

Martina PRANIĆ, « “The purpose must weigh with the folly”: The Role of Falstaff  
in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV Plays* »,  
« Theta XI, Théâtre Tudor », 2013, pp. 149-164  
mis en ligne en septembre 2014, <<https://sceneuropeenne.univ-tours.fr/theta/theta11>>.

## Theta XI

est publié par le Centre d’Études Supérieures de la Renaissance,  
dirigé par Philippe VENDRIX,  
Université François-Rabelais de Tours, CNRS/UMR 7323

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## Date de création

septembre 2014



## “The purpose must weigh with the folly”: The Role of Falstaff in Shakespeare’s Henry IV Plays

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“In every thing the purpose must weigh with the folly” (Shakespeare, *2H4*, II.ii.168-69), Prince Hal announces with conviction to Poins at the very end of Act Two, Scene Two, of *Henry IV, Part Two*. They have just conspired to play yet another prank on Falstaff. At Poins’s suggestion, Hal has consented to a “low transformation” (167): they plan to disguise themselves as drawers at hostess Quickly’s tavern, to wait on Falstaff and catch him unawares as he suspends his customary bravado and shows his “true colours” (163). The folly of Hal’s masquerade has in this case a very plain purpose: to provide some idle jest in the intermission between battles, while the throne is still occupied, and Hal can still profit from the procrastination of responsibility. Yet the jesting Prince is further justified by an ulterior motive: the seemingly harmless joke is bound to expose the grotesque champion of Hal’s “rude society” (Shakespeare, *1H4*, III. ii.14) as a deceitful parasite who seeks personal advancement through association with Hal’s “princely heart” (III. ii.17). Since Falstaff is yet again affirmed a fake, Hal’s own performance as England’s prodigal son gains ever more validity. And therefore, a far greater purpose is in the course of the two parts of *Henry IV* being weighed with this folly of literally gargantuan proportions.

It is Hal’s true purpose that is central to the two plays. As early as the second scene of the first act in *1 Henry IV*, Hal

briefly lifts his own mask for the benefit of the audience and delivers a manifesto of his solitary enterprise of regal self-fashioning. And the scale of such a purpose required the employment of one of the most carefully constructed figures of folly in the Shakespearean canon. It required the invention of Falstaff. In order to solidify his sworn reformation, the Prince will conclude his transformation in an act of exorcism against the “old, white-bearded Satan” (II.iv.451) and finally “banish plump Jack” (467). As for the purpose of this paper, it will discuss the received perception of Falstaff as a celebrated comic creation and offer some thoughts on his discourse of folly and the character’s purpose in the world of the two plays.

Judging by the number of works that refer to him, Falstaff’s reputation seems as huge as his fictional person. He is the king of crossing the boundaries of media, and has found his way into literature, painting, opera, film, even comic books—by directly inspiring Volstagg, the somewhat less flawed companion to the eponymous hero of *Thor*.<sup>1</sup> Critical regard for the foolish fat knight followed popular opinion closely, if not always in sentiment, then certainly in the amount of attention this comic literary construct has so far received. Throughout the dusty old tomes of character criticism, Falstaff was celebrated as vigorously as he was chastised; his genealogy was carefully established and scrupulously rebuked many a time; and his role in the peculiar structural arrangement of the Second Tetralogy was discussed nearly *ad nauseam*. As often happens, critical consensus was never established, and Falstaff has been approached from many different angles.

The braggart knight’s intertextual portrayal resembles a uniquely protean beast, whose malleability seems to allow him to fit into numerous moulds. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Alfred Ainger recognized in Falstaff the Vice of the morality plays, who “was invariably a comic character; not at all with any view to make light of sin, but in order thereby to make sin contemptible. Just so the fat knight Oldcastle [i.e., Falstaff] would be sure to be made as ridiculous as possible for popular presentation” (Ainger, I: 129). This line of descent has many adherents,<sup>2</sup> and is prompted explicitly by Falstaff’s identifying himself with the Vice through the latter’s weapon of choice, in his characteristically pompous bluster: “If I do not beat thee out of thy kingdom with a dagger of lath, and drive all thy subjects afore thee like a flock of wild geese, I’ll never wear hair

1 The character of Volstagg was created by Jack Kirby, one of the doyens of the American comic book scene, and was first introduced into the plot of *Thor* in August 1965.

2 See, e.g., Wilson, Bethell, Spivack and Kaiser.

on my face more" (*1H4*, II.iv.130-33.) Enid Welsford saw in Falstaff the pinnacle of the buffoon tradition of "the incorrigibly impudent rogues, the irrepressible mischief-makers" whose "gross men of the earth . . . knew well that the normal physical functions of the body have always provided the human race with an inexhaustible source of merriment" (Welsford, pp. 50-51). Harold C. Goddard resorted to mythical explications, claiming that Falstaff carried "the proportions of a mythological figure. He seems at times more like a god than a man. His very solidity is solar, his rotundity comic" (Goddard, I: 178). Northrop Frye discerned another very important type in the fat knight: "Falstaff is a mock king, a lord of misrule and his tavern is a Saturnalia" (Frye, p. 11).

The figure of the Lord of Misrule is built into one of the most resilient interpretations of Falstaff, and it was C. L. Barber who perhaps most famously took this path in a discussion of the festive elements in the *Henriad*. As he wrote, "the Falstaff comedy, far from being forced into an alien environment of historical drama, is begotten by that environment, giving and taking meaning as it grows. . . . Shakespeare dramatizes not only holiday but also the need for holiday and the need to limit holiday" (Barber, p. 219). Whereas it used to be customary to read Falstaff's narrative thread in the two parts of *Henry IV* as a satirising mirror-image of the historical events in the plays, Barber sees the dynamic relation between the historical and the comedic action as saturnalian, Falstaff's misrule functioning as a safety-valve, and his subsequent banishment as a consolidation of the newly established rational rule of Hal as king. Given that Barber was writing before the Anglo-American discovery of Bakhtinian thought, an obvious temptation would be to develop this saturnalian interpretation further and employ carnivalesque theory. Falstaff could be read as a champion of the lower bodily stratum and as emblematic of a carnivalesque worldview that celebrates the vitality of the popular, of life, and renewal. Indeed, a number of critics have done so. In such a reading, the tavern realm over which Falstaff presides indeed *becomes* the lower bodily stratum of the play as a whole, pitched against the cold and calculated mind absorbed into the political everydayness that Hal will come to represent. This reading would endorse the Falstaffian festival as a subversive strand that, even though seemingly eliminated at the end, ultimately continues to destabilise any authoritative power that threatens to contain it. "Carnival, like the king, never dies" (Laroque, p. 95), concludes François Laroque in his largely Bakhtinian analysis of the Falstaff-Hal dichotomy.

As satisfactory and compact as it may seem, the carnivalesque interpretation does, however, suffer from certain instabilities. While it is true that Falstaff appeals to the popular taste, he can hardly be said to represent the people. Taking Falstaff to be an embodiment of the carnivalesque does not account for his pronounced individualism, or for the fact that none of his spoken lines actually echo any kind of coherent popular voice. Yet his rampant individualism, like many of his other properties, is deeply contradictory: two of the things he seemingly indulges in the most, namely laughter and sack-drinking, are both ubiquitous social lubricants that presuppose communality.

Communal as he may be, Falstaff in the *Henriad* is far from being a spirit of the people. If anything, he is a detached commentator seemingly unaffected by interests other than his own. A case in point is the soliloquy on how he has “misused the King’s press damnably” (*1H4*, IV.ii.12–13), which exposes the unfair ways of the Elizabethan recruiting system. In times less politically correct than our own, this speech must have generated roars of laughter from the audience, yet now it is often recognized as employing his habitual rhetoric of excess to lampoon the unfortunate, the lowest class of society. Quite like his discourse, Falstaff’s laughter is nowhere near the carnival laughter of all the people. As Bakhtin conceptualised it in *Rabelais and His World*,<sup>3</sup> communal laughter included and engulfed everyone and was timeless in nature, rather than directed toward isolated events. Conversely, Falstaff uses laughter precisely to ridicule individuals and particular events, and he does so to gain personal advantage. As Indira Ghose has shown in *Shakespeare and Laughter*,<sup>4</sup> the Falstaffian laughter is often an end in itself, and his satirising antics face “the danger inherent in any satire—that of spilling over into sheer entertainment” (Ghose, p. 158).

Yet, paradoxically, the fact that Falstaff is a solipsistic and often bluntly immoral force has hardly soiled his reputation as Shakespeare’s most endearing comic creation. Even his completely unethical commentary exhibits a sharp wit, which has proved a guarantee of his enduring charm, and his tomfoolery often points up the hypocritical sombreness of the historical characters: his unforgettable rendition of the old king in the “play extempore” (*1H4*, II.iv.271) is but one example. The nimble prose he speaks, which differentiates and excludes him from the historical blank-verse-speaking world, is even more inflated than his

3 See esp. the chapter, “Rabelais in the History of Laughter”, in *Rabelais and His World* (pp. 59–145).

4 See Ghose, esp. pp. 156–63.

own body, and he relies on it to get himself out of any corner. One of the pleasures of Falstaff is ultimately a cruel one: like Hal and Poins, the audience enjoys seeing him distressed, as distress is surely to trigger his discursive brilliance. And yet his famous wit hardly ever amounts to much and is ultimately a fool's truth: spoken in jest and generally ignored. That may also be the location of his appeal: he is a misleader of youth that has no authority; his territory is a morally dubious state of denial, such as one allows oneself before assuming worldly responsibility.

Falstaff's festive character, however, has a darker side, which can be described as a degeneration of the carnivalesque and is closely related to the concept of time. Characterised by liminality, Falstaff is located at the closure of a popular tradition and the beginning of a new order—one represented by Hal, the redeemer of time, and one that cannot (or will not) accommodate him. This locus converges historically with the transformation of the carnival, the moment that saw the constraining of festivals into temporally bound forms. The corrupt carnival, and by extension the corrupt brand of folly, that Falstaff exemplifies is a product of the transformation of the social time that Bakhtin described in *Dialogic Imagination* as unifying, productive and generative. This form of time Bakhtin located within the pre-class agricultural stage of social development that gets articulated in later literature, especially the folkloric bases of the Rabelaisian chronotope.<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin emphasises the connection of the carnival with the largely idealised “time of labor . . . of productive growth . . . not separated from the earth or from nature”, in which “everyday life and consumption are not isolated from the labor and the production process.” According to time thus conceptualised, there is “no precise differentiation of time into a present, a past, and a future (which presumes an *essential individuality* as a point of departure)” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, p. 207; original emphasis). Martin Procházka criticises Bakhtin's notion of unifying time, pointing to the

rash generalization [that] ignores the deep gulf between the sacred and the profane, festivity and everydayness. It is based on a backward-looking romantic utopia, idealizing the life of the folk community and identifying it with natural rhythms. (Procházka, “Shakespeare's Illyria”, p. 6)

That is yet another reason why Falstaff is not a true embodiment of the carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense, as he is sharply disconnected from all

5 See Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, esp. pp. 206-10.

romanticised utopian festivals. And the world of *Henry IV* is one that has a clear differentiation between the holiday and the everyday.

It is Hal who is in control of the essential individuality as a self-fashioned future monarch, and Falstaff strives to follow. He corrupts the carnival, but his lack of understanding how the time for festivals and jests has come to function makes him unfit for participation in Hal's world. This change is signalled by the transformation that social time undergoes: from the unifying force and the hope of salvation, it is changed to units measured mechanically, coordinated by the clock. Falstaff's very introduction on the stage and into the text has him speak the words, "Now, Hal, what time of day is it, lad?" (*1H4*, I.ii.1) Apart from establishing his familiarity with the Prince, the line enquires after a temporal beginning, trying to determine whether it may be time for jest. Falstaff functions outside of conventional time, as Hal leads us to believe. He has no reason to be "so superfluous as to demand the time of the day" (I.ii.10-11), "[u]nless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds" (6-8), and so on. As he lists common markers of festival culture, Hal's catalogue locates Falstaff within a world set apart from the everyday. But unlike Falstaff, who will spend the greater part of the two plays obstinately trying to prolong the time for jest and revelry, Hal understands the impulse behind limiting the festive. His programmatic monologue revealing his duplicitous character resonates with this understanding:

If all the year were playing holidays,  
To sport would be as tedious as to work  
But when they seldom come, they wish'd for come,  
And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents. (*1H4*, I.ii.194-97)

Temporally restricted festivities such as Hal advocates have been described by Foucault as heterotopias, defined as different spaces, "actually realized utopias" (Foucault, p. 178) that always link some kind of fictitious projection with actuality and start functioning fully once a break with traditional time is established. The heterotopic festival is bound by a time that Foucault sees as "time in its most evanescent, transitory, and delicate form" (p. 182). Such a festival is easier to control, as it requires a stricter licence. Falstaff is guided by an unflinching desire to lead an existence free of care and responsibility, a desire almost to inhabit an unconstrained heterotopia of the festival. Oblivious to the internal rules of transient festivities that Hal is to master, he is obstinately bent on per-

petuating folly. That also seems to be his major fallacy, at least in the world of Shakespearean history, where Hal has the power to make festive heterotopias temporally conditioned.

Falstaff represents the transformation of the carnivalesque that leads to its loss of integrating and recuperating powers. By the second part of *Henry IV*, he will have degenerated even further into the mode of fallen carnival. The crucial scene takes place in the third act of the play, when Justice Shallow ruminates on the allegedly glorious times the two old men shared, the times that may be said to look back to the carnival spirit in its uncorrupted form. The Falstaff of *Henry IV* does not belong to that time and concurs with Shallow's chatter evasively—"We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow" (*2H4*, III.ii.209-10)—evoking yet another mechanical measurement of time. When midnight chimes, the end of a day is marked, and Falstaff could be marking the end of an understanding of time. The line was made famous by Orson Welles, who had based his entire sentimental interpretation of the Shakespearean text on the supposed wistfulness Falstaff expresses. Yet Falstaff is there, I believe, far from just wistful. In his second visit to Shallow in Act Five of the same play, he will pragmatically follow his selfish interests and proceed to cheat the foolish justice out of a thousand pounds. And this thievery is a deed that clearly belongs to a time that values profiteering more than communality, and one that is able to produce festivals merely as a form of temporally conditioned heterotopias.

The very fact that Falstaff is rejected has earned him forgiving and sentimental interpretations. He is often seen as a collateral victim in Hal's coming-of-age story. And in this story, Hal is a master performer. In a world so strategically dependent upon the theatricality of regal power and the performativity of politics, where rhetoric is in service to war, and men are "food for powder" (*1H4*, IV.ii.46), Hal will rise to the challenge of the role that awaits him in *Henry V*. Compared to Hal's calculated brilliance, Falstaff is a largely ridiculous fool who toys with the margins of historical action, hoping to procure some money for his consumption-infected purse, some sack to satisfy his unquenchable guts, and the laughter of others to justify his existence. His folly is on full display once he steps onto Hal's main stage. Falstaff's actions in the battle, while at the same time caricaturing a very human fear and unwillingness to participate in the gruesome affairs of the war—"I would 'twere bed-time, Hal, and all well" (*1H4*, V.i.123) is one of his pleas—serve to establish his unsuitability for the world Hal is trying to fashion.

The beginning of the battle is marked by his famous catechism on honour, once again sharply contrasted with the ideology of the state and power. In the catechism, Falstaff may to our ears sound unusually serious, his nihilistic words betraying an awareness of the relativity and constructiveness of grand causes, reflecting perhaps even his own brand of twisted pacifism. But on the stage of history he is inept, and his words are null and void. His further actions, namely, saving his own skin by counterfeiting death and his counterfeit killing of Hotspur, solidify his cowardice but also reaffirm his resilience. The fake killing—or, literally, faking a fake killing, as the killing is, of course, theatrical and Hotspur is not actually cold—is the single action of Falstaff that has any consequence. Hal will afterwards display uncustomary kindness towards him by supporting his display of heroism and secure him a role in the post-Shrewsbury world, as in the second part of the play. Falstaff is, therefore, no less a performer than Hal is, his histrionic personality throughout the two plays casting a comical shadow over the more serious players.

Falstaff is, however, blinded by folly: he does not completely comprehend the seriousness of the historical realm, but enjoys the play for its own sake. For him, the play is the thing wherein he hopes to capture not merely the conscience, but also the heart of the future king. His love for Hal is sometimes read as charged with homoeroticism, and his devotion has been compared to that of the speaker of the Sonnets to the Fair Youth.<sup>6</sup> Falstaff iterates his love for the Prince freely. In a misplaced speech that is seemingly directed to Poins, but that in fact affirms everything he had thus far said about Hal, Falstaff declares,

I have forsworn his company hourly any time this two and twenty years, and yet I am bewitched with the rogue's company. If the rascal hath not given me medicines to make me love him, I'll be hanged; it could not be else: I have drunk medicines. (*1H4*, II.ii.16-19)

The example is not solitary: if Hal loves him, he will stop mocking his cowardice in the robbery; if he loves him, he will practice an answer to his father in a “play extempore” (II.iv.271). And trying to slither out of hostess Quickly's accusations in front of Hal, he trumpets and exaggerates: “A thousand pound, Hal? A million. Thy love is worth a million. Thou owest me thy love” (III.iii.135-36). Falstaff

6 The argument is developed in William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral*, first published in 1935 (see the chapter, “They That Have Power”), and W. H. Auden's essay, “The Prince's Dog” (first published in 1948, reprinted in the 1962 collection, *The Dyer's Hand*), but is driven to its full articulation in Jonathan Goldberg's *Sodometries* in the chapter, “Desiring Hal”.

is a fool in his actions, as well as his affections. And underneath its ridiculousness of expression, his love for Hal can almost be taken as the only remotely honest thing about him, something which exposes him to flights of Hal's fickle affection.

This love-fool's vulnerability Falstaff masks with a discourse of folly and the employment of lies. His lies, which are truly "like their father that begets them, gross as a mountain, open, palpable" (*1H4*, II.iv.218-19), have opened up a way into a somber critique of his role in the *Henriad*. He becomes, as James Calderwood termed it, an emblem of the "fallen language" that permeates the plays' portraying of multiple crises: of kingship and regal power, of allegiances and friendship, of rhetoric, but most of all of truth. In Calderwood's sobering analysis,<sup>7</sup> Falstaff appears as a creature entirely made up of words, allowed on the stage only after Bolingbroke has manoeuvred his way to the throne, debasing true legitimacy and legitimising base lies. Calderwood's Falstaff is a master of improvisation and a devious manipulator of language, the ultimate artist of relativisation, whose irreverent humour exposes all value as empty. And as such, he has been denied all meaningful agency, intervening in the historical world only with the preposterous claim of having killed Hotspur. He cannot act in the historical field because "[s]o stuffed with speech is he that doing is beyond him, he can only *be*—for there is an inevitable inertia to the word in itself as opposed to the inherently kinetic thrust of action" (Calderwood, p. 43)—a diagnosis that may well befit certain aspects of Prince Hamlet. This overwhelming stasis prevents Falstaff from ever plotting, so even in that he is doomed to be defeated by action and plot, which are supposed to run the politics of history. For Calderwood, this Falstaff embodies Shakespeare's final decadent basking in the "tendency toward sensual verbal indulgence" (p. 41) pushed to the very pinnacle of irrepressible hilarity, where it threatens to devour the plot that stands for progress of the state. Which, in the end, is why it needs to be killed off.

Encountering darker visions of Falstaff in criticism is not overly common. Falstaff, as appealing as the best incarnations of folly often are, has sometimes caused critics to approach his case uncritically. One such account came from Harold Bloom, who magnanimously declared he could find no fault in Falstaff, who was, in his view, along with Hamlet, "a miracle in the creation of personality" (Bloom, p. 53), a master of language unparalleled in Western literature, whom "we need . . . because we have so few images of authentic vitality and even

7 See Calderwood, esp. pp. 39-46.

fewer persuasive images of human freedom” (p. 55). Bloom’s Falstaff is often on the verge of dangerously overshadowing the play that spawned him, and becoming a sublime creation of Art meant to induce fear and trembling—a view that loses sight of the fact that Falstaff is primarily a morally dubious character. As Procházka points out, falling in line with Calderwood,

Falstaff’s boisterous rhetoric is no mere carnival of words: it is represented as a potentially dangerous power whose nature can become violent and even military. In using Falstaff, Hal learns to use lie as a pragmatic rhetoric of war geared to political purposes” (“New Languages”, unpaginated)

Hal requires the lie of Falstaff, as much as the world of history requires the realm of the tavern, because they need to be appropriated as counterpoints that will establish the truth of kingship and, in turn, the legitimacy of the historical narrative. And Falstaff’s presence in this narrative is quite brutally exploited by the ultimate end that Hal is pursuing. As Richard Hillman puts it, expounding on Falstaff’s production for the purpose of destruction, “[h]e is, in the final analysis, a spirit conjured—by Hal, in part, but with the abettance of the text at large—precisely in order to be laid, and, if the spirit is made flesh with improbable excess, the fatter the scapegoat, the more efficacious his ritual slaughter” (Hillman, p. 116). The folly of Falstaff becomes weighed with the political purpose of the play.

However, even the completely unmasked, dark Falstaff is not the end of all interpretation. Falstaff’s fallen rhetoric is a discourse of folly, a wilful employment of unreason in the name of laughter, and his lies are intentional inversions of the officially sanctioned truths. Having used up the lies, Hal cuts Falstaff off in his final rejection with “How ill white hairs becomes a fool and jester!” (2*H4*, V.v.44), and for the first time since he has stepped onto the stage, Falstaff is at a loss for words. He is eliminated from discourse and, together with his clique, banished “till their conversations / Appear more wise and modest to the world” (101-2). Strictly speaking, Falstaff is neither a fool, however foolish he may be, nor a jester, regardless of how much he enjoys a good jest. But he is wise enough to *play* the fool, to appropriate the fool’s discursive tools. And in doing so, he must be aided by his environment—his audience within the play, as well as the audience of the play—because folly, that rather dangerous protean phenomenon, is as much discursively produced as it is historically conditioned. That Falstaff is finally banished is ultimately Hal’s choice: he is the one to stipulate what passes

for folly and how long it is desirable to put up with it; he has the power to summon, but also to cancel laughter.

Just like laughter, a phenomenon that can be at once disruptive and subversive, but still susceptible to sanction, early modern discursive folly had its rules of application, and in order for it to work, it needed to involve a temporary suspension of moral judgement. We seem to understand this principle still, since the immensely popular characters of today's commercial culture are known to be morally despicable, as Homer Simpson and Eric Cartman often are—two animated caricatures of the deeply flawed common man, both of whom arguably have something of Falstaff in them. Which is not to say that early modern folly or its employment was immoral in itself—quite the contrary; if we are to judge from Erasmus's example, employing folly sometimes also meant affirming virtue. But Falstaff's folly, albeit masterly and singular, is of a fallen kind if it becomes an end in itself. It is as seductive and contagious as a specific kind of transformed theatre—one that has discovered the marketability of entertainment. Ghose concludes that

what Shakespeare dramatizes in *Henry IV* is the potential risk that inheres in the idea of play. At the beginning of the play, Hal and Falstaff share a world of playful abandon that leaves its trace on their speech. . . . But the danger inherent in play is that of losing the ability to differentiate between reality and fantasy. Falstaff loses track of the real world. (p. 158).

A concluding remark might suggest at this point that there may not be one Falstaff to end all Falstaffs, although this essay did not set out to make this point. In my own readings he is usually at least two-sided, his Janus faces pleasing and repelling simultaneously. This double potential was well illustrated by two recent noteworthy Falstaffs. In 2010, Roger Allam delivered in many ways a magnificent Falstaff at the Globe Theatre. Utilising all the peculiarities of the Globe stage, as well as the full theatricality of the character, Allam's hilarious rendition brought to the surface all the endearing aspects of the fat knight. Collaborating with his charmed audience in forming the character, literally playing for the pit, Allam made the early modern lines speak directly to the modern spectator. His success was recognised with the Olivier Award in 2011.

The following year BBC2 released *The Hollow Crown*, a star-packed television series—as brilliantly cinematic as the latest television productions get—that adapted Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy. In it, the Falstaff of Simon Russell Beale was faced with a different medium, and an environment with no groundlings

with whom to share his jokes. Beale created a Falstaff who from the very beginning seemed completely aware of his own moral complexities. Smaller in stature than might be expected, he surprisingly shuffled around a lot. He also lacked the expected *basso profundo* of a Falstaff, and never completely convinced one of how, with such apparent guilt on his shoulders, he managed to hold the attention of Tom Hiddleston's remarkably princely Hal. And yet, his more serious scenes on the battlefield, and especially the rejection, were delivered with such quiet, sombre weight that he succeeded in uncovering a very dark layer of the character. For his Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part Two*, Beale was awarded a BAFTA for best supporting actor in May 2013. Both Allam and Beale are rightly renowned for their interpretative abilities, and their Falstaffs—two Falstaffs that could not be further apart—very vividly represent the unresolved ambivalent potentialities of the role.

As I hope this survey has shown, Falstaff functions very well as an example of multiplicity. If we perceive culture as a web of different systems of signification, Falstaff is best described as one of its hefty nodes, suspended between different popular, literary and theatrical traditions that all contribute to the character's polyvocality, but none of which describes him completely on its own. Falstaff is a character that formed and continues to form connections within this multidimensional network, which is also poly-temporal, as Falstaff in the text not only brings together all the Falstaffs of the past, but also already contains interpretations of the future. And all these new interpretations are bound to reflect upon as well as bring us back to the original text, finding new meanings in it and reshuffling the old, in a way perhaps reminiscent of Shakespeare's own attitude towards his historical sources.

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