

SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

The Fatness of Falstaff: Shakespeare and Character

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ONE day early in the 1590s a clown came on to a London stage, holding a piece of string. At the end of the piece of string there was a dog. It's hard not to think that some in this first audience, realizing what an extraordinary thing was happening, put down their oranges and concentrated.

The dog, possibly the first on the Elizabethan stage, I want to leave where it is for a moment. My main subject in this lecture isn't Launce and his dog (for this is, of course, the first entry of the clown in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*): but the much more complicated character who, charged by the Lord Chief Justice with having led astray the Prince of Wales, answers: 'The yong Prince hath misled me. I am the Fellow with the great belly, and he my Dogge'. No one now quite follows this joke, which may be an airy reference (to distract attention) to the Man in the Moon. What is more interesting than Falstaff's ancient joke is his capacity to make us listen to him while he tells it. We concentrate.

Falstaff can get away with this debate as to who precisely, as between him and the future King of England, is whose dog, because the *Henry IV* plays give him peculiar authority. This is an authority that works not only inside the plays but outside them as well. One of the few early stories, rare but trustworthy, that come straight from Shakespeare's own theatre-world, reports that when Falstaff walked out on to the stage the groundlings stopped cracking their nuts so that they could hear him better. From the time of this well-known anecdote up to the beginning of our own critical period, some 60 or 70 years ago now, Falstaff was widely agreed to be the dramatist's greatest character.

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We now tend not to believe in Character in general, or in Falstaff in particular. The time-span of this disbelief can probably be synchronized with the full professionalizing of literary studies into the academic: the process by which the thing worth knowing was standardized into the thing capable of proof. The Shakespeare industry has brought into a kind of perfection something begun perhaps as early as the First Folio's categories, which made the Falstaff plays Histories and Launce's play a Comedy.

Those decades during which Shakespeare studies have matured in our own time have been governed by a concept of History primarily political and constitutional. The King is dead; long live the King. As a result, certain inflexible presuppositions are lodged in even the best of the earlier academic work on Shakespeare's Histories: and I am thinking here of basic studies of the 1940s and 1950s, like Dover Wilson's *The Fortunes of Falstaff*, or useful popular books like Tillyard's on *Shakespeare's History Plays*, both still with a certain influence.

These early studies, with their monarchical interests, tended to be strongly conservative in their attitudes. They worked to defend the rejection of Falstaff. In the course of time, they generated in opposition a series of essays implicitly radical in their attitudes. Looking back to Bradley's very fine, and essentially liberal, praise of Falstaff, Auden's and Empson's essays (for instance), like Orson Welles's film, *Chimes at Midnight*, make a brilliant case, in different ways, for the old Knight's generous, even loving, even saintly cast of character. Yet these remarkable studies, like more recent writing with a radical stance (Greenblatt's powerful essay 'Paper Bullets' would be a case in point) do little to dislodge the intellectual bases of more conventional criticism: they merely reverse them. Stress on the whole Tudor Myth, concern with the source-materials which Shakespeare took from contemporary historians, whether primarily 'for' the Prince or 'for' Falstaff, prejudices the actual form and substance of these plays.

Scholarly criticism of the *Henry IV* plays is haunted by an interesting problem of structure. There is marked difference of opinion as to whether they constitute one or two dramas, whether the second is separate, a continuation, or a sequel—whether envisaged from the beginning or enforced by the success of what became Part One. These questions appear to depend on a decision to define plot in political terms. Both parts of *Henry IV* are commonly described as working in terms of what is called its main plot—which is to say, the story about how Henry IV overcomes rebellion in his kingdom. The sub-plot describes how Henry's son Hal, on his way to becoming the great and good Henry V, at once helps his father and also defeats riotous impulses in his own character and in his companions, the chief of them Falstaff.

The trouble with this main plot is that it leaves much of the actual and fascinating substance of both plays to be known as the sub-plot, which merely entertains by its account of the adventures of the Prince's riotous group. Even those most firmly appreciative of the *Henry IV* plays often display not only the anxiety about structure I have mentioned, but a tendency to praise in terms which have a tell-tale imprecision, a sheer inaccuracy: words like 'epic' and 'panoramic' recur disturbingly. Both are attempts, I suspect, to categorize what is always thought of as the realism of these plays—a realism made synonymous with randomness and used to explain how the greatest character in Shakespeare, or one so considered for centuries, comes to be lurking in a sub-plot.

Other odd circumstances attend Falstaff's connexion with the political. It is now generally accepted that the character was invented under the name of Oldcastle, but that Shakespeare's acting company was forced to alter this name after protest from powerful descendants of the original or historical Oldcastle. Yet political incaution of this kind hardly characterized Shakespeare in general: he was a writer with a prudent tendency to keep his hands clean. Moreover, and odder still, Shakespeare took his name, 'Oldcastle', from a major source for the comic side of his play, the rambling and formless but not lifeless chronicle drama called *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, where the knight Oldcastle is one of the small group of companions of the wild young Prince. The interesting thing is that Shakespeare borrowed the apparently dangerous name, while taking no other attribute whatever from the character. The people in *The Famous Victories* after all have no attributes. They do not rise, strictly speaking, to the level of the characterized.

Shakespeare created Falstaff; and the role had no real sources except a name. The name I shall return to. The character's chief attributes are startling in their apparent incompatibility. He has an extreme, wittily fantastic and talkatively humorous intelligence. And this free mind is—paradoxically, according to the stock physiology of the age—united to an enormous body. That Hal's Vice-like and riotous tempter, the ever-thirsty if in practice rarely gluttonous Falstaff, should be a 'whoreson round man' of course makes sense. But I want to record an impression that, just as the character becomes preposterous as the offspring of a sub-plot, so is his fatness something more than an incidental attribute. Falstaff is fat necessarily. Certainly we may say that the groundlings fell silent because of his superlative free-wheeling play of wit, enthrallingly dangerous in a political milieu. But perhaps they also fell silent when he first walked on to the stage: entranced to find the simple individual body (and so much of it!) given a star part in the drama of History.

Here I want to turn back to Launce's dog, still there on the stage of the

early 1590s. There aren't, so far as I know, many other acting dogs in the considerable amount of Renaissance drama in English that has come down to us. There is one—and it doesn't seem likely that Ben Jonson was uninfluenced by Shakespeare when, in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, only a few years after the earlier comedy, he gave a dog to his foolish country Knight. Jonson's Knight doesn't just have a dog—he totes around a cat as well, though we never see her because she isn't let out of her bag. And the dog too might have been better off in a bag, because before very long he is poisoned off. So much (Jonson may have felt) for Shakespeare.

Despite the cat at home—'wringing her hands', Launce the fool tells us, for grief of the parting—there is no invisible cat on stage to challenge the solitary splendour of Shakespeare's dog. Moreover, he survives. In fact, he triumphs. Launce does everything for the creature he calls his 'servant'. 'I have', he says crossly, 'sat in the stockes, for puddings he hath stolne'; he has 'stood on the Pillorie for Geese he hath kil'd'. And lastly, the dog has a name. He's called Crab, presumably short for crab-apple, for his Petrarchan-mistress-like hardness and bitterness of heart: he is, reports Launce regretfully but still dotingly, 'the sowrest-natured dogge that lives ... this cruell-hearted Curre'.

The Two Gentlemen illustrates through its pair of gentlemen and their ladies the crazy if beautiful things romantic love can make human beings do; and its plot is merely a dazzle of love's permutations and possibilities. The perplexed and innocent feeling of the clown for his dog is the matching shadow of that dazzle. Both more and less than 'gentlemanly', his experience limited to an acquaintance 'with the smell before' and yet given (as in the remark about the stolen puddings) thought-provokingly Scriptural verbal cadences, the fool is without argument a fool, and hardly a holy one; yet he is happy, and we are glad he is happy, a man who gets what he wanted.

This early comedy, full of weaknesses as it is, is none the less decidedly agreeable on the stage: and its intrinsic affectionateness focuses on Launce and his dog. All the play's Elizabethan paradoxes of love shimmer round the clown and finally embody themselves in the entirely original figure of the dog. We have to say 'figure' rather than 'character'. In the first place, Crab can't talk. Talked-at, his silence promises the huge capacity to contain meaning which is common to all true theatrical presences. He *is*, beyond analysis: to be is as much the dog's function as it is Hamlet's. He is character as an end more than a means, the thing in itself: a dog (Gertrude Stein might have said) is a dog is a dog. Or, as Shakespeare himself put it with some desperation in a Sonnet, 'You alone are you'. Opaque, incurable and absolute, the beloved is.

Dogs can't talk; and they can't act, either. *Qua* dogs, they aren't

gentlemen, aren't civilized, don't tell lies and don't betray. It's this pleasant lack of the complicit that makes animals amusing in their domestic relations. To quote another and finer Modernist, about another and subtler animal, one of T. S. Eliot's 'Practical Cats', 'He will do/As he do/And there's no doing anything about it!' The basic joke about the Petrarchan 'cruell-hearted Curre' depends on a shared understanding of writer and reader, or actor and audience. The first onstage dog, like all his successors, must have been the kind of reliable creature that can be counted on to do little worse than sit on the boards and smile and pant and thump his tail. If the dog's silence says something about his own nature, then his simple recalcitrance—his inability to be either good or bad to order—says something about ours, as loving beings and as audiences. Our loves are not meaningless, but we do imagine things.

The clown seems almost to perceive this when he acts out his departure from home, casting himself and the dog: 'I am the dogge: no, the dogge is himselfe, and I am the dogge: oh, the dogge is me, and I am myselfe'. He can try in this way to rationalize and mutualize their relation, despite his protest that, unlike the compassionate cat, the dog did not 'shedde one teare: he is a stone, a very pibble stone, and has no more pitty in him then a dog'. The circularity is instructive. The clown is thinking through things more than philosophically difficult. The animal gains our and the fool's feeling by natural sympathy, and holds it by equally natural (natural to him) resistance to sympathy: 'No, the dogge is himselfe'. Like the future Cleopatra's superbly theatrical hold on the heart, Crab's opacity is of the essence. He is real enough to attract and compel startled attention, but obdurately bodily or thingy enough never to bore the imagination by satisfying it.

In his 'I am the dogge', the clown is wrestling, in words of one syllable, with the issues that give the Sonnets all their love-metaphysics. But his words also help any critic in the effort to analyse what we mean by 'character' in Shakespeare's plays: a factor inimitably itself and thingy ('No, the dogge is himselfe') yet also boundlessly giving to the imagination ('Oh, the dogge is me, and I am my selfe'). *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is a mild, small play, not much revered (it seems) by any critic; but every time it is performed, an audience will be riveted by a character which is also a non-character—an actuality, life itself standing at the centre of the comedy, wagging its tail. Dr Johnson, who praised Shakespeare because there was always a way out from his fictions 'to nature', may have included among his meanings something like this.

I want to suggest that Shakespearean character-creation is from the beginning an exemplifying of this unique process: that a character in his

work is less a person than an insight, but an insight embodied into brilliant forms of the real. The dramatist's characters, that is to say, are supremely observed. But they are observed in a special way: they are not merely social, but recognizably opaque, essentially thingy. They are poetically embodied into forms which oddly compel our dreaming loyalty, whatever decisions of morality may seem to intervene—'I am the dogge'.

The most splendid case of this in Shakespeare's early drama is of course the King known as Richard Crookback. The chronology of the early writing being as vexed as it is, it's hard to say whether *Richard III* precedes *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. But the character has all the compelling, attention-focusing quality I am trying to define, and it derives from more than the glittering eye which holds the theatre from the beginning, the index of a mental force unmatched in these early Histories. Richard's real power surely emanates—as the sinister wooing of Anne will at once make plain—from what is crookedly yet straightforwardly physical in him, from the symbolic (though of course historical) crookback in itself: from the oddly undeceptive, doggish body that humps and thumps its way forward to the dead centre of the stage, saying first by its sheer presence what it thinks at last aloud: 'Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I'.

A sweeter proposition altogether, Bottom too has something in him of this heroic physicality. The idea of Bottom as a character is hampered by the problem of his name—which didn't mean what we think it means until two centuries later. The word 'Bottom' for our lower parts was an 18th-century euphemism. Yet *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which layers together our night-time with our daytime selves, has a place in it for euphemisms: the gentle, decent, arty artisans who are Bottom's companions agree that 'You must say, Paragon. A Paramour, God bless us, is a thing of naught'.

Poor Bottom, an innocently dreaming egoist, a would-be artist, becomes in the wood by night what we would now call a donkey. But that word is another 18th-century euphemism. Elizabethans would have said roundly that Bottom was an ass. And they pronounced that word exactly as they said the word *arse*, one of their two current terms for what we call the bottom. The other term, Shakespeare was to use later on (he clearly wasn't incapable of it) for the name of one mean and degraded as Bottom never is, in a far darker, more realistic comedy, *Measure for Measure*: where the servant to the Bawd is named Pompey Bum. The word itself Shakespeare certainly introduces into the earlier comedy, where, after Bottom has just left the stage at his first appearance, Puck is made, with a degree of firmly stated earthiness, to introduce the word into the first of the fairy scenes, in his story of the old woman falling off her stool. The poetic effect of the clash of worlds is marked.

The evidence suggests that Shakespeare did think of Bottom in these not unfriendly terms, giving him, from all sorts of propriety, dramatic and otherwise, a decent euphemism, decided on because of its first and last letters (the profession of weaver would obviously follow). And he did so, surely, because he saw the euphemized, civilized Bottom as tender and funny, with the Queen of the Fairies draped adoringly round his stupidity, in a way that the character's own refined self would have been shocked by if he could ever have conceived it, but which the poet's own even more refined self saw as a good, human (which is, creaturely) truth about love.

I don't want to work through all the dramatist's earlier characters: the most brilliant of them all, Shylock, has subtleties that can't and shouldn't be cut down to a sentence or two. But the fastidious and intellectual money-lender isn't an exception to the physicality I'm talking about here: Shylock focuses this hardest and most Marlovianly bejewelled of all Shakespeare's comedies in his incantatory, ironic, highly personal utterance, extreme in its hatred and speaking of human brotherhood: 'Hath not a *Jew* eyes? hath not a *Jew* hands, organs, dimensions? . . . if you prick us, do we not bleed?' There is a Shakespearean depth of meaning in the way this most abstract and conceptual drama of money is at the same time peculiarly physical, directed towards acts of love, its plot turning on a pound of flesh.

The pound of flesh brings us in sight of that 'Tunne of Man', Sir John Falstaff. I've been arguing that throughout Shakespeare's developing power of characterization, the physical has a special place: from Crab the dog to Richard Crookback, then to Bottom, then to the magnificently delineated yet isolated Shylock, and then the 'fat old man' himself. I have made a deliberate decision hardly to quote from or to illustrate Falstaff's fatness in this lecture, only to try to explain it—and this, for a specific reason. The brief phrases I've already quoted come, of course, from Hal in the Tavern Scene of *1 Henry IV*, before he goes on to detail 'that Trunke of Humors, that Boulting-Hutch of Beastlinesse, that swolne Parcell of Dropsies, that huge Bombard of Sacke' and the rest.

It's striking that this flying of Hal's is no more (or less) vivid than Falstaff's own winningly modest, 'plumpe *Jacke*'. Earlier in this same scene, recalling his thinness at Hal's age ('I could have crept into any Aldermans Thumbe Ring'), Falstaff has lamented, 'A plague of sighing and grieve, it blowes a man up like a Bladder'. This is ridiculous, of course. And yet the fact is that the character does indeed seem to do a good deal of waxing and waning. Like the 'Jet Ring Sent' by the poet John Donne, there is 'nothing more endless, nothing sooner broke' than our sense of Falstaff's fatness. The brilliance of these plays, in short, is that they give a kind of metaphysical witty status to Falstaff's fatness—at once all human solidity,

and yet as subject to Shakespeare's magical conjuring skills as a vanishing rabbit. The character is absolutely large and ultimately present, the whole round world in person—the Globe. But he is best evoked in the theatre by an actor's illusion, and elsewhere, by the individual reading imagination.

Explanations are probably easier than illusions. There are sixteenth-century intellectual movements in terms of which we should perhaps see Shakespeare's art of bodies. On many fronts, as in some revival of the ancient skill in bas-relief, figures begin to solidify, and to grow out of their backgrounds. The whole humanistic period, as recent studies of Rabelais have shown, counterpoises its abstraction by an immersion in the physical. Aesthetic Mannerism in Europe inaugurated a vision intoxicated with relativities, and at ease in a world of giants and dwarfs. But to these large mental contexts, imagining a newly material universe, there needs to be added one simpler factor. Shakespeare's discoveries would probably not have been perfected by a writer who had not acted for years on the public stage: a process which induces awareness of the body as few others can. On stage, the visible public self can seem to the inner consciousness of the actor or speaker to grow, like Falstaff, 'gross as a mountain', to become a 'huge hill of flesh'. It is a notable fact that Richard, Bottom and Falstaff are all natural actors; the reserved Shylock mimics others; even Crab the dog is a kind of joke about what T. S. Eliot might have called, 'acting and not-acting'. In a memorable autobiographical study, an actor—Simon Callow—has described the long discipline of learning to act as a 're-inventing' of the physical self, an actual 're-birthing'. This is the context from which Falstaff was 'borne about three of the clock in the afternoon, with a white head, and something a round belly'.

It may be possible to go further than this, and to give some details of (so to speak) the character's birth certificate, under the name Oldcastle. I've already mentioned the dramatist's major source for the Falstaffian incidents in the three later Histories, the raw but not unentertaining *Famous Victories of Henry V*: a work which strikes many scholars as so bad as to lead them to argue that Shakespeare must have had to hand a text fuller than that which has come down to us. This is theoretical, however. On the evidence that we have, Falstaff took nothing but his original name, Oldcastle, from the source play. The change of name proceeded from (or so we now assume) the forceful if foolish protest by descendants of the original Oldcastle. This whole political incident now attracts a good part of the interest of scholars and critics in the second cycle of Histories. But none seems to have asked why Shakespeare bothered to retain the name of a personage from whom he took so little. Nor does any apparently go on to wonder why so generally cautious a man as the dramatist now seems could

have got himself into trouble by dabbling in a political scene he was at most other times so careful to avoid.

One simple answer offers itself, which may solve the second problem in meeting the first. The name, Oldcastle, was suggestive and important enough for it to be stated as early in the play as possible, hence Hal's 'My old lad of the Castle'. But it doesn't seem to have mattered that the writer dropped it for 2 *Henry IV* and after. Efforts on the part of editors to replace the name in editions may be a waste of energy: all its virtue (as we say in cooking) has gone into the character. Therefore the name and the character are consonant with each other.

Shakespeare incautiously failed to observe the political bearings of the name because its literal and metaphorical sense excited him more: it may even for a while have served as some kind of poetic guideline. The name's resonances, I would suggest, were a matter of a whole late-medieval iconology of the Castle in itself. As fortification, the Castle was central to the entire militaristic feudal culture. But over the centuries, the fortress gradually changed its function. By the sixteenth century, many were ruinous, and others had been transformed into palaces, mansions or just ordinary large houses. (It's perhaps instructive that in Shakespeare's period the words 'castle', 'mansion' and 'house' approximate and grow near to synonymous: a fact which permitted the witty apophthegm of the great Elizabethan jurist, Sir Edward Coke, who seems first to have coined the axiom, 'A man's house is his castle', *et domus sua cuique est tutissimum refugium*). As the old castles were altered in their uses, so too the symbolic meanings of the Castle grew different. Once a symbol of power, of the mailed fist, the image of the Castle was internalizing itself, even representing the battle for virtue on the part of the human spirit, castled within and conscious of its own body.

Some glimpse of this context, both linguistic and cultural, can be seen in Shakespeare's Sonnet 146, 'Poore soule, the center of my sinful earth'. In this poem, the soul inhabits the body as a medieval Lord might have done an embattled castle, struggling with 'these rebell powres that thee array', and 'Painting thy outward walls so costlie gay'. With a rapid transition the castle becomes a short-leased house: 'Why so large cost having so short a lease / Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?' The sestet of the poem welcomes ruin: the spirit needs death, the death of the body.

Though there are some fine and touching things in it, Sonnet 146 is not the poet's best: its conventional images are unhandily played with, and unsuccess makes the whole curiously unconvincing. It's hard for a reader to reach the end without feeling some impulse to answer as old Falstaff does Dol in Part Two of *Henry IV*: 'Peace (good Dol) doe not speake like a

Deathshead: doe not bid me remember mine end'. Dol has been recommending that he should 'leave fighting on dayes, and foining on nights, and begin to patch up thine old Body for Heaven'. Variable and human as both characters are, this moment of quiet in a scene of sometimes savage, always wonderfully funny farce is extraordinarily compelling as the sonnet perhaps is not. The comparison of play and poem says something simple about the nature of Shakespeare's genius. It needs to embody, to build the contradictions of existence into people and moments as richly ambiguous as this one. The poet isn't most at home sorting out the iconology of the Castle in religious sentiments. Falstaff needs to be fat.

One touching phrase in the poem, the 'fading mansion', is revealing, because it has (I suspect) a word-play on the first syllable of its noun. The fading *mansion* is *manhood*, the ruinous castle where men live all their lives: those who live by the sword, dying by the sword. These resonances are a living part of Shakespeare's dramatic vision in his Histories. In the *Henry IV* plays, a royal usurper, even a Cain-like brother-murderer, spends his troubled reign thinking of Jerusalem. In short, the name Oldcastle in his source perhaps suddenly articulated for the poet all the meanings of History—of men alive and embodied in what we call 'History'—that he wanted to bring together. At their centre was a magnificent old reprobate, Sir John Oldcastle/Falstaff, who is also one of the names of Everyman.

I have used here the phrase, 'What we call "History"', in recognition of the fact that we can mean different things by it. The history Shakespeare took from his sources has been called 'the Tudor Myth'. What he did with it is a large question. History plays may be the dramatist's first work. Indeed, he probably invented the form, planning his first tetralogy (the *Henry VI*s and *Richard III*) with immense ambition and originality. The ecclesiastical and political censorship of the time lending distance a certain enchantment, he took his historical subjects from the years before the ascent to the throne of his own Queen's grandfather, Henry VII. And, as is well-known, he deals with the chronologically later kings in his earlier sequence. The *Richard II-Henry IV-Henry V* sequence, written towards the end of the 1590s, takes him back historically into the further past, Henry V being of course the father of Henry VI.

This reversal has interesting effects. It intensifies that play of memory and irony which all retrospective art brings into play. The triumphant story of Henry V is acted out in the knowledge that Henry V's son Henry VI has already—in the past of the audience and in the work of this

dramatist—thrown away the spoils of his father's victories, and with his mixture of uncertainty and good principle submerged his kingdom in civil war. As a result, Shakespeare's own sense of History is always, and increasingly, circular, individual and ironic. It says that nothing is final; it says that—as the sub-title of *Henry VIII* would finally have it—*All Is True*.

It is commonly agreed that the *Henry IV* plays are the poet's finest Histories. It is also commonly agreed that they are the least historic—they depend least on historical sources. We need perhaps to put these agreements together. These are Shakespeare's best Histories because the least historical. I spent a good deal of time at the beginning of this lecture stressing the importance to Shakespeare's developing art of characterization of a non-character: a dog. The academic, even the professional literary intellect can impose its own categories on Shakespeare's work, confusing the vital with the important and the important with the large. The poet's genius is an intrinsic and effortlessly intelligent sureness with symbols and the other media of his art: media not always explicitly recognizable as having the status of the political and historical.

The central presence of the historically factual in these plays ought not to deflect us from seeing what is special in them—their strangeness, their originality, their identity as imagined works. Falstaff's fatness matters in them; there is a substantive point to the character's challenge of the Prince's authority, with his 'I am the Fellow with the great belly, and he my Dogge'. I will give one example of the plays' originality from outside these two characters. Scholarly commentators have done excellent work on the dramatist's adaptations and alterations. Most mention for instance that Shakespeare radically changes the age of Hotspur, historically twenty-three years older, to make him of Hal's generation. He therefore becomes the young man's rival, his mirror-image or alter ego.

But it is interesting to go further than this. When the heroic Harry Hotspur is dead, his grieving young widow (a marvellously vivid character in both parts, and essentially invented by Shakespeare) describes the husband she loved as having had an intensely real physical identity:

speaking thicke (which Nature made his blemish)
Became the accents of the valiant.

Whether this means stammering, or lisping, or merely fiercely rapid stumbling speech, everyone did it (says Lady Hotspur) just to be like him. In Shakespeare's hands, through Lady Hotspur's desolate words, a dead History comes alive. Like a haunting literary presence, the historical Hotspur has turned into a living and wholly human stutter.

One simple way of explaining the splendour of these plays is to say that

they are full of Falstaff's fatness—they are full of people, newly defined as Falstaff is defined. In terms of stored resources suddenly and fully utilized, Shakespeare seems to have travelled a startling distance in *1 Henry IV* from *Richard II*, that exquisite unpeopled verse exercise, a thin play in the sense that the *Henry IV*'s are fat. It is of course relevant that *Richard II* is written wholly in verse, while the *Henry IV* plays invent a new and magnificent prose, widespread in the plays and different with every character who uses it. Particularly in a raffish urban milieu, it is a prose that characterizes, identifies, realizes.

Many critics react appreciatively to what they feel as an intense reality and variety in the *Henry IV* plays. But they may be driven by a deference to what is in appearance historical and political in them to speak with a puzzled generality of what is called 'epic' or 'panoramic' breadth of life. It is perhaps worth recalling that these are dramatic worlds with specific lineaments. The two *Henry IV* plays, like *Henry V*, are in fact so little panoramic as to omit those major elements of their audiences, both Elizabethan and modern, the middle classes—from which the dramatist himself came. Sociologically these dramas concern themselves only with the Court and the Tavern; they are about power and the lack of it. Their world is of the Castle: medieval, militaristic and male. In this last respect they are actually less 'panoramic' than the earlier Histories. Hugely-peopled, with more characters in each than *Hamlet*, the two parts of *Henry IV* hold only a quartet of brilliant female cameos, Ladies Percy and Mortimer, Mistress Quickly and Dol Tearsheet, all powerless either in high or in low life. Loved by her husband, Lady Percy can't influence his life, and Lady Mortimer can't even be understood by hers.

Certainly the Falstaff plays give an image of the real hardly achieved elsewhere in Shakespeare's first decade. Indeed, the very nature, intensity yet elusiveness of this sense of the real earns them the title of (perhaps) his first and best early tragicomedies, the two parts of *Henry IV* seeming actually to explore the possibilities of a mode first (Part One) comic, then (Part Two) tragic. A condition of this truthfulness is an expressiveness within laws almost ruthlessly maintained. The fine experience of randomness in these plays, so exhilarating and absorbing, at the same time proceeds from considered decisions and exclusions. The superb dawn scene before Gadshill (*1 Henry IV*, II.i), with its 'Charles waine ... over the new Chimney', its country dankness and its fleas, its smell of urine, its gammon of bacon and its roots of ginger, is where it is to serve as a quizzical alternative to 'Gadshill' itself, juxtaposing to the systematic thieveries of high life the mere fleabites of the low.

With this mention of Gadshill I want to pause briefly to give some sense of what I mean by the peculiar decisions and exclusions of the *Henry IV*

plays: for the Gadshill incident, essentially invented by the poet and given elaborate treatment, throws a surprisingly clear light on to the historical in this First Part. It's first necessary to say that perhaps the most initiatory of the academic studies of these plays, and for a long time the most influential, Dover Wilson's *The Fortunes of Falstaff*, is an admirable piece of scholarship spoiled by those innocent snobberies, those deferences to politics believed to characterize Shakespeare's Histories, which were formerly too often found in English studies. Supporting his case for the severe loyalism of *1 Henry IV*, Dover Wilson quotes with approval an earlier scholar's description of Prince Hal as 'a man among animals', only preferring to the word 'animals' (which he finds 'too modern') the term 'pack of scurvy rascals, inhabiting a sphere altogether remote from that to which Hal rightly belongs'. (Falstaff he incidentally downgrades by proposing that as the Fool he was played by Kempe—a judgment possibly shaky: *Much Ado*'s Beatrice too would perform many of the functions of the Fool, but would hardly be likely to be played by Kempe.)

The phrase 'a man among animals' mixes social snobbery with a speciesism Crab the dog would have been amused by. It seems to me wrong in other ways as well. Shakespeare worked with intensity in *1 Henry IV* to locate the Prince as a 'man among men'. This has both private and public interlocking meanings, of which the public most directly affects Gadshill: but because they do interlock, it is worth remembering the private as well. I mentioned earlier the monosexuality of the plays' world. By confining female companionship to Mistress Quickly, and by excluding any hint of that homosexuality suggested in (for instance) *Troilus and Cressida*, this throws into a more brilliant light the relation of Falstaff and Hal, and the conditions in which friendship survives or dies in the world at large.

Innumerable studies have quoted Falstaff's opening question, 'Now Hal, what time of day is it Lad?', with an interesting discussion of his and the Prince's different notions of time and its proper use. None as far as I know bothers with the word, 'Lad'—a word which Housman's usage has of course made largely unhandleable now, even apart from the passing of Edwardian and earlier social conditions. 'Lad' was, like 'fellow', in Shakespeare's time a word of kindly contempt, used to those younger or lower in the social scale than oneself. In using it to the Prince—whose irritation sparks the wit of his response—Falstaff is manifesting from the first his cheerfully arrogant resistance to social hierarchy. That this might amount to more than what Dover Wilson calls his 'sauciness' is made plain by the odd but functional scene at II.iv, where Hal teases Francis the naïve tavern drawer. Poor Francis has the helpless corruptibility of the wholly powerless; he is spellbound in an instant by the Prince's mere murmur of 'a

thousand pound', that talismanic ghost- or dream-fortune which haunts these two plays. Francis simply can't forget the Prince's rank and status, and think of him as a person. It takes a Falstaff, tough enough to exist, at least for the moment, in the free kingdom of his own fatness, to maintain something like real feeling for this prodigal prince.

But Hal is a man among men in a public sense as well as a private one. At least in the only text in which we have it, the source-play, *The Famous Victories*, notably lacks Shakespeare's value of human feeling, the world of relationship and its terms and treacheries. And it opens only *after* the Gadshill incident, which we hear about at some distance. This incident Shakespeare chose to bring into the foreground and to make the basis of his Falstaff's character in action, giving four whole scenes to it—it becomes, indeed, something almost like a play-within-the-play.

Why did Shakespeare like it so much, this story of thieves who rob rich travellers, and of a prince who robs the thieves? Hal comes well out of it: he sends the money back and protects Falstaff. But the incident, playful escapade as it is, shows Hal a thief, all the same. Like Hamlet (who also found friends among 'thieves of mercy', pirates), Hal could, quoting the Book of Common Prayer, call his hands 'these pickers and stealers', recognizing a guilt both largely human and specifically royal. The Histories are haunted by the figure of Cain, thief and brother-murderer; and Hal is after all the son of the usurper who 'seized the crown' from Richard.

His soliloquy at I.ii, beginning with the words 'I know', endows the Prince with responsibility, almost with guilt: sooner or later he will enter the world of power natural to him and win virtue by making 'offence a skill'. At the battle of Shrewsbury, the play's climax, he articulates his relationship with the near-fraternal Hotspur:

All the budding Honors of thy Crest
Ile crop, to make a Garland for my head.

He has done what he promised his father earlier, made Percy 'but my factor . . . / To engross up glorious deeds on my behalf'. And Hotspur, dying, understands what has been done: 'O Harry, thou hast rob'd me of my youth'.

Yet Hotspur is of course essentially no different in his politics: he is merely given the beauty of the historical loser. The historians used by Shakespeare called the reign of Henry IV 'troubled', one of 'unrest'. In the drama, that trouble and unrest internalize, changing from the accidentality of data to the necessity of vision. Henry the King himself, politician and usurper, dreaming of Jerusalem, generates the ambiguities reigning everywhere in these plays. In this First Part, the poet has invented Gadshill as an ironic mirror of the great world of power which Henry rules over, and

which the political rebels envy, pursue, but won't defer to. Prince, rebel and Fool; reticent Hal, heroic Hotspur and wise Falstaff, all alike and equally make 'offence a skill'. We may call Hal's honour true, Hotspur's a dream and Falstaff's non-existent, but the only honour the play knows is Honour Among Thieves.

Wholly characteristically, Falstaff knows this: 'A plague upon't, when thieves cannot be true one to another' (II.iv). These profoundly sceptical conditions release the play's stereotyped hierarchies; conventions are shaken free into a glitter of relativities. *I Henry IV* is as fine as it is because of the depth with which it shows Hal as no other than a man among men. These are the terms on which he must learn his fidelities, infidelities, and historical survivals. And this is a world in which a man's supremacy is as individual to him as is Falstaff's massive body, his rapid mind.

I earlier made the suggestion that Falstaff's original name, Oldcastle, may have held in itself a certain potency for the poet. It carried with it, perhaps, to an Elizabethan imagination alive to language, something of the late-medieval and chivalrically militant world of this play, a world—as Shakespeare's own was still—of 'fading mansions', ruinous castles. An architectural historian, conceding that the psychic image of the Castle must be predominantly one of terror and aggression, has suggested that there may still be an aesthetic beauty in castles: that these fortifications may now, from their aspect of security, their defensive function, reveal to the mind an image of what he calls (in a fine phrase) 'stored energy'.

The debates on the structural problems of Parts One and Two of *Henry IV* may reflect difficulties in coming to terms with their great originality of form. They possess what Coleridge called 'form as proceeding', as against 'shape as superinduced': a form which has some relationship to Falstaff's massive, natural and always (theoretically) waxing and waning body. Though the Second Part is, if anything, even more original than the First in its loose expressive deliquescence of form, the First Part has always given more pleasure. And the enjoyment it gives might be glossed by the historian's aesthetic image of the Castle. Part One of *Henry IV* has above all a 'stored energy', a beautiful weighing of violent and indeed aggressive forces against each other. The play is everywhere in a state of active self-balance: Kings and subjects, fathers and sons, robbers and robbed, usurpers and rebels, exchanging roles but never out of true.

The political ambiguities of *I Henry IV* allow no escape, but they do afford what might be called suspension. 'Time, that takes survey of all the world / Must have a stop'—and both stop and survey are the play. When

the brisk but adoring Lady Percy asks her husband what carries him away, he answers laughing, 'Why my horse my love my horse'. This hint on the play's part about the natural, unarguable Crab-the-dog-like energies of youth is balanced by the very different but equally unarguable detachment in the historical memory of reader or audience: a detachment suddenly explicit in the Second Part of the play, when the tired old King says that life is so terrible to the eyes of experience that it can't be thought about, there is nothing to do but 'shut the book, and sit him down and die'. Such vitality and such sadness work together in a fashion more like music than politics.

The actor's autobiography I mentioned earlier happens to remark that 'There is nothing in a play *but* the characters', and though this is an actor's reaction, he is quite right: but he might not have said it about *The Famous Victories*, or many other scores of plays of the period. The *Henry IV* plays, and especially the First Part, enthrall because their actors are all characters: Falstaff may be greater than Glendower, or Mistress Quickly, or Cousin Silence, or Feeble, the woman's tailor, but they are hardly less intensely realized. In these plays, something rare and Shakespearean and hugely important to the literary tradition that followed was being achieved.

Moreover, this full translation of drama into character seems dependent on a quality of vision more than dramaturgical. *I Henry IV* is a world of men of action, acting upon each other, struggling throughout for mastery, yet in the process each man becomes less destructive than autonomous. The world of action has become, in its way, purely contemplative. Concomitantly, and in simpler terms of behaviour, the play's combatants battle (to borrow another phrase from Coleridge) 'as in a war-embrace'. Lovers quarrel laughing, or talk different languages to each other; fathers and sons fall out from sheer affection; rivals imitate each other. Centrally, of course, there are Hal and Falstaff, fighting and flying and planning betrayal, perhaps the richest, the most human, but also the most worldly portrayal of friendship in Shakespeare's works. And always, playing off against the powerful, cool and withdrawn royal boy, is the man Falstaff, perpetually making a kind of grumbling, smiling peace within himself, between the cumbersome body and the incomparable mind.

Part One of *Henry IV* brilliantly succeeds by turning History into a tension of relationships, which we may think of, as we wish, as private or public: the sort of political history the dramatist was handling made these interchangeable—among the rebels, for instance, Lady Percy is Mortimer's sister, and Lady Mortimer is Glendower's daughter. Such a world permits the play to celebrate love and friendship snatched, like Hotspur's flower, 'Out of this Nettle, Danger'. The terms of the feeling which unites the characters are a vivid disinterest or dissociation combined with alert attention to the other. It is this element of dissociation that makes

arguments about Falstaff curiously irrelevant. Moral criteria only obtain as conditions are laid down; a person may flee from the plague without being a coward, nor is a soldier necessarily cowardly who takes part in an orderly military retreat. Falstaff is no more a coward at Gadshill than Crab the dog is hard-hearted.

But at Shrewsbury there is a change. Throughout this First Part, Shakespeare has naturalized history and politics into a living world in which Falstaff's fatness has its place. Success and succession are all about growth, about movement upward, with the thrusting energy of Hotspur's flowering nettle. The play sets us in that world envisaged by the poet's fifteenth Sonnet, where 'every thing that grows / Holds in perfection but a little moment / . . . Men as plants increase / . . . at height decrease, / And were [wear] their brave state out of memory'. Part One is a kind of historical comedy, in which everyone gets as near as may be to having what he wants (the idealistic Hotspur would have found life horrifying, had he survived). But it is comic only because the clock stops, the action is suspended, the sheriff is shut out, the fighters are 'Cheared and chekt even by the self-same skie'.

In Part Two, naturally enough for a second part, the clock starts again. It has often been pointed out how far this almost tragic Second Part is dominated by the power of Time. Age and disease darken the scene. Hotspur is gone, Hal little on stage. There begins here that 'rejection' of Falstaff which is the climax the whole Second Part moves towards, in which the newly crowned Henry V rebukes and dismisses his old companion. Even Bradley, in what may be the best essay ever written on the *Henry IV* plays, sorrowfully assumes that the dramatist has willed and even rigged this rejection, has degraded his character through this play and on into the diminished and different (though still enjoyable) horseplay of *The Merry Wives*. There may be something that qualifies this. I have suggested the effect of the autonomous in the characterization of these plays: and the Falstaffian decline is surely similarly powered from the inside, like an illness that proceeds from his great bulk.

The turning-point is that obscurely disturbing moment at Shrewsbury, at the end of Part One, in which Falstaff stabs the dead Hotspur, his 'new wound in your thigh' bringing an odd erotic shame to the incident: some fleshing has taken place. Devoid as these plays are of any homosexual feeling, the sheer fatness of Falstaff, most male of men, allows him some of the soft freedoms of the female role; and now, some of its betrayals, too. It's a striking minor fact that at the very beginning of this play Shakespeare has remembered from the chronicles the detail of the Welshwomen's emasculation of the enemy dead in battle.

Early in Part One, the old Knight had turned on the Prince an ironic

reversal of his own role as tempter: 'Before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing; and now I am (if a man shold speake truly) little better then one of the wicked'. There is always a lurking truth in these floating ironies Falstaff is expert in. The shadow of their friendship is a double corruption. However much Sir John chooses—from some point of view that is anarchic or democratic or Elizabethanly aristocratic—to feel himself outside or even above Hal's royalty, he depends on it, just as he does on the Prince's youth. As Hal is involved and committed at Shrewsbury, so for the first time is Falstaff too. The battle that kills Hotspur and brings alive Hal does both to the old Knight. He dies in some part of his intellectual detachment, and rises from that death a survivor, to lose Hal's friendship by stealing his glory: 'Ile follow as they say, for Reward. Hee that rewards me, heaven reward him. If I do grow great again, Ile grow lesse. For Ile purge, and leave Sacke, and live cleanly, as a Nobelman shold do'.

The quarrelling friendship of Hal and Falstaff is, like other relationships in Part One, in its tension a high-wire on which both safely run and somersault. Falstaff's last-act stabbing of Hotspur is also a tragicomic betrayal of the Prince which cuts the wire. In Part Two neither he nor his circumstances are ever quite the same again. There are subtle adjustments of tone: the old Knight, now decisively poorer yet grander, grows faintly but pervasively ambitious, snobbish, with an eye to the main chance, talking Court talk in a manner never quite certainly enough ironic. His fatness loses its easy airy poise, its grace of imagination, and begins to solidify, greasily, into unnerving realisms of social class and gender. For the first time in this always dangerous territory, the old man's bulk begins to be touched by the queasily androgynous: as when, self-mockingly boasting about his wit, Sir John 'walks before' his new Page, 'like a Sow, that hath o'erwhelmed all her litter, but one'.

The stagger in the rhythm of that line is telling. The change in Falstaff is more than tonal, it is situational; and it is dictated by his new separation from the Prince, who growing up towards his royalty, is often a felt absence, a silence here. When he does appear, Hal is colder, Falstaff more demanding; Hal withdraws, Falstaff presumes. The entire play is more erotic than Part One, and there is a trace of the erotic in the power-game of relationship the two have started to play.

The action of Part Two, while we wait for the rejection that we know must come, is anything but boring. But it possesses a marked rhythm of entropy or running-down, a centrifugal loss of energy. The contrast with Part One is obvious. The world is one where, as in the Sonnet, men 'were [wear] their brave state out of memory'—or even that 'great world' of *King Lear* which 'wears out to naught'. Everywhere in this Second Part of *Henry IV*, we sense imbalances. No longer made brilliant by the Prince's

bright hostilities, Falstaff has to talk to his own minimal Page; to a faceless, unindividuated and unshakeable old man, the Lord Chief Justice; to the coarsely savage Tearsheet and the wonderfully dizzy Quickly, whose human weight of farce and pathos almost upstages the Knight; and Shallow and Silence, the two country cousins.

These last two inhabit a Gloucestershire estate that grounds in itself much of what the closing phase of the play is saying, a back-of-beyond at once sad and preposterous, hilarious and charming. Both true and fantastic (not even Elizabethans saw Gloucestershire as on the main road North from London), their estate, with Davy's wistful hope 'to see London once ere I die', achieves a provinciality that is suddenly Chekhovian. This is not a place merely satirized by the dramatist, as it is patronized by Falstaff. It has its own ludicrous, deathly beauty, a mildewed richness: the strength of a Feeble who disturbingly achieves the heroic, telling the ruinous Falstaff that he owes God a death, and the surprise of a Silence, flowering through wine into an unstoppable music.

As at the end of the play Falstaff stands waiting for Hal, the new King, he talks troublingly of 'new Liveries' and of a borrowed 'thousand pound', of his travel-stained clothes, 'this poore shew doth better'—acting out a love: 'thinking of nothing else, putting all affayres in oblivion, as if there were nothing els to bee done, but to see him'. Stirring as it is, this is all hypothetical, a rhetoric—'Painting thy outward walls so costlie gay'. In the course of the Second Part, Falstaff's fatness might even be said to have gone into such shows, becoming an outer man only. Its true spirit has, in some way not easy to articulate, flowed out of him into the London tavern's noise and fury of 'Swaggerers', and the gone-to-seed energies of a country estate, where Feeble is hero and Silence sings: all the vagrant forms of life which almost mimic, in reverse, those 'by-paths and indirect crookt ways' by which, Bolingbroke has said, he 'met his crown'. Power is leaving Falstaff by the same routes. Part Two begins with Rumour bringing 'smooth-Comforts-false', and it may be that it ends, for fat Falstaff, in nothing but words.

There is, of course, life in the old dog yet, though some of his admirers find his third translation, into the sharp caricature of *The Merry Wives*, so disheartening as to make them prefer the fourth: the death-bed Falstaff of *Henry V*. That the old Knight died of a broken heart I don't find it altogether easy to believe; it's less difficult to accept Shakespeare's genius in hiding whatever happened to be the truth—and death-beds should be reticent—behind the lush sentimentality of the small group of crooks who talk about it in *Henry V*. Yet they are marvellous crooks, and the involvement of the hard with the soft in the narration brings back that recognizable tension that reigns in *Henry IV*.

Everything in Falstaff's reported death-scene is supreme and ambiguous. More than one scholar has pointed out that the poet seems clearly to be recalling an account of the death of Socrates. But that grave and noble demise of a philosopher is so rendered by Quickly as to keep straying into quibbles obscurely sexual: 'A bad me lay more clothes on his feet: I put my hand into the Bed, and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone: then I felt to his knees, and so upward, and upward, and all was as cold as any stone'.

This inimitable mix of the Socratic with the farcical-erotic is a poetry entirely right for the tragicomic passing of the brilliant fat Falstaff. And it is echoed in the pride with which Mistress Quickly locates the old Knight in 'Arthurs Bosome, if ever man went to *Arthurs Bosome*'. The more orthodox would have sent him to Abraham. But Arthur was the founder of knighthood; he was moreover to Elizabethans the King of Romance. This made him, in the view of hard-headed classicists of the time, the representative of that whole realm of archaic folly which (they thought) goes along with love. This hint of Romance, and the Socratic, and the helplessly physical jokes coming through the tenderly lamenting babble of Mistress Quickly about *stones*, make us look back, in fact, down a great decade of invention to a clown holding a dog on a piece of string, and complaining that as to heart, he is a 'stone, a very pibble stone, and has no more pittie in him then a dogge'.

In the Tudor Myth of History, Prince Hal has the authority and the moral right on becoming King to reject Falstaff. It is probably good that he does so, for History's sake. But with a gesture new at every re-playing of these later Histories, Mistress Quickly hands Falstaff over to the feeling of reader or audience, on whose imagination, after all, this whole hearsay death-bed depends. The old dog stands up, shakes itself, and wags its tail in the air of reality.