Joshua Guerrero
October 8, 2018
ENGL 422
1 Henry IV Essay

Falstaff's use of Forgetfulness, Foolishness, and Fabrication in *1 Henry IV*

The validity of memory and the ability to recount the past is an incredibly ubiquitous theme in Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV*. One's own accountability is shaped from the consistency of official histories with those around them while contention from either side can breed mistrust. For the characters in this play, Jonni Koonce Dunn holds the view that "forgetfulness can be not only pleasurable in one form but also advantageous and empowering in another" and that "circumstances sometimes require one to forget something s/he actually remembers" (83). Dunn believes that the philosophical theories of Friedrich Nietzsche, who was highly influenced by Shakespeare, can help explain why characters choose to change or omit the circumstances of past events. There is one character in particular who weaves history to his own favor even when it is blatantly fabricated and deceptive to those around him. Continuing on Dunn's examination, I would like to continue looking into Falstaff's blatant behavior, how his circumstances allow him to continuously reshape his narrative without as many overtly dire consequences as other characters, and how he ties into Nietzsche's idea of a man of vast nature.

One of the concepts of Nietzsche that Dunn uses in her argument is the power of a characters' plasticity towards history and "the capacity to develop out of oneself in one's own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds."(qtd. in Dunn, 84). From this idea, those of little plasticity are greatly moved by singular experiences while those with the greatest are able to remain unaffected by almost anything including their own actions. Under these

definitions, a character such as Hotspur would fall on the lower end of the spectrum while characters such as Falstaff and Hal would fall on the higher end.

Based on Nietzsche's theories, Dunn states that "Happiness and benefit depend on one's being able to forget at the right time as well as to remember at the right time" (85). Being able to forget or overlook certain aspects and events at the right times could prove extremely beneficial when trying to advance one's own goals but doing so at the wrong time may exacerbate the situation. The audience sees this first hand in the opening acts of the play where King Henry refuses to pay the ransom for Lord Mortimer, the rightful heir to the throne but brother-in-law to his ally Hotspur. In order to hold claim to the throne, Henry must denounce potential threats and suppress his own past as an usurper. He justifies his refusal to pay the ransom by deeming Mortimer a traitor, naming him "revolted Mortimer" (*Henry IV, Part 1,* 1.3.94), and, upon a heated confrontation with Hotspur, finally declares "Let me not hear you speak of Mortimer." (1.3.121). While the king attempts to move on the public's attention away from the past, his previous allies' memories of his actions bring forth immense contention. As Dunn states, "Henry IV cannot overmaster the fact that he is a usurper, and this unforgotten guilt overshadows everything he does" (Dunn, 83). The honor and duty expected of a king is rotten with subterfuge towards his allies and the suppression of past truths in order to advance his own agenda of power.

While the King of England is haunted by his history, the king of quips and debauchery doesn't let his past impede his grandiose visions of himself. Falstaff is a knight who is constantly creating, revising, and living in his own mythology. Seemingly looked down upon as a foolish drunk, Falstaff is a master of words, highly entertaining, and, as Dunn describes, a master of

"profligate self-forgetting" (84). His amnesia makes his constant retelling of the past entertaining but his attempts at saving face do not bring him the desires for power or influence at court he speaks of. Instead, it leads him to further become rejected by his companion, Prince Hal throughout most of the play.

The first grand taste we get of Falstaff's amnesiac resourcefulness is in the Boar's Head Tavern where Falstaff and crew are returning from being robbed in the dead of night and recount their experience to Prince Hal and Poins who, unbeknownst to Falstaff, were the actual thieves. In his opening statements, Falstaff alludes to his own character,

> God help the while. A bad
> world, I say. I would I were a weaver. I could sing
> psalms, or anything. A plague of all cowards, I say
> still. (2.4.135-8)

Not only does Falstaff deny his own previous cowardice after being run off by Hal and Poins, he denies that he himself is a weaver of stories before starting on his tirade of false tales. Throughout his recount, Hal and Poins catch Falstaff's inconsistencies and correct him constantly while Falstaff plays it off. Finally, Prince Hal calls Falstaff out and reveals himself to be the robber. In response, Falstaff acts as though he knows all these facts and justifies his actions by creating a false context within the past to justify his own narrative and come out on top in his own mind. As Nietzsche says, "The stronger the innermost roots of a man's nature, the more readily will he be able to assimilate and appropriate the things of the past"(qtd. in Dunn, 86). Through his own ability to embrace the narrative he weaves, and with his comedic and foolish reputation, Falstaff is able to rewrite his own past and move on from his own

shortcomings as if they had never happened. In context of Nietzschean theories of high plasticity, he “overmasters what he can and forgets the rest.”(Dunn, 86).

After many retellings of the robbery and giving audacious falsehoods, Falstaff and Prince Hal have an opportunity to roleplay and give their brutally honest views of each other under the guise of acting. Taking on an impersonation of King Henry and discussing the company that Prince Hal takes up, Falstaff’s vision of himself comes forward through statements such as, “If that man should be lewdly given, he deceiveth me, for, Harry, I see virtue in his looks” (2.4.439-40). He wipes away his past as a highwayman, a drunkard, and a liar and puts himself up on a pedestal. When the roles switch, the sharp-witted Hal viciously attacks Falstaff’s character, even so far as to call him, “That villainous abominable misleader/of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan.”(2.4.489-90). Hal is able to briefly disassemble Falstaff’s previous praise about himself and show that Falstaff’s plasticity only serves so far as to eventually become comedic relief and fuel his appetite for life’s vices. In his own defense, Falstaff pleads to Hal to not get rid of, “sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack/Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff, and therefore more/valiant being as he is old Jack Falstaff” (2.4.493-95).

Falstaff’s final grand use of forgetfulness occurs during the final battle. Arising from a fake death and taking advantage of the confusion on the battlefield, Falstaff claims credit for the death of Hotspur by inflicting a leg wound on the corpse while no one is watching and then dragging the body back to the king. When he comes upon Prince Hal, the killer, and claims credit, Prince Hal refutes it, noting that he saw Falstaff dead upon the field as well. To this, Falstaff refutes, “Didst thou? Lord, Lord, how this world is/given to lying. (5.4.148-9) and that they “fought a long hour by Shrewsbury clock” (5.4.151). Surprisingly, Hal does not contest

Falstaff's claims as he usually would, possibly not caring anymore, and lets Falstaff claim the kill. In doing so, Falstaff enacts the strand of forgetfulness Dunn calls "the intentional amnesia at work in the making of the historical narrative" (81). By accepting this history and moving on, not only does Hal allow Falstaff to change the historical record, but this action also illuminates how malleable the record itself is, based on which elements are highlighted and which are allowed fall to obscurity. Falstaff not only gives a final display of his utilization of forgetfulness but also becomes a carrier of Shakespeare's commentary of how the historical record is easily altered by those who tell the story.

What drives Falstaff's forgetfulness is not by his age or his drunkenness but the desire to live a full life. Dismissing his knighthood for camaraderie of the lower-class and not being forced into societal norms, he is not bound to ideas of honor, honesty, and responsibility. Although he may be seen as a drunkard and a buffoon, he is sharp, quick, and "witty in himself as well as being the reason that wit is in other men, that is, the lovable butt of their humor."(Dunn 92). Highly adaptive, Falstaff embodies Nietzsche's man of vast nature and is able to absorb what he needs from the past without becoming burdened by it and fully utilizes the power one has to forget.

Works Cited:

Dunn, Jonni Koonce. "The Functions of Forgetfulness in 1 Henry IV." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 113 no. 1, 2016, pp. 82-100. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/sip.2016.0000

Shakespeare, William. "*Henry IV, Part I*" Folger Digital Texts, Simon & Schuster, 2010, https://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/html/H5.html