

*theatre*  
at UBC  
A COMPANION GUIDE



The  
*Falstaff*  
Project

A WORLD PREMIERE BY  
ERROL DURBACH



# The Falstaff Project

An adaptation and collage of Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Parts I and II*  
(with additional material drawn from other plays by Shakespeare)

written by  
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**Frederic Wood Theatre**



*theatre*  
at UBC

In the interest of promoting our creative work and encouraging theatre studies in our community,  
Theatre at UBC proudly presents this Companion Guide to *The Falstaff Project*.



*Falstaff*, Frederick William Davis, 1907

# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

*The Falstaff Project* is a “contraction” of four of Shakespeare’s linked historical plays – *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and *Henry Fifth*. Most of the material is taken from the plays in which Falstaff appears, so that the first and last plays in the series are incorporated only slightly. In other words, about twelve hours of performance time (or more) have been contracted into about two-and-a-half hours; and many of the historical events in the series have been truncated. *The Falstaff Project* is coherent (we hope), but not entirely self-contained. For this reason we offer the following items of information to supply some of the historical background to the events onstage.

You need to know, firstly, that Henry IV has not acquired the throne of England by hereditary succession or by Divine Right. His conscience is troubled (and his hands are bloody) because he is a usurper – he has deposed his predecessor, King Richard, an incompetent and vacillating ruler, and has given vague but unmistakable orders for Richard to be killed. Henry IV is king of England because he has grabbed power; and even if he is better suited to rule than Richard, his legitimacy and his ethical position are in considerable doubt. He has sleepless nights wrestling with his guilt, and fearing that he will be passing a polluted dynasty on to his son. Moreover, what moral authority can a “criminal” father exercise over his delinquent son? How can he possibly demand of his family, and his subjects, the sort of loyalty that legitimate kingship requires for social and political stability? This is Henry IV’s predicament at the beginning of *The Falstaff Project*. His only response to the dilemma is to try to rally the nation behind him and lead them on a Crusade to the Holy Land. His strategy, in dire political straits, is a desperate form of distraction.

This predicament is exacerbated, moreover, by active rebellion among King Henry’s former associates. The Percy Family – Northumberland, his son Harry Hotspur, and other northern warlords – who sided with Henry against Richard II and supported him in his coup, now resent his unwillingness to give them what they take to be their due. Contemptuous of the very man they put in power, they plot to restore the English throne to its rightful heir: the dead King Richard’s next-in-line, the Earl of Mortimer – who happens (rather conveniently) to be a member of the Percy family. The play begins with political disruption and the Percy Family’s rebellion that finally erupts into civil war; and it is against this background that King Henry tries desperately to reconcile with his son, and hand on a kingdom cleansed of his own wrongdoing. Little wonder that the Prince of Wales is a very reluctant heir to this political mess. But we watch him rise to the bloody occasion – in his own particular way.

# THE FALSTAFF PROJECT

by ERROL DURBACH

Department of Theatre, Film, and Creative Writing

*The Falstaff Project* has been excavated from Shakespeare's tetralogy of History Plays that chronicle the government of England from Richard II to Henry V – a formidable terrain covering the assassination of Richard, civil warfare, the uneasy reign of Henry IV, and the career of the Prince of Wales who will become a national hero and lead his army against the French. How to encompass all this in 2.5 hours? Obviously by cutting and pasting and selecting a story line from the mass of available material – and then finding a focus and a theme that hold the whole unwieldy chronicle together.

One theme is clearly political, and discourses on power, authority, rule, and the forces that operate within a kingdom and vie for precedence. Henry IV is a “public relations” ruler, whose tenuous claim to a kingdom snatched by violence from the legitimate King drives him to strategies of desperate distraction. His authority is implicitly challenged, in Shakespeare's artful structure, by the anarchic and law defying Falstaff, on the one hand, and by the incorrigible rebel-hero Hotspur, on the other. How legitimate is any claim to rule that derives from a lawless action against the rightful King? How can Henry IV establish a dynasty of good government and order to pass on to his heir? And is the example he sets the Prince of Wales any less heinous than the overt flouting of all order by the life-affirming but criminal tutor of his riots, Sir John Falstaff? Exemplary models of good government are not available in this world, and the Prince's choices – Westminster where his father struggles to hold on to power, and the Tavern where Falstaff reigns in total disregard of law – make choice itself an existential problem. The Prince's solution, like all solutions in the play, calls seriously into question the possibility of any humane



Errol Durbach

and decent political order – or the feasibility of a hero-king who can assert his sovereignty only by the sort of imperial conquest that leaves us aghast at its aggression.

The other major theme is the archetypal relationship of fathers and sons: the Prince's fractured allegiance to (at least) two models of fatherhood, two ways of engaging with the world, two demands upon his self-definition. On the one hand there is the voice, compromised by political expediency, that speaks of moral obligation without exemplifying it. On the other, there is the voice that counsels pleasure without

the Falstaff principle – often leaves us humanly diminished and, in Prince Henry's case, even more terrifying than Henry IV as Political Man

moral consideration and denies any value-system beyond self-gratification. Henry's parenting is repellent, amounting to little more than cold instruction in political cunning and emotional blackmail. Falstaff's parenting is vastly more attractive, but a fallible basis for government because eternally pre-adolescent. Trapped between noblesse oblige and delinquent fun, the Prince must choose between the sort of extremes we always encounter in drama, if not in life; and his choice is finally defined as a necessary hatefulness. It is clarified, for him, by the Lord Chief Justice (the paternalism of the Lawful State) who puts the issue very clearly to the new King: “Make the case your own. You be the father, and think upon your son.” Nothing converts license into obedience more than the responsibility of parenthood and family and State. But what we must deny in the process of political maturity – the Falstaff principle – often leaves us humanly diminished and, in Prince Henry's case, even more terrifying than Henry IV as Political Man.

Philostrate:

*Ah, Master Shakespeare! Welcome to the court.  
Her Majesty, of late, has been distraught  
By the dumbing-down and dullness of our stage.*

Shakespeare:

*My Lord of Revels, must we needs converse  
In tedious ta-dums of rhyming verse?  
I'm sick of it. I flatly must reject it.*

Philostrate:

*Why not? — Send for Durbach! Send for Wright!  
They'll edit Henry Four Parts One and Two.  
If Ibsen could endure it, so can you!*

From the Prologue, *The Falstaff Project*

# FALSTAFF ON STAGE AND SCREEN

by TONY DAWSON  
Department of English

Ever since it was written, the first part of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* has been extremely popular, and the reason is Falstaff. The play was frequently performed and reprinted during Shakespeare's lifetime: there are many contemporary references to Falstaff and the published title pages draw repeated attention to the "conceited mirth" or the "humorous conceits" of the jovial knight. In a 1662 engraving (the first ever of a Shakespearean character), Falstaff is pictured at the front of a thrust stage with a huge goblet in his hand, lording it over the hostess. There is even a story, probably apocryphal but nevertheless indicative of his stage appeal, that Queen Elizabeth herself was so taken with Falstaff that she expressed the hope of seeing "Sir John in love"; and so Shakespeare obliged by writing *Merry Wives of Windsor*. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Falstaff, and to a lesser degree Hotspur, were the star attractions, and the actual hero of the *Henry* plays, Prince Hal, remained in the background. But in the middle of the twentieth century, theatres in Britain began the trend of presenting *Henry IV Parts One and Two* in a cycle along with *Richard II* and *Henry V*, and this move brought Hal to the forefront, since the larger story of the transformation of the prodigal prince into a great national leader highlighted the politics of kingship over the festivity of misrule.

*Part Two*, since Shakespeare's own day, has not been so popular as *Part One*; its politics are more cynical and its Falstaff less appealing. Whether it was ever performed by Shakespeare's company in tandem with *Part One* is uncertain, nor is there any evidence that Shakespeare planned to write a "tetralogy" (a sequence of four plays), though he in effect ended up with one. However, as early as 1622, the two parts of *Henry IV* were condensed and produced as a single play, as they frequently have been since (the UBC production being the latest example). In 1622, as in all subsequent abridged versions, most of the lines (almost 70%) were taken from the first part, mainly because *Part Two* is more sombre; Falstaff himself is sick and obsessed with money, and in the end he is banished. But the darkness of the second play has given it a special appeal to modern audiences, and recent performances have often emphasized the decay of the vibrant society depicted in *Part One* and the dubious political morality of Hal's rise to power.

At the Old Vic in 1944, in a production of the two plays, Ralph Richardson epitomized the quality that many have identified as the key to Falstaff, namely a "jubilant brain", or what Richardson himself called "alacrity of mind"; balancing Richardson (for *Part One*), Laurence Olivier's Hotspur was romantic, impulsive and elegant, with a memorable stammer on the letter "w". Pathos was the dominant tone of both their ends. In 1951 (as part of the "Festival of Britain") and again in 1964, (under the auspices of the Royal Shakespeare Company) the whole cycle of four was produced at Stratford-on-Avon. The 1951 version, the first ever of such cycles,

aimed at the development of heroism in Hal (Richard Burton) and the need to reject the temptations offered by Falstaff (Anthony Quayle). In 1964, the cycle followed a "war of the Roses" sequence of the year before (comprising the three *Henry VI* plays—reduced to two—and *Richard III*), so that the heroism and mirth of *Henry IV* were seen in the context of the bloody, pointless battles and vicious political opportunism that would follow *Henry V*'s triumph. The tone was darker than in 1951, the style Brechtian, suspicions of political machination heavy in the '60s air. Twenty odd years later (1986-89), in the seven play cycle produced by the English Shakespeare Company (irreverent rival to the RSC), the tone was even darker. The series began with *Henry IV* and *V*, and was characterized by muscular and rude political critique, combined with a rough and ready, proletarian style. In recent productions, the politics of the plays have been less blunt, and successful performances have tended to return to character as it affects the complicated human dealings that are the essence of these plays. Two years ago, I saw the beginning of yet another cycle at Stratford, with *Richard II* and the two parts of *Henry IV* performed in different venues with different directors and styles. The idea was to move away from a single over-riding meaning and instead wrest personal significance out of each episode. The scenes in Shallow's garden, both yearningly nostalgic and sharply funny, were as memorable as anything I've seen in the theatre.

A final word on what is probably the most successful, if perhaps also the most perverse, attempt to reduce the two *Henry IV* plays to one, Orson Welles' brilliant film *Chimes at Midnight*, produced shortly after the RSC cycle in 1964. Predictably, most of its text derives from *Part One*, but it is cut and rearranged to such a degree that the spoken language is thoroughly subordinated to the visual, Shakespeare's speeches having to "contend with the wind of a truly open space", as one critic put it. If Falstaff had made films, says another, "he would have made something like this one". Both stylistically and thematically, the film is organized around the rejection of the central character (i.e. Falstaff, played by Welles), foreshadowing it in several ways, and offering a mocking perspective on the ways of monarchs. While the film focuses on Falstaff, it paradoxically displaces him at every turn. That might be an epitome of the whole stage tradition, Falstaff dominating the play's ethical stance as well as its history, imposing himself on an audience that cannot help but love him but for whom his values must at the same time be troubling.



Engraving  
(c. 1662)  
The earliest published depiction of Falstaff and Mistress Quickly

# REALPOLITIK WITHIN A PLAY ABOUT REALPOLITIK: INTRIGUE WITHIN INTRIGUE

by NEIL FREEMAN

Department of Theatre, Film and Creative Writing

As the controversy rages as to the inner nature of Falstaff – arguably the second most popular character Shakespeare created (after Hamlet) – so there was equal controversy over the character’s creation.

The current play, based on the two *Henry IV* plays (and others), deals with clashes of duty versus self-preservation, friendship versus manipulation, and old-boy cronyism versus the new realities presented by Machiavelli affecting both Hal and Falstaff – all neatly packaged in the decline of chivalry set against the decline of old age of both Falstaff and England itself. But the on-stage *realpolitik* was matched by a contemporary political intrigue affecting Shakespeare himself.

The whole controversy might stem from Samuel Johnson’s tribute — namely that Falstaff is a character loaded with faults . . . Yet the man thus corrupt, thus despicable, makes himself necessary to the prince that despises him by the most pleasing of all qualities, personal gaiety.

Shakespeare was known to avoid conflict whenever possible, usually by presenting both sides of an argument, especially after the unfortunate consequences of playing the entire deposition scene from *Richard II*, banned by Elizabeth I, prior to the ill-fated Essex rebellion. Nevertheless, in his creation of Falstaff, Shakespeare’s political acumen let him down once more. Indeed, it was these very Falstaffian “faults” that led to an astonishing piece of *realpolitik* on Shakespeare’s part, for the character was not originally known as Falstaff but as Sir John Oldcastle; and this fact quickly threatened to land Shakespeare in a great deal of potential political trouble. In the Epilogue to *Henry IV Part Two*, Shakespeare offers an apology. Referring to a future play – presumably *The Life of Henry the Fifth* in which paradoxically the Oldcastle-Falstaff figure dies offstage without ever making an appearance – Shakespeare writes: Fal-staffe shall dye of a sweat, unlesse he already be kill’d with your hard Opinions: For Old-Castle dyed a Martyr, and this is not the man.

The problem was that though historically there was an Oldcastle at the time of Henry IV (nowhere near the Vice figure Shakespeare portrays), his powerful descendants included members of the Cobham (Brooke) family, the 7th Lord of which had held the post of Lord Chamberlain to

Queen Elizabeth. The 8th Lord protested against Shakespeare’s use of the family name, and it was hastily changed to “Falstaff” – a cowardly character already seen in one of Shakespeare’s earlier plays, *The First part of Henry the Sixth* where we first come across Sir John Falstaff (or “Fastolfe” as the real personage was known). So expeditious was the change that the Frontispiece of the 1598 Quarto edition of *Henry IV* contains the proclamation “with the humorous conceits of Sir John Falstaffe”.

the character was not originally known as Falstaff but as Sir John Oldcastle; and this fact quickly threatened to land Shakespeare in a great deal of potential political trouble

This renaming was more than expeditious. It underlines the whole of the Falstaff-Oldcastle experience throughout the Shakespearean canon, and the evolution of “Fastolfe” from an early to a mature conception of his character. As Errol Durbach has put it, “Shakespeare’s yanking of this name out of *Henry VI Part One*, and then embellishing and transforming Falstaff’s cowardice into a pragmatic apologia for self-preservation in *Henry IV* is very apropos”.



John Henderson  
as Falstaff  
George Romney  
1780

# THE FALSTAFF PROJECT

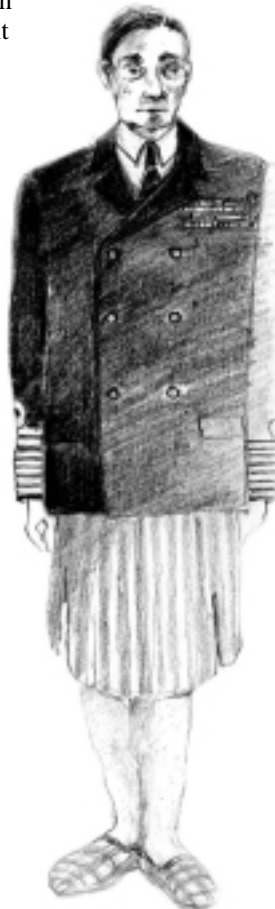
This has been a wonderful show to work on. The biggest challenge has been what to do with the king's army, the rebels, and the nobility of both. In an effort to encompass all wars, initial thoughts ranged from retro to futuristic, from *Chimes at Midnight* to *Road Warrior*. Floating design ideas eventually became anchored by the flesh and blood of Shakespeare's rich characters and the process evolved with the introduction of elements from different periods which seemed suitable. We found ourselves lurking between 1910 and 1980. After the usual research we pulled all possible military uniform pieces from stock, and I made many visits to various army surplus stores. Wishing to avoid specific armies, ranks, countries, etc., in any one uniform, we chose them all and mixed them up, pinning and draping the various bits and pieces on a dummy until an outfit emerged that felt appropriate. If something looked like "costume" as opposed to "clothing", it was pitched. Without a body present they looked like ghosts, with stories to tell. The Director wanted the nobility to fight with swords – a symbol of honour. As an audience, you must judge how successful we have been in combining archaic weapons with modern artillery.

To be able to discuss all aspects of staging with the Director is a rare occurrence and very inspiring in the design process. Adding the actor to the mix brings a drawing to life, and can change and enrich the original design. The fitting is where it happens. As I write this, I anticipate our first fitting with Steve Miller. It will become real at that moment.

Marti Wright  
Costume Designer



Mistress Quickly



Henry IV



Hotspur

set and lighting design by  
**ROBERT GARDINER**  
costume design by  
**MARTI WRIGHT**  
sound and video design by  
**AMOS HERTZMAN**



Prince Hal



Falstaff

# SIR JOHN FALSTAFF

by BRYAN GOOCH  
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The role of Sir John Falstaff is in many ways, both in *Henry IV Part One* and *Henry IV Part Two*, markedly comic. His appearance, clever banter, and antics offer a clear contrast to the tensions of the court and the rebel camps, and provide many opportunities for laughter. Yet behind the jolly guise of Shakespeare's famous fat knight is a character both dangerous and despicable, a sharp lesson (deriving from the morality play) on the perils of pride, gluttony, sloth — in fact, all of the seven deadly sins, as Shakespeare's own audience would have recognized. Sin and evil are particularly successful while their pleasant façade remains intact. The audience must, in these plays as in others, distinguish appearance from reality, just as the characters in the play have to do; and Falstaff, a grotesque caricature of a knight, lacking in decorum and responsibility and focused purely on self-interest and gratification, needs to be identified for what he really is — a misleader of youth, Prince Hal — and thus a threat not only to himself but to the state.

Hal's first words to Falstaff in *Henry IV Part One* (I.ii) offer a clear assessment of the old Knight's behaviour; and Hal's summation of his own judgement of his ale-house friends (I.iii), after the plans for the Gads Hill robbery and the way in which Hal and Poin will deprive Falstaff and his cohorts of their booty, makes clear that the Prince is under no illusions about his law-breaking companions. Nonetheless, the fact is that Hal spends time in their company, neglecting his duties at court (on the weak rationalization that he is learning about the wide range of his future subjects), and thus Falstaff becomes the antithetical pull to draw Hal away from the King and into disrepute, creating an image of Hal as weak



King Henry IV, The Last Scene James Gillray 1788

and irresponsible, a reputation that will haunt Hal even as King in the early part of *Henry V*.

Not only is there the matter of trying to drag Hal into a capital crime, but also (in *Henry IV Part One*) the audience sees Falstaff as an example of the bad captain, taking advantage of the King's Press to pocket money in allowing fit men to avoid battle while proceeding to the conflict in Shrewsbury with a hapless rag-tag of conscripts utterly unsuited to wars (IV.ii) — hardly an attempt to strengthen the King's side. He is without conscience, a man for whom "honour" is only a word; and his behaviour during the battle (V.iii, iv), feigning

It is not difficult to be taken in,  
to some degree, by Falstaff

death and stabbing the dead Hotspur, cements the impression of a cowardly and dishonest courtier who will engage in sheer fraud to feather his own proverbial nest. And not even the momentary humour deriving from the bottle of sack in his holster can absolve him from that judgement. His interest in Hal is based on his concern for his own future, for he foolishly believes that with Hal as his king his needs will be utterly satisfied.

Falstaff in *Henry IV Part Two* is unchanged — he is still the obese, witty reprobate, though his wit, in which he takes pride, is never a match for that of the Prince in either play. Here the symbolic polarity of his position is even more obvious in his opposition to the Lord Chief Justice (and hence to the crown, and to order and stability). Hal, who has reverted to his old ways, must choose between misrule and rule. Again, the superficially amusing scenes involving Falstaff show him for what he is — a false friend, willing to slander the Prince behind his back (II.iv), an abuser of his military responsibility once more in his larcenous approach to impressments (III.ii) and the foolish Justices Shallow and Silence (V.i), and an arrogant knave in his assumption — on hearing of Hal's accession to the throne — that "the young King is sick for me. Let us take any man's horses — the laws of England are at my commandment. Blessed are they that have been my friends, and woe to my lord Chief Justice!" (V.iv) Falstaff's false confidence in Hal's favour is justly rewarded with a merciful banishment, for the new King, in confirming the continuation of the Lord Chief Justice's role, accepts responsibility and rejects misrule (V.ii) and hence must turn his back on his wayward excursions and remove from his presence any suggestion of the sinful life his sometime would-be surrogate father represents (V.v).

It is not difficult to be taken in, to some degree, by Falstaff — to laugh at him and even, at times, with him — but ultimately Hal's recognition of the nature of Falstaff and the Boar's Head Tavern crowd with his succinct "I know you all..." speech (*Henry IV, Part One*, II.ii) comes home to the audience: the licentiousness Falstaff represents cannot be condoned or tolerated at court even if such indecorous behaviour is part of the real world Shakespeare so broadly reflects.

# PRINCE HAL

by KATHERINE SIRLUCK

Department of English

Prince Hal is the protagonist of a romantic tale engineered within a political frame. It tells of a prodigal prince, an Eastcheap tavern reveler, notorious for his flouting of established authority, whose approaching reign the nation dreads. This wastrel, with a miraculous reversal of expectation, confounds all predictions and becomes an ideal king, uniting the English and leading them to victory against the hated French.

Central to the structuring of the Henry plays is the *Pyschomachia* (battle of the soul) of the English Morality plays, where personified Virtues and Vices struggle for control of a human being. Hal is the Everyman character, torn between Virtue (Hotspur's Chivalry and the Lord Chief Justice's Order of Law) on the one hand and Vice (Falstaff as Idleness and Riot) on the other. But Shakespeare's use of this model is ironic, for in choosing Virtue (Hotspur) Hal must kill a noble opponent, thus debasing the very Honour he obtains; and in rejecting Vice (Falstaff), Hal commits a greater indecency, perhaps, than the tavern misdeeds he must leave behind.

Shakespeare's use of sources is a weaving of fact and invention which reveals his objectives. He invents, for example, Hal's rescue of his father from Douglas at the battle of Shrewsbury. He makes Hal and Hotspur the same age, so that King Henry can plausibly compare the two "youths", and wish that Hotspur were his son instead of the "good-for-nothing" Hal. This generates the deadly rivalry in Hal's breast, which constitutes his driving emotion in *Part I*. His burning need to kill Hotspur, and thereby redeem his own reputation in his father's eyes, is what makes Hal human, while at the same time revealing his ruthlessness. Yet we may question to what degree Hal's emotion is authentic. Perhaps he has created this rivalry deliberately, together with his "prodigal" persona, as part of a public relations scheme. Is Hal's disreputable life in the London underworld an adolescent rebellion against his father and the constraints of royalty awaiting him? Or is it an effective means of distancing himself from the blood-guilt with which his father's usurpation of the crown, and murder of Richard II, have stained the Lancastrian line?

Hal has been seen by some critics as "an engaging scapegrace" who transforms himself into "one of the most admired of English kings" (Maynard Mack). But for others, he is the perfect politician, whose "interiority" or private self is entirely devoted to self-promotion; a master spin-doctor, who can turn his own degradation into a narrative that captures the popular imagination. We observe Hal's charm, wit, and force of personality, and above all his skill in manipulating people; but we also note the devastation he leaves in the wake of his transformation from wild boy to sober king. Hal's most obvious "crime" is his rejection of Falstaff, who believes Hal loves him, and has built castles in the air as a result. The Prince claims to be at home among the people, a friend of the common man; but he plays cruel pranks upon Francis the tapster, and reveals his contempt for his tavern companions. We also note Hal's distant relationship to father and brothers, his taking of the crown before the breath has left his father's body, and his

over-adroit excuse for doing so. He invades France – upon a flimsy pretext – as a ploy to deflect the public gaze away from the illegitimacy of his family's claim to the throne. Hal briefly unifies an England ravaged by civil war, but he does so through foreign military aggression, which leaves a tent full of English children dead, and he fails to stop the spilling of English blood, which continues into the reign of his son, Henry VI.

Hal is like his father, a strategist; but where Henry IV dies weary and tainted by regicide, Hal is a phoenix rising from the ashes in a burnished armour of chivalric "honour" stolen from the dead Hotspur. His new sobriety and aura of authority are purchased by his public rejection of Falstaff, who serves as the scapegoat, to whose charge all Hal's youthful follies may be laid. In contrast to Hotspur, who is rash, brave, and easily manipulated – a hero of lost causes — Hal is cool, efficient, a winner. In his attraction to Falstaff, Hal reveals a side of himself that we can relate to: a side which wants to live and be merry, to escape from responsibility, thirsty for pleasure, fun, and subversion. Falstaff embodies the topsy-turvy realm of carnival; he is the Lord of Mis-Rule, a corpulent English Dionysus. In his rejection of Falstaff, Hal stands for that part of us that will sacrifice pleasure and even affection in order to achieve power and status. It may be a choice that Hal must make, but it is not one that endears him to the audience.

Through Hal, Shakespeare paradoxically displays the charisma of the monarchy, and demystifies it at the same time. While Hal is the undervalued, misfit son, we root for him, desiring the reversal of fortune he promises us right at the beginning. However, when he has reached the pinnacle, and wears his father's crown, when the rebels are all dead, and the French have yielded, we can measure the rapacity of Hal's appetite for conquest. Which is the more gluttonous and indecent: Falstaff's great belly, or the bloody devouring of territories won through war? We are rarely allowed a glimpse of Hal's true feelings. He is a chameleon, a gifted actor, whose inner nature remains veiled; but his actions express his purpose.



*The Capitano*  
G. Borgetto, 1595. The Capitano stock character from commedia dell'arte, is believed to have influenced Shakespeare when creating Falstaff.

# SHAKESPEARE'S FALSTAFF IN OPERA

by JONATHAN WISENTHAL  
Department of English

It is actually a bit misleading to talk about Shakespeare's Falstaff, because there are in fact two Falstoffs: Prince Hal's grossly irresponsible companion in the *Henry IV* plays, and the elderly would-be lover of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, who is also grossly irresponsible but in the agreeable context of comedy. When one talks about Shakespeare's Falstaff in Opera, the Falstaff in question is mostly plump Sir John in hapless pursuit of the merry wives of Windsor. This character has provided the basis for a number of fine operas, one of which ranks among the greatest music-dramas ever composed.

One extremely pleasant and satisfying Falstaff opera is by Antonio Salieri, the composer who has sometimes been accused of murdering Mozart

One extremely pleasant and satisfying Falstaff opera is by Antonio Salieri, the composer who has sometimes been accused of murdering Mozart, and his Falstaff (1799) has plenty of reminders of the music of Mozart and of Rossini. Here is the *Merry Wives of Windsor* story told musically with late 18th-Century energy and elegance. Another Falstaff opera that is well worth listening to or seeing is by the 19th Century German composer Otto Nicolai, whose *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor* (1849) enjoyed great success in its day as a piece of operatic comedy. And one should not miss a chance to hear or see the 20th-Century English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Sir John in Love* (1929), a delightfully gentle, pastoral musical telling of the story with an emphasis on the Fenton-Anne subplot of Shakespeare's play, but with the baritone Falstaff as a conspicuous role as well. In all of these operas Falstaff is the fat knight with a deep voice, a baritone or a bass.

This relatively deep voice for fat Sir John is true as well of the greatest Falstaff opera of them all. After his Shakespearean *Otello*, it looked as if the elderly Giuseppe Verdi's composing career was over, but Arrigo Boito, who had done the inspired libretto for *Otello* (and who was himself a significant operatic composer), persuaded Verdi to take on Shakespeare's *Merry Wives*. This kind of subject matter was a new departure for Verdi, in that it is a comedy of middle-class town life, as opposed to his previous attachment to elevated tragic plots. But Verdi proved that he could be absolutely triumphant as a composer of operatic comedy, and it would be hard to find, in all of opera, a more successful fusion of verbal text and musical score.

Verdi was a great admirer of Shakespeare's plays (in Italian translation), and he had already based operas on both *Othello* and *Macbeth*. His *Falstaff*, which was first produced in 1893 when Verdi was almost 80, is drawn mainly from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* but with some important passages from *Henry IV, Part I* — such as Falstaff's sardonic dismissal of honour in the last act of Shakespeare's history play, and Verdi's musical treatment of this speech is a wonderful example of ways in which an orchestra can express a dramatic idea. Indeed, the whole of Verdi's opera is a wonderful example of ways in which music can give expression to drama (including musical images of fatness and swelling), and the vitality and genial good humour of its central character make him an incarnation of the spirit of comedy. An experience of this opera might even make one agree with W. H. Auden's comment that Falstaff is a character whose true home is the world of music.

Contemporary poster from Verdi's *Falstaff*, 1893



# THE POLITICS OF SHAKESPEARE'S HENRIAD

by PAUL YACHNIN  
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On September 20, 1598, the English diplomat Sir Toby Matthew wrote to his friend Dudley Carleton about the Continental wars of religion. “Sir Francis Vere is coming towards the Low Counties,” he commented, “and Sir Alexander Ratcliff and Sir Robert Drury with him. Honour pricks them on, and the world thinks that honour will quickly prick them off again.” Sir Toby’s remark was, of course, inspired by Shakespeare’s famous “catechism” on honour, a satirical question-and-answer carried out by Falstaff just before the battle at Shrewsbury (at the end of the first *Henry IV* play). “Well, ‘tis no matter,” Falstaff says, putting on a brave face, “honour pricks me on” (5.1.129-30). His courage, however, lasts no longer than his belief in honour: Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on, how then? Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? Air. . . . Therefore I’ll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon [i.e., grave marker]—and so ends my catechism.

Falstaff’s pretence of knightly honour serves only his own unquenchable appetite for pleasure — for food, drink, entertainment, and good company

We are likely to think of honour codes as belonging to groups like warrior clans rather than to the political structures of nation-states, but it is nevertheless true that Shakespeare and the people of his time thought of honour as a political principle first of all. The historian Mervyn James tells us that the various forms of honour, especially military and aristocratic *virtù* and also the honour that issued from the Queen and court, provided the foundation of the Elizabethan political system. Shakespeare’s *Henriad* is fascinated by the operations of honour—from Mowbray’s honour-based hostility against Henry Bullingbrook (*Richard II*, 1.i.182-85), to King Henry IV’s wish to have Hotspur (“the theme of honour’s tongue”) as his son instead of his real son, to Hal’s wresting of his rival’s “budding honours” at the battle of Shrewsbury, to the giant wave of “honour’s thought” (Act 2, Chorus) that carries

the English army into the bosom of France in *Henry V*. Given the ubiquity of honour in Shakespeare’s plays and Shakespeare’s England, it is not surprising that Sir Toby should have been so taken with Falstaff’s catechism, especially since the speech is of a piece with the *Henriad*’s critique of Elizabethan “honour politics”. Where honour as a principle of policy and conduct requires that nations and persons act not according to their own interests but rather in light of a shared ideal of integrity and uprightness, Falstaff’s pretence of knightly honour serves only his own unquenchable appetite for pleasure — for food, drink, entertainment, and good company. Over the course of the *Henry IV* plays, Falstaff’s pursuit of pleasure emerges as a parallel for the equally self-interested struggle for power going on among the leaders of England, men who say that they are only concerned about honour and the well-being of the nation but who are, as the plays suggest, bent on personal aggrandizement and domination over other men. This critique, built up in a series of parallels between King Henry and Falstaff (consider how both use counterfeiting in order to save their own lives at the Battle of Shrewsbury), never coalesces into an outright rejection of honour politics, but it nevertheless casts a shadow over (or shines a light into) the “honour” of rule, rebellion, and war, even including Henry V’s glorious war against the French.



Falstaff Raising Recruits Francis Hayman 1760

# THE FALSTAFF PROJECT RESOURCE GUIDE

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