

Critical Reception

³ Falstaff, *Henry IV, Part One* and early responses

Henry IV, Part One has always been a controversial play, with much of that controversy focussed on the character that embodies contradictoriness, Sir John Falstaff. Because Falstaff--like most of the play's characters--also appears in *Henry IV, Part Two*, early criticism usually discusses *Henry IV* as if the two parts are one play. It is, in fact, impossible to describe the critical history of *Henry IV, Part One* without reference to *Part Two* and debate about the relationship between the two plays has occupied many critics (see for example Jenkins 1956, Yachnin 1991, and Pugliatti 1996). To complicate matters, a significant proportion of twentieth-century criticism discusses *Part One* within the context of Shakespeare's other history plays, particularly those of the second tetralogy: *Richard II*, *Henry IV Parts One and Two*, and *Henry V*; or what has been dubbed the "Henriad": *Henry IV Parts One and Two*, and *Henry V*. Of necessity much of the following discussion will refer to *Henry IV, Part One* alongside these other plays.

One of the first printed critiques of *Henry IV, Part One* could be said to be another play: *The First Part of the True and Honorable Historie, of the life of Sir John Old-Castle, the Good Lord Cobham*. It was written by a group of playwrights for a rival company to Shakespeare's, the Admiral's Men, although, strangely, one of its quarto printings from 1600 states that it was "Written by William Shakespeare." *Sir John Old-Castle* was designed as a corrective to Shakespeare's portrait of Prince Hal's companion in the *Henry IV* plays. Sir John Falstaff was originally named Sir John Oldcastle, and the name was changed, purportedly because it had offended Oldcastle's descendants and those who thought of Oldcastle as a Protestant martyr (see Performance History). The prologue to *Sir John Old-Castle* asserts:

It is no pampered glutton we present,
Nor agèd counsellor to youthful sins;
But one whose virtues shone above the rest,
A valiant martyr and a virtuous peer (Prol. 6-9)

A similar corrective is presented in John Weever's poem *The Mirror of Martyrs* (1601) in which the

ghost of Sir John Oldcastle narrates the story of his valorous life.

Shakespeare's gluttonous and less-than-valiant knight clearly did not please all of his contemporaries and the character has generated polarised critical responses ever since. In effect, though, both *The Mirror of Martyrs* and *Sir John Old-Castle* were critiquing Shakespeare's historiography not his characterisation, and these concerns were fuelled by the enormous and ongoing popularity of *Henry IV, Part One*. Many surviving comments on the play from the seventeenth century attest to its drawing power. A commendatory verse by Leonard Digges, published with a 1640 edition of Shakespeare's poems, compares Shakespeare with fellow playwright, Ben Jonson, and asserts that, while Jonson's comic characters might not always cover costs, "let but Falstaff come, Hal, Poins, the rest you scarce shall have a roome / All is so pester'd" (Vickers 1.28). One of the first commentators on Shakespeare's characterization, John Dryden, used Falstaff as an example of a character that was successfully composed of complementary qualities: "Falstaff is a Lyar, and a Coward, a Glutton, and a Buffon, because all these qualities may agree in the same man" (Vickers 1.258), and Gerald Langbaine, writing in 1691, noted that Falstaff "never fail'd of universal applause" (Vickers 1.420).

A consciousness of a possible down-side to Falstaff's popularity first appeared in responses to the two parts of *Henry IV* during the early eighteenth century. In 1709 Shakespeare's first editor, Nicholas Rowe, anticipated the direction of much future criticism when he wrote:

Falstaff is allow'd by every body to be a Masterpiece. . . . If there be any Fault in the Draught he has made of this lewd old Fellow, it is that tho' he has made him a Thief, Lying, Cowardly, Vain-glorious, and in short every way Vicious, yet he has given him so much Wit as to make him almost too agreeable; and I don't know whether some People have not, in remembrance of the Diversion he had formerly afforded 'em, been sorry to see his Friend *Hal* use him so scurvily when he comes to the Crown in the End of the Second Part of *Henry IV* (Vickers 2.195).

During the latter half of the eighteenth century, however, Shakespeare's prestige was riding so high that most responses to his works and characters consisted primarily of fulsome praise and the idea of any fault in Shakespeare's design largely disappeared. Commentators stressed the moral lesson that Falstaff embodied in spite of his seductive charm. Samuel Johnson greatly admired the two *Henry IV* plays, stating that "perhaps no authour has ever in two plays afforded so much delight" (Vickers 5.124). He

describes Falstaff as "a thief and a glutton, a coward and a boaster, always ready to cheat the weak, and prey upon the poor" and as at once "obsequious and malignant." Johnson admits the appeal of Falstaff's gaiety and wit and that he is not stained with "enormous or sanguinary crimes," but sees him as representing a moral to be drawn from the play that "no man is more dangerous than he that with a will to corrupt hath the power to please" (Vickers 5.124-25).

In a similar vein, Elizabeth Montagu's "Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare," published in 1769, positions Falstaff as the felicitous means through which Shakespeare protects the reputation of Prince Hal. Montagu suggests that "it was a delicate affair to expose the follies of Henry V before a people proud of his victories . . . How happily therefore was the character of Falstaff introduced, whose wit and festivity in some measure excuse the Prince for admitting him into his familiarity" (Vickers 5.332). Falstaff's vices and defects make him "as contemptible as entertaining" (Vickers 5.333) and the fact that the Prince, "seems always diverted rather than seduced by Falstaff" (Vickers 5.332) means that the knight poses no real threat to either the Prince or the audience.

A more provocative reading of Falstaff's character was posited by Maurice Morgann in 1777. Morgann's ostensible aim was to refute the assumption that Falstaff was a coward: an idea which, according to at least one anonymous contributor to *Walker's Hibernian Magazine*, was "a much disputed point" at the time (Vickers 6:135). Morgann's essay on Falstaff is a milestone in literary criticism, reflecting both the consolidation of Shakespeare's reputation as a writer of genius and Morgann's own determination to subject Shakespeare's characterisation to serious extended scrutiny. Morgann examines several Falstaff scenes and references to him in both parts of *Henry IV* and argues that, while there are appearances of cowardice in Falstaff's portrayal, this is not the overall feeling we get of Falstaff's character. He tentatively suggests that "the *real* character of Falstaff may be different from his *apparent* one; and, possibly, this difference between reality and appearance, whilst it accounts at once for our liking and our censure, may be the true point of humour in the character" (15).

Much of Morgann's essay talks about Falstaff as if he were a real human being with a life beyond the plays in which he appears. He stresses Falstaff's upbringing and reputation as a soldier and a knight, and he interprets his behaviour at the battle of Shrewsbury as belonging to "a kind of military free thinker" and a man of "common sense" with "too much wit for a hero" (103). Morgann's lengthy analysis of the Gadshill robbery argues that Poins's comment in 1.2--"and for the third, if he fight longer than he sees reason, I'll forswear arms" (TLN286)--sets Falstaff apart from his companions. He also claims that,

although Falstaff is derided by the Prince and Poins for running away roaring, the stage direction--"*Falstaff after a blow or two runs away too*" (TLN840)--again distinguishes Falstaff from the others. Morgann invites us to suppose that "Falstaff was a man of Natural courage, though in all respects unprincipled; but that he was surprised, in one single instance, into an act of real terror" (139).

Morgann's view of Falstaff was not without its critics (Samuel Johnson facetiously suggested he should next try to prove Iago a good man), but it did stimulate much further debate. Richard Stack, for example, admired Morgann's "dexterity in support of a paradox" (Vickers 6: 470) but in a refutation from 1788 pointed out that Falstaff has many faults that we forgive because "he entertains, surprises and charms" us, so there is little point trying to acquit him of cowardice: "defence is a thing of too serious a nature for Falstaff, he laughs at all vindication" (479). Stack's insight was shrewdly developed by William Empson a century and a half later: "The whole joke of the great rogue is that *you* can't see through him, any more than the Prince could" (135-36).