

"Falstaff"... A Critic for All Seasons

Dina Nabil Abdel-Rahman Ibrahim

Being requested to write more plays about Falstaff after the success of his *Henriad*, William Shakespeare, responding to Queen Elizabeth I's wishes, wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. According to some critics, Falstaff is the best comic character that Shakespeare has ever created; therefore, the character has inspired many writers and musical composers in all times, to adopt the essence of his character in either novels or operas. Falstaff is a satirical laugh at things from a critical perspective, though the original name of that character was not as what is familiar now. It is believed that Sir John Falstaff's original name in Shakespeare's *Henriad* is Sir John Oldcastle, a Lollard leader in the medieval period, who was executed for his beliefs and died as a martyr. References to the original name can be easily traced throughout the play; the best reference is in the title given to him by Prince Hal as: "My old lad of the castle". However, a descendent of Sir Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, objected on such humiliation to his ancestor's memory, and forced Shakespeare to change the name, especially that there are no similarities between the historical Oldcastle and the fictitious equivalent. One of Falstaff's major functions in Shakespearean drama is 'a comic relief' from serious political and historical events in the plays. However, it is only half of the truth, for Falstaff's character acts as a severe critique of economic, political and social conditions; moreover, it elucidates hidden life in the court as well as the tavern world.

History plays are presumably intended to enroot the Tudor myth; nevertheless, Shakespeare has his own ways to attest his perspectives. "Like any other royal subject, he had to satisfy - or at least not to displease - the sovereign and her court" (153 alternative). Queen Elizabeth was very sensitive regarding any challenge to the legitimacy of her throne; therefore, theatres were to her, sources of doubt and fear. Being source of entertainment, though, she feared that theatres were small hideouts of conspiracies plotted against her, or media which repeatedly present the same performances, and eventually would nurture revolutions like the one risen by Earl of Essex in 1601, dated two years after the performance of *Richard II*. By bringing royal families and dynasties on the stage and generating funny role-plays about them, Shakespeare defies the halo surrounding them. Dynasties, as a result, appear as real human beings whose health degenerates according to life span, as in the case of Henry IV, or face great challenges which may sweep their throne away, as in the case of Henry V. In both cases, Shakespeare, via his 'light-hearted Falstaff' and farcical scene, depicts various circumstances during Elizabethan era and criticises them in a medieval context.

Humorous as he seems to be, Falstaff is a figure of collective negatives; he is sage, rascal, knave, rogue, womanizer, and a drunkard, who spends his life in Boar's Head Tavern among a company of cutpurses and cheaters. Hal sums up Falstaff's life in *1 Henry IV*, he says: "Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping-houses, coloured taffeta" (I. ii. 5-9). Despite his corruptive nature, Falstaff stands on equal feet with kings and nobles when it comes to their glow on the stage. His mastery of

language, wit and verbal dexterity which get him out of any critical situation, add to his lovable air; that is to say, the audience are inadvertently pushed to like him and listen to his funny wicked views of life. Shakespeare introduces, through Falstaff, the stage clown or the wise fool, whose subversive potential sheds light on current circumstances and satirises them, eventually. As Sigmund Freud appoints, "[h]umour is not resigned, it is rebellious" (cited in Jacobs 92). Falstaff, as a result, becomes "a figure almost larger than life" (Jacobs 75), since he sits away and carries on mocking the incidents around him.

Falstaff has an outstanding philosophy of life which ventures a replica in modern Elizabethan ages. "Harold Bloom sees Falstaff as a teacher... one who instructs us in freedom; particularly freedom from society; he is a satirist who turns against all powers" (Jacobs 79). Freedom must be a release of all censors: time, law and social norms. By the turn of the sixteenth century and with the shift from Middle Ages to early Renaissance, a vast belief in man's mental faculty sprouts and flourishes, resulting to an antagonistic emotion against spiritual and taken-for-granted sacred scripts. As a materialistic man, Falstaff believes only in what he sees and feels. Honour, for him, ceases to be a mere abstract concept and rather turns to be a tangible perception, illustrated in food, drinking and sex. This perspective echoes the British personality which prefers *la joie de vivre* or joy of living and material goods to spiritual goods. Falstaff, hence, is an archetype of physical pleasures. He robs, does not pay his debts and takes bribes to hire soldiers. In seeking opportunities, he waits for the moment his young Hal ascends the throne, and consequently, ripens all the benefits of this new position. Though he carries the title of knighthood, he is antagonistic to chivalry codes, not to mention, he introduces a deteriorated image of chivalry and knighthood during early modern era.

Introduced by King Edward III and his son, the Black Prince, chivalry is considered a milestone in Middle Ages, as it is associated to codes of honour and bravery which illustrate the self-fashioning of the age. "According to the code of chivalry, the perfect knight fought for his good name if insulted, served God and the king and defended any lady in need. These ideas were expressed in the legend of the Round Table" (McDowell 45) and King Arthur. Chivalry, thus, is an idealistic code and rather legendary. Chivalry was declining during Elizabeth's reign, and lost its glamour due to the appearance of 'new aristocracy' and the 'rising bourgeoisie'. Shakespeare makes a comparison between two different perspectives, as long as chivalry is concerned; on the one hand, Hal and Hotspur, though they are on a stark contrast, and on the other hand, Falstaff. Theme of honour is a crucial aspect of knighthood. In investigating feeling of honour throughout the play, it appears that for Hotspur, honour is feeling of duty, and fighting and dying in the battlefield for the sake of reputation. Meanwhile, Hal regards honour as a virtuous behaviour acquired after loose youth. Thus, in both cases, honour is perceived as something significant or venerable. Dissimilar to Hotspur and Hal, the *beau ideal*, Falstaff views honour as a vicious word, he says: "Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honor hath no skill in surgery, then? No. What is honor? A word" (V. i. 130-135). Falstaff strips the word of its abstract value and regards it as a foolish choice, only the dead could obtain.

Falstaff presents a deformed knight and rather a more realistic human being facing stumbling blocks in the turn of a new era. Falstaff undercuts the values of chivalry. He is a coward knight with no weapon but a bottle of sack, he says in *2 Henry IV*: "So that skill in the weapon is nothing without sack, for that sets it a-work; and learning a mere hoard of gold kept by a devil, till sack commences it and sets it in act and use" (IV. iii. 110-113). The vital question is what is the reason behind Falstaff's addiction to wine? The answer might be found in the following, when he says: "It ascends me into the brain, dries me there all the foolish and dull and crury vapors which

environ it, makes it apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble, fiery, and delectable shapes" (94-98). Wine, thus, is a refuge and an escape from unsolved economic problems. After the usurpation, "the authority of the Crown had been greatly weakened... The magnates who had made the revolution had to be lavishly rewarded" (Myers 99). Accordingly, nobles were much favoured to common knights and given luxurious bounties in order to keep their eyes humble. Falstaff, among those who lost everything but his title, has been given nothing to offer his loyalty to the King. In Tudor England, things went much worse than before; despite prosperity, poverty spread all over England due to the rapid increase in population and economic pressures. Prices increased and could not be afforded, which pushed Henry VIII to debase the coinage. Despite the Poor Laws, the poor went poorer, and some of them turned into vagabonds and beggars. London streets, eventually, were divided into the elite court life and the degraded life of inns and taverns, which explains much about the shifts of scenes in the *Henriad* from court scenes to tavern scenes and vice versa.

Thievery was among main crimes in Tudor England. Falstaff's company is a merry company of wicked funny "thieves of the day's beauty", who desire to be titled as "Diana's foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon" (I. ii. 21-23). They rob each other such as in Gad's Hill robbery scene when Hal and Poin robbed their fellowmen. Those tavern robbery scenes, despite their negative implications, are not as perilous as thievery of authority in the court scenes. Franz Alexander assumes that "our sympathy for Falstaff is partly due to the contrast between the intrigues of the politicians at the court and Falstaff's relatively harmless adventures" (Jacobs 84). Shakespeare criticises wily political situations in which authority is stolen and illegitimately overtaken. Kings and nobles fight to seize the throne and raise false claims and push thousands of innocent soldiers to obtain something which does not belong to them. Bolingbrook's usurpation in 1399, for instance, is a double treachery to his allegiance to Richard II and to God as well.

"Expropriating the expropriators" is a common theme in the *Henriad*. Bolingbrook expropriates Earl Roger Mortimer's right in the throne, and subsequently is threatened by Hotspur's rebellion to seek his throne. After Hal becomes Henry V, he repeats his father's mistake, but abroad on French lands. Henry V raises a claim in ascending the French throne from a female lineage of his grandmother Philippa, which the French discarded according to their Salic Law. Nevertheless, Henry V pushes thousands of English soldiers after getting the support from the church, Bishop of Exeter says: "Your brother kings and monarchs of earth / Do all expect that you should rouse yourself, / as did the former lions of your blood" (I. ii. 122-125). What is so cunning about Henry V is his lying responsibilities of war and bloodshed on the churchmen who seem, from the first scene, so sensitive about their properties which they may lose. Shakespeare is so cautious about revealing corruption underpinning the court life, where subversion is generated to lay control over the situation. "In *1 Henry IV*, Shakespeare traces the origins of centralised government to the strategies of a wily ruler and his son, who, like Elizabeth, was aware of the importance of public self-fashioning" (Hattaway 159). The history of the Tudors in ascending the throne shows another similitude to "expropriating the expropriators". After the raging of the War of Roses between the Lancastrians and the Yorks, many nobles died, so Henry Tudor, Queen Elizabeth's grandfather, strengthened his throne by marrying Elizabeth of York, King Edward IV's daughter and the heiress of the throne. Henry VII, though had no real claim in the throne, succeeded to put an end for the War of Roses and unite the two noble houses. Establishing what is known as the Tudor myth, Henry VII proclaimed he was divinely sanctioned and supported by God as he succeeds in bringing peace back to England.

As Hal oscillates between the two opposing worlds of tavern vagabonds and court royalty, Shakespeare erects two major binary opposites between Falstaff's and King Henry IV's characters. Falstaff acts like a substitute father figure who alternates King Henry's role, as a father. The father-son relationship between King Henry and Hal underpins tension and anxiety concerning Henry's past treachery and Hal's uncertain royal fit in the future. Falstaff fulfills the absence of King Henry, who wishes, as a father, that the fairies could have switched his son, Hal, with Hotspur, the honourable warrior. He says: "O my young Harry. O that it could be proved / That some night-tripping fairy had exchanged / In the cradle-clothes our children where they lay, / And called mine Percy, his Plantagenet! (I. i. 85-88). Hal, thus, is a great disappointment to his father. Plus, King Henry keeps comparing Hal with others, such as Hotspur, and with Richard II, who lost his throne due to his publicity. This disdain reveals the lack of trust King Henry feels towards his son. Even up until the end of *2 Henry IV*, King Henry never trusts his son, particularly on his death bed. Falstaff and his company, on the contrary, compensate Hal's nostalgic emotions and offer him the respect he looks forward to. Though manipulative, as he may appear, Falstaff trusts Hal's merits, which are partly royal and partly thankful for the sack he drinks, to become a great sovereign. Despite his doubts about Hal that he may banish him after he ascends the throne, Falstaff kicks those negative thoughts of his mind, he says: "banish not him thy Harry's company, banish plump Jack, banish all the world" (II. iv. 414-415). Then Hal says: "I do, I will". That is why; the banishment of Falstaff is regarded by some critics as the most heartbreaking scene in the play. Meanwhile, Hal is perceived as a ruthless ungrateful king causing death for the man who has considered him an adopted son.

Shakespeare makes a comparison between Falstaff and Hal in order to reveal the wide gap of demeanour between tavern world and court world. Court life is based on self-interest, deception and manipulation. Falstaff is reckoned an opportunist; however, he is clear about the ambitions and out speaks them frankly. On the contrary, Hal is sly about his ambitions. Seeing himself as the sun, a royal symbol, Hal manipulates Falstaff and his company to appear corruptive, idle and loose, but when the moment comes, he changes this apparent mask to reveal his royal nature. He says: "So when this loose behaviour I throw off, / And pay the debt I never promised, /... My reformation, glittering o'er my fault, / Shall show more goodly, and attract more eyes" (I. ii. 174-180). Trapped in a conflict between *res publica* and *res privata*, Hal has to favour public affairs and abandon his old company. "I know thee not" – how close to Peter's denial of Christ: "I know not the man". The critic A. C. Bradley is emphatic in his acknowledgment of how uncomfortable this rejection makes us feel" (Jacobs 89). Hal's famous dialogue with Falstaff: "I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers. / How ill white hairs becomes a fool and jester!" (V. v. 46-47) seems quite distressing especially that he says in the beginning of *1 Henry IV*, "I know you all, and will awhile uphold / The unyoked humour of your idleness" (I. ii. 161-162). Consequently, paradoxes took shape in Hal's character, between his role as a king and his duties towards his old friends who stood by him when everyone else disappointed him.

Falstaff mostly appears to be the sole character that has inner peace and tranquility. As being keen about human inner complexes, Shakespeare presents a psychological critique to human psyche. Falstaff is possibly regarded as an embodiment of the libido or pleasure principle according to psychoanalysts, as he reveals hidden infantile shadows in Hal's character. Falstaff lies in the other extreme with Chief Justice who personifies the superego. Hal looks up Lord Justice and draws his ambitions towards him, and mostly important he regards him as another substitute father. Probably, it seems that life is unfair as Falstaff is banished while Justice is drawn closer. However, Hal, in this respect, behaves like an ego that is trapped in a relentless conflict with the father figure, the exact embodiment of oedipal complex. Therefore, Hal, according to the theory,

has to kill any father figure whosoever he is acquainted with, in order to get rid of parental authority. Acute, his choice is ought to be, Hal could not kill his father, the King, nor the Lord Justice lest he should be called a tyrant, so Falstaff has been his last, reasonable and welcomed choice to banish, causing his 'murder', eventually.

All in all, Shakespeare's history plays do not present academic history but rather a historiographic drama through which he tackles serious themes and criticises current circumstances. Falstaff is regarded as his best comic character though it is generated in a dramatic history genre. Through humour, wit and verbal dexterity, Shakespeare, through Falstaff, of course, presents a serious critique, not only to Medieval England, but mostly important to Tudor England. However, Shakespeare who masters his language and characters' profiles is never caught in the act, but proves along with 'his Falstaff' to be a critic for all seasons.

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Ms Dina Nabil Abdel Rahman Ibrahim is a postgraduate student at the Faculty of Arts, Alexandria University, Egypt. She can be contacted at dinanabilio8@yahoo.com