

## Interpreting *Henry IV*: The Men in Buckram

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The critical problems of *Henry IV* are well-worn, but there is still, I think, matter of instruction in them.

I would suggest that nearly all these problems are referable to one underlying cause: the variability of texture in Shakespearean drama. A Shakespearean play does not necessarily stay precisely the same *kind* of play throughout every inch of its length. The essential fallacy, surely, in the approach of a Bradley was the assumption that any play of Shakespeare's is made of exactly the same stuff from beginning to end of it: that any given part of it can be pressed on, handled, pulled about in precisely the same way as any other part: that the tensile strength (so to say) of the dramatic material remains perfectly uniform from start to finish. But this does not always happen. We can move, in a Shakespearean play, between slightly different levels of reality—we can keep moving backwards and forwards between them—and all this without noticeable strain. Audiences adapt themselves to such shifts and fluctuations with the greatest ease: they realize instinctively what is going on: and so do readers when they are left to themselves. But in these selfsame shifts and fluctuations lie the possibilities of later trouble. When we stop and think, reflect and scrutinize, we are likely, of course, to be struck by difficulties that in a theatre, or in a quick reading, would hardly have been noticed, or would have caused us no very grave concern. It is in that way that Shakespearean problems are born—or a very great many of them.

Many of these problems may, I think, be dispelled—for it is a question rather of dispelling than of solving—by bringing to bear on them the principle just noted. We can fancy something in the process a little analogous to the methods and results of psychoanalysis. Let us face up squarely to the cause of a neurosis and it fades; let us realize the cause of some of these time-honoured Shakespearean problems (Falstaff's "cowardice", Hal's "priggish-

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ness") and, though the difficulties in a sense still remain, the "problems" become unreal, not worth arguing about.

I doubt whether the full elucidatory value of this principle is even yet quite recognized. I do not think there is a major problem in the *Henry IV* plays to which it does not apply.

Consider, for example, the rejection of Falstaff and the worry that this event has caused. The worry is not unjustified; there is a reason for it. But it is of little help to attack this question ethically, in the old way; or, by proving that Shakespeare was intending so-and-so, to demonstrate that our responses were meant to be so-and-so. It is easy to see what Shakespeare meant: the important question is what he did. If we study the nature of the problem that he himself faced here, and the technical devices by which he coped with it, we are led immediately, I think, to the source of the trouble; the cause of the worry is disclosed.

It arises, surely, from the fact that the *Henry IV* plays are not perfectly homogeneous. The plays have been proceeding on two different levels: the level of the upper-plot and the level of the under-plot. And these two plots have been differentiated not merely in locality, interest, action: they have been differentiated in *texture*. Essentially, in this one drama two different kinds of play have been going on, calling, on our part, for two quite perceptibly distinct mental attitudes. Where Falstaff, especially, is concerned it has meant that a whole set of moral responses which we customarily bring to bear—and which we bring to bear here in the other part of the play—is automatically swung out of action; a whole set of values is held in abeyance while we enjoy Falstaff. There is little use in saying that we both enjoy him and disapprove of him; the enjoyment is so intense that the disapproval (so long as we are responding naturally and not reflecting in afterthought) is and must be utterly ineffective.

Then, all of a sudden, after two whole plays of *not* judging, we are called on to judge. Shakespeare has done something, no doubt, to soften the jar: the shadier side of Falstaff has been more in evidence in Part II than in Part I; but all that he has been able to do will not really suffice. Falstaff is violently transported from one dramatic plane to another. Naturally we feel that there is an unfairness somewhere, though we are often a little puzzled to locate it. The root of the matter, surely, lies in this technical necessity of, at the end, joining two different and not perfectly compatible kinds of drama, and making them one kind. It is as if we had been listening, in alternation, to two melodies: the melody of the main-plot and the melody of the sub-plot; and

they are in different keys. But the very last note of Falstaff's story is played, not in its own key, but in the other. The result is a sharp discord.

I turn for the present, however, to a slighter matter, but one where the issues are perfectly definite: the aftermath of Gad's Hill, and especially the passage in which Falstaff mounts the scale of the assailants in buckram suits—two, four, seven, nine, eleven—who set upon him. Falstaff enters damning all cowards; then after a little the narrative begins. There were a hundred upon poor four of them. At the Prince's protesting cry Falstaff makes a slight abatement: he alone took on a *dozen*, anyway. A moment later it is "sixteen at least", as he and Gadshill compete in enumeration. "Then come in the other", and if fifty, or two and three and fifty were not upon poor old Jack, he is no two-legged creature.

Then the narrative takes the turn that the audience have been waiting for: "Nay, that's past praying for: I have peppered two of them; two I am sure I have paid, two rogues in buckram suits". The account continues:

*Fal.* 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. Four rogues in buckram let drive at me——

*Prince.* What, four? thou saidst but two even now.

*Fal.* Four, Hal; I told thee four.

*Poins.* Ay, ay, he said four.

*Fal.* These four came all a-front, 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.

*Fal.* In buckram?

*Poins.* Ay, four, in buckram suits.

*Fal.* Seven, by these hilts, or I am a villain else.

*Prince.* Prithee, let him alone; we shall have more anon.

*Fal.* Dost thou hear me, Hal?

*Prince.* Ay, and mark thee too, Jack.

*Fal.* Do so, for it is worth the listening to. These nine in buckram that told thee of——

*Prince.* So, two more already.

*Fal.* Their points being broken——

*Poins.* Down fell their hose.

*Fal.* Began to give me ground; but I followed me close, came in foot and hand and with a thought seven of the eleven I paid.

*Prince.* O monstrous! eleven buckram men grown out of two.

(II. iv. 213)<sup>2</sup>

2 The references are to *The Globe Shakespeare*.

What is to be made of it? Does it mean that in some way Falstaff is "in the know"? Is he conscious of what is happening as he climbs the impossible ladder of exaggeration—four, seven, nine, eleven? Is he in the joke, is he doing it deliberately, and has he winked at the audience or in some way contrived to let *them* know what is really going on? Most modern editors and critics still answer "yes", to all these questions.

Professor Dover Wilson's view (arrived at after some hesitation) is that Falstaff must have been "in the know" from the very start. That is, he really did (as he claims later) recognize his assailants at Gad's Hill. The present scene, therefore, is mere play-acting on his part from start to finish—he never expected to be believed—and Shakespeare intended at least the "brighter sort" to gather as much from the dialogue and the stage business, a "secret understanding" being built up in this way between Falstaff and the audience.

I think that in this interpretation Professor Wilson is being a little disloyal to his own basic tenets. It is one of his principles (applied again and again to the great illumination of these very plays) that one must never lose sight of the actual conditions of theatrical performance. He has a half-sense himself that he is forsaking that principle here, but he sees no help for it.<sup>3</sup> The "arithmetical progression" of those numbers is too much to swallow: it is simply impossible to think that Falstaff at this point still expected to be believed; and nothing seems left, therefore, but to conclude that he had been laughing at the Prince and Poins, "behind his hand", from the very outset of the scene.

This interpretation has to face, not one or two difficulties, but a whole cluster of them. First as to "theatre", and the natural, obvious impressions of the scene. Professor Wilson himself, though he feels he must conclude that this is what Shakespeare was driving at, confesses that only "the judicious" had much chance of taking such a meaning; the duller members of the audience would have continued in the belief that Falstaff was (so to say) in earnest, that he really was trying to "put over" his story. Think, then, what we have. Poins and the Prince are laughing at Falstaff; he, secretly, is laughing at them; nine-tenths of the audience (the "barren" sort) believe with the Prince and Poins that the joke is on Falstaff; the other tenth know that it isn't and are themselves laughing *outright* at the Prince and Poins (because *their* legs are being pulled) and *secretly* at the rest of

3 See *The Fortunes of Falstaff*, 1944, p. 52.

the audience (because *theirs* are being pulled too). And Shakespeare must have known as well as anyone that it would turn out this way. Can we really believe that he planned the scene on such terms?

Second: there is a remark of Falstaff's at the very end of the passage that is surely of significance in this connexion (II.iv.310):

*Prince.* Content: and the argument shall be thy running away.

*Fal.* Ah, no more of that, Hal, an thou lovest me!

What does this mean? Does it not mean that if Falstaff ever blushed he was blushing now, that he was feeling just the least bit silly, that in short he really had been found out, and knew it? What point would there be in such a reply, with its deprecatory air, if Falstaff had had the laugh on them all along? Professor Wilson brushes it aside with the comment—in which for once, it seems to me, he out-Bradleys Bradley—that it shows Falstaff “humouring” the Prince.<sup>4</sup>

And there are many other things that such an interpretation renders pointless. The Prince asks Bardolph how Falstaff's sword came to be so hacked, and poor Bardolph lets him into the secret. Falstaff hacked it himself and got the others to tickle their noses with speargrass so that they might bloody their clothes. Are we to understand that Falstaff insisted on this degree of realism and circumstantiality, though he knew perfectly well all the time that they were not going to be believed? This would have been going one better than the actor in Dickens who blacked his body all over every time he played Othello. It will be recollected, again, that it is a long time before the Prince and Poins cease teasing Falstaff about the “instinct” that made him run away, a long time before they stop pulling his leg about his having known them as well as the Lord that made them. *They*, at all events, never drop to the truth of the matter—never to the very end of the plays.

Professor Kittredge<sup>5</sup> has a slightly different theory: he compromises. He cannot bring himself to believe that Falstaff was aware of the facts from the very beginning; but equally he cannot believe that Falstaff remained unaware of them to the very end. At a certain point in the dialogue, he thinks—he is even prepared to indicate the exact spot—Falstaff “caught on”: became suspicious, and then became quite sure, that the Prince had played

4 *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

5 *Henry IV*, ed. G. L. Kittredge, 1940.

him a trick. At this he changed his tactics, began to burlesque his own style, to exaggerate as a counter-measure—for the mere fun of it, and also to provide himself with a good reply if presently (as now he was pretty sure would happen) he were taxed. Kittredge thinks that Falstaff's suspicions turned into certainties at about the line "Ay, ay, he said four".

Professor Wilson's retort to this is that it is treating the drama as if it were a novel. I think it is, though much the same complaint could be brought against Professor Wilson's own view. It is not true, perhaps, to say absolutely that Kittredge's reading could not be conveyed: in principle, an actor could convey such a meaning, no doubt. But one is at least justified in wondering whether, in all the circumstances of the scene, he could convey it. As for the text as it stands, it gives, of course, no indication—not the slightest—that at this or that point Falstaff "caught on".

But we still have the difficulty of the "arithmetical progression". That passage, indeed, is the real difficulty: if it were not there, there would be no talk of Falstaff's having recognized the Prince, there would be no argument about the scene at all. The mounting numbers are the crux. Could Falstaff have expected still to be believed—could he have remained unconscious of the absurdity of what he was saying—*there?*

The answer is: no—if this were happening in real life; but because it is happening in a play, and because a Shakespearean play can be of variable texture—yes.

The logic of the passage, I would suggest, is as follows. It has an obvious psychological basis in the heightenings, the embellishments, the improvings, the pilings-on of one who is telling a sensational and highly successful yarn. I need not labour this point, or the equally obvious one that Falstaff's self-contradictions here quite outdo anything in nature. In real life—or by the conventions of even a moderately realistic play—the "arithmetical progression" would be more than improbable, it would be impossible. Very well: for the moment or two required Shakespeare changes the conventions, and then a second or two later changes them back again. (This, of course, is merely the critical interpretation of what went on. I do not mean for a moment to suggest that Shakespeare thought of what he was doing in this light—he was too expert at the game to have to think about such a trifle as this at all; or that audiences while they are watching such a scene say to themselves: "Ah, a change of convention!" They respond instinctively.) The scene rises at this point to a

climax of what is nothing less than vaudeville; that is its quality just here. Just for these few moments the realistic conventions drop away: we make a quick readjustment of attitude (all, of course, quite instinctively and unconsciously): we accept the scene as the ultimate burlesque, the *reductio ad absurdum* of the sort of exaggeration that is a familiar part of our daily experience. This, at least, is what we should do—not asking *how* Falstaff could have expected to be believed (as the editor of the new Variorum text asks); knowing perfectly well that—if the play were still continuing on a realistic basis—he could never have expected it; but *granting*, for the fun, that he *does* expect it.

The implication is that Falstaff, while he is going up the scale of those numbers, steps slightly out of rôle; and that, as I see it, is so. He is, for the moment, a more abstract Falstaff, a Falstaff whose identity has been merged, just for these few instants, with that of a typical vaudeville comedian. It is all over so quickly that there is little chance of real disturbance under the actual conditions of the theatre, or of rapid, natural reading. If the passage had lasted much longer there *would* have been a chance of real disturbance; the audience would have felt a strangeness coming over the scene. We are, that is to say, near the limit of tolerance—for audiences; far beyond it, needless to say, for critics, or for leisurely, probing, inquisitive readers; for it is precisely the extremity of the variation here from the normal texture of the underplot that is behind the endless puzzlement over the passage and debate upon it.

The process I have described is not subtle or unusual or in any way extraordinary; it may be observed in film-comedies any day of the week. In these the variations of texture can be of the wildest, yet audiences accept the variations with the greatest ease. Such a comedy will often begin on what is to all appearances a normal, fairly realistic basis, and for a while the humour may be on that level, quite credible and life-like. But if such a comedy is featuring a comedian whose specialty is rollicking farce then the audience knows perfectly well that the realism is but temporary. Presently the tempo will liven, the quality of the fun will grow more and more extravagant, until we reach (it may be) the plane of sheer vaudeville. On this plane the comedy may continue for half an hour—all its central stretch. Then the fun may subside somewhat, we may begin a descent of the planes again. Presently (the conventions, as it were, gradually changing back) we find ourselves on the level of ordinary, credible comedy

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on which we began. (This is not an imaginary picture. I jot down the scheme, in fact, from the general drift of such a comedy seen only the other day. Readers may test the matter for themselves.)

I am not suggesting that such comedies are good art, any more than I suggest that the particular variation in question in *Henry IV* is good art, though it furnishes an effective enough climax. In itself, however, the passage is not nearly as funny as the comedy that surrounds it; it is cruder, thinner. And in our studies, poring over the play, we feel this comparative thinness and crudity, and set about attempting to enrich the texture of the passage at the same time as we are removing its incredibility. I merely make the point that these variations of texture—or mountings and descendings of planes within the action—are commonplaces of popular comedy, and probably always have been; and that the Falstaffian comedy, so much richer in its characteristic veins, is capable, within fairly strict limits, of similar variations; and that it is such a variation here, and nothing else, that has caused all the difficulty and the bother.

I add one further note. The attitude of the Prince and Poin throughout the whole scene is obviously of the greatest importance. From start to finish of it they give the audience the cues. They tell the audience, in the first place, what to expect. The jest is to consist in the "incomprehensible lies" that the fat rogue will tell, and in the refuting of them: "lies", be it noted, not just (in Professor Wilson's phrase) "a feast of braggadocio"<sup>6</sup>; they are looking for more than that. The audience, in short, are given a plain "tip" to look forward to the confounding of Falstaff. And they are not disappointed: he *is* confounded, utterly. But even while the confounding is in process—while the Prince delivers the true tale—he is pulling himself together. The Prince's speech is a fairly long one—ample time for Falstaff; by the end of it he is ready. Out he comes with the most magnificent lie of all, the superlative fabrication that by its very unexpected outrageousness brings down the house and sets all the audience laughing *with* him again: "By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye".

Again, in the crucial passage itself the attitude of the Prince and Poin is, I think, decisive. They, of course, never suspect that Falstaff is not contradicting himself in all innocence. They are careful not to bring him to a complete halt, they nudge one

6 *Op. cit.*, p. 55.



another, they wink, perhaps, at the audience ("Ay, and mark thee too, Jack"). At all events there is surely not an atom of doubt that it is *they* and the audience who are in league just here, not the audience and Falstaff. In any scene of this type, that is the natural, almost the inevitable situation, the audience taking their lead from those on the stage who are busy drawing out the comedian. If they do not respond in this way it will only be because of some absolutely decisive prompting. Is there really room for such prompting here? Falstaff has begun in a tone of indignation ("A plague of all cowards", "A King's son", and so on) and he keeps it up. He is acting the part of one who wants to be believed, and there is no indication that he diverges from the part. In the "arithmetical progression" piece itself Falstaff's *tone* does not alter: "Four, Hal; I told thee four" (wagging an admonitory finger); "In buckram?" (the fatuous, earnest, distinction-drawing tone, as if to say: "Mind, I'm talking about the *buckram* ones now: don't get confused"); "Dost thou hear me, Hal?" (he will permit no slackness of attention). To my mind, at least, the fun is spoilt if we imagine that somewhere hereabouts he relaxed his attitude, began to show that he was enjoying his own performance, started to share the joke with the audience. But more than that. If we take the tone of each remark as it comes (in the way I have just clumsily tried to do) I do not think that we *can* imagine his relaxing; the two attitudes are not really compatible.

I need hardly add that unless Falstaff's enjoyment of his joke is manifest to someone—if not to the Prince and Poins, then at least to the audience—it does not exist. To say that he is enjoying his joke secretly is to say something that does not make dramatic sense.<sup>7</sup>

7 Since the foregoing was written I have had an opportunity of hearing some details of the recent presentation in London of the *Henry* plays by the Lawrence Olivier company. It is interesting (though not surprising) to learn that Mr Ralph Richardson as Falstaff took the "arithmetical progression" passage easily in his stride, and that at this point there was not the slightest suggestion of collusion between Falstaff and the audience.

Miss Sheila G. Mackay (whom I commissioned to observe for me) writes: "Falstaff (Ralph Richardson) doesn't recognise the Prince and Poins at the hold-up. Later, telling the tale, he plays it straight—he makes as good a story as he can get away with. He doesn't know that the Prince and Poins know. He probably forgets (what with his own imagination and the interruptions) his latest exaggeration. It is a genuine shock when they challenge him. 'Is not the truth the truth?' says