarchic comic presence in a focused, political world. ... The very understanding of what counts as history is swollen by his swollen presence'.¹⁸ Falstaff is a character impersonated by an actor,¹⁹ but he is also an actor within the play, and not just in the tavern scene; he is always trying on roles to see if they fit (and they are always too small). Nor is he the only character to do this; Hal, Hotspur, King Henry himself, are to some extent experimenting with their self-images.

As that last point implies (and as I could not see in my schooldays), the impulse to reduce the play to *The Falstaff Show* has to be resisted. Falstaff, however large, is an element in a still larger design. The title pages of the seven pre-Folio printings of the play (an exceptional number, attesting its popularity) all distinguish 'the History of Henry the Fourth' from 'the humorous conceits of Sir John Falstaff'.²⁰ This is testimony to the box-office potential of Falstaff's jokes. But 'conceits' in Shakespeare's English can mean ideas as well as witticisms. Contemporary criticism likes to speak of ideological conflict, but 'ideology' is just a fancy, and less exciting, word for 'idea'. Sidney argued in the *Apology* that poetry was uniquely able to unite the goals of philosophy and history, coupling 'the general notion' with 'the particular example'.²¹ It is not an exaggeration to say that Shakespeare in *1 Henry IV* (and of course elsewhere) writes as a philosopher of history. In one sense Falstaff lives in the same world as the politicians, but in another sense he has a different idea of Time from them.²² They are ever aware of the urgency of unfolding events, 'breaking news' as we say, the calls upon them for swift decisions and action. They must master the situation or be mastered by it. Both the court party and

the rebels at various points feel at the mercy of history. As often, Hal stands at the point of balance between these extremes, biding his time. His 'I know you all' soliloquy (I.2.185 –207) is, among other things, a statement of his intention to use time wisely, 'redeeming' it (207),²⁴ conscious of his ultimate destiny as king. This is not how Falstaff thinks. A number of commentators have related him to the rhythms of pre-Reformation festive time, a parody of his Oldcastle persona.²⁵ Physically old, he has a young man's mental agility and a self-image of perennial youth; his vitality and his scorn of humbug cannot but seem attractive when contrasted with the King's weariness or the unscrupulousness of the rebels. Unlike some critics, Hal pays Falstaff the compliment of taking him seriously. That is why it is inevitable that, at the end of Part 2, 'Comedy finally steps into the path of History and is crushed'.²⁶

'After the violation of sacramental and inherited kingship by Henry', writes James Bulman, 'the office itself has become secular: anyone who performs kingship can lay claim to it...political power is secured by theatrical illusion'.²⁷ If so, everything depends on who makes, as it were, the more genuine counterfeit. Hal inherits a more secure throne than his father did, but no sooner is he dead than the whole structure collapses into chaos once more during the minority of Henry VI, 'which oft our stage hath shown' (*Henry V*, Epilogue, line 13). As for Falstaff, the promise at the end of *2 Henry IV* to bring him back is not kept: Shakespeare could not risk having him take the audience's eye off Henry V. Instead we have the report of his death,²⁸ and his translation to Arthur's bosom rather than Abraham's (II.3.9 –10). This is one of Mrs Quickly's most inspired mistakes, enrolling Falstaff in the Round Table (what other kind would do?) as some compensation for Henry's rejection. He remains counterfactual to the last.

Notes

1. A.R. Humphreys ed. (1960) *King Henry IV Part 1* (London: Methuen), p. lvii.
2. Dennis H. Burden (1985) 'Shakespeare's History Plays: 1952 –1983', *Shakespeare Survey* 38 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 1–18 and Christy Desmet (2010) 'Shakespeare the Historian', *Shakespeare Survey* 63 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 1–11 survey criticism of Shakespeare's history plays between the 1950s and the early 2000s. Tom McAlindon (2001) *Shakespeare's Tudor History: A Study of Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2* (Aldershot: Ashgate), pp. 3–25, mounts a defence of traditional approaches against those of postmodernism.

3. William Empson (1986) 'Falstaff', in *Essays on Shakespeare*, David B. Pirie ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 29–78, argues powerfully for a serious estimate of Falstaff's political role.
4. See Christopher Allmand (1997) *Henry V* (New Haven: Yale University Press), pp. 280–305; Gary Taylor, (1985) 'The Fortunes of Oldcastle', *Shakespeare Survey* 38 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 85–100; and the introduction to Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge, eds. (1991) *The Oldcastle Controversy: 'Sir John Oldcastle, Part 1' and 'The Famous Victories of Henry V'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), whose edition is used for quotations.
5. René Weis ed. (1997) *Henry IV, Part 2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 29 note 1, notes that in the Folio text of *1 Henry VI* the name is consistently given as 'Falstaff'. See Edward Burns ed. (2000) *King Henry VI Part 1* (London: Thomson), p. 289.
6. See Weis (1997), pp. 14–16, for a discussion of the Epilogue, which suggests that it was only after Part 2 had been staged that the Cobhams complained.
7. See Phebe Jensen (2008) *Religion and Revelry in Shakespeare's Festive World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 160–3.
8. See David Scott Kastan ed. (2002) *King Henry IV Part 1* (London: Thomson), p. 62 for some evidence that the character of Falstaff in turn influenced popular representations of Oldcastle.
9. Sir Philip Sidney (2002) *An Apology for Poetry (or The Defence of Poesy)*, ed. R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 85, 93, 103.
10. William Empson (1966) *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books), pp. 41–4.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
12. 'Meat scored with a knife to ready it for broiling' (Kastan's note) —one of several darkly comic allusions to the fate of the historical Oldcastle, who was roasted alive in chains.
13. In his introductory speech to Part 2, Rumour tells us he has propagated the lie that Douglas killed the King (*2 Henry IV*, Induction 31–2), but Morton reports that, having 'three times slain th'appearance of the King', Douglas was captured (I.1.128).
14. James C. Bulman (2002) 'Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2' in Michael Hattaway, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 158–176, p. 162.
15. Shakespeare's alteration of his source to make Hal and Hotspur the same age prompts us to see them as parallel characters.
16. See Karen Sawyer Marsalek (2009) 'Marvels and Counterfeits: False Resurrections in the Chester Antichrist and 1 Henry IV', in Curtis Perry and John Watkins, eds., *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*

- (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 217–240, pp. 231–239 (although I cannot agree that Falstaff should be seen as a descendant of Antichrist here).
17. Cf. Bulman (2002), p. 166.
 18. Kastan (2002), p. 49.
 19. On candidates for the original actor of Falstaff, see *ibid.*, pp.78–79.
 20. ‘History’ could simply mean ‘story’ in Shakespeare’s English, but the separate grouping of the English Histories in the Folio shows clear awareness of a dramatic *genre*. Out of interest, the title page of *2 Henry IV* (1600, the only printing until the Folio) calls it ‘The Second Part of Henry the Fourth...with the humours of Sir John Falstaff, and swaggering Pistol’ (Weis 1997, p.8), while that of *Henry V* (1600) is unambiguous: ‘The Chronicle History of Henry the Fifth...Together with Ancient Pistol’, T.W. Craik ed. (1995) *King Henry V* (London: Routledge), p. 11.
 21. Sidney (2002) p. 90.
 22. See McAlindon (2001), pp. 53–92.
 23. ‘For the modern reader, it has to be emphasised that far from signifying mediocrity and commonplaceness, the mean connotes a precarious point of balance’ (*ibid.*, p. 88).
 24. See Kastan’s note on I.3.207. The repayment of debts, the underlying concept of redemption, is prominent in both the action and the imagery of the play.
 25. Jensen (2008) pp. 153–8.
 26. Alexander Leggatt (1988) *Shakespeare’s Political Drama* (London: Routledge), p. 100; pp. 77–113.
 27. Bulman (2002), p. 162.
 28. It is interesting to note that, during the period offstage between *Henry V* II.1 and II.3, when Falstaff’s death is assumed to take place, Shakespeare inserts the scene (II.2) in which Henry condemns the traitors Cambridge, Scroop and Grey to death. *1 Sir John Oldcastle* contains a scene (15) in which that trio plot Henry’s death and mention Oldcastle as a co-conspirator, only to be surprised by Henry who has been eavesdropping on their conversation. Historically, Oldcastle took no part in the plot. Shakespeare takes great care to make any such associations impossible in Falstaff’s case.

A complete summary of William Shakespeare's Play, Henry IV Part 1. Find out more about the civil wars of King Henry and the wild pranks of Prince Hal. While his son Prince Hal spends time in the taverns, King Henry IV argues with his former ally Hotspur. Angry, Hotspur gathers a rebellion, and Henry and Hal go to battle to stop him. Henry's army wins the battle, while Hal redeems himself from his wild youth and kills Hotspur. More detail: 2 minute read. Act I. Following the events of Shakespeare's play, Richard II, Henry Bolingbroke has succeeded to the throne of England as King Henry IV. During his ascension, he was partially implicated in the murder of his cousin, Richard II, in prison. To atone for Richard's death, Henry IV