Why We Love Falstaff

Perfection is not of this world, and indeed we have difficulty even in conceiving of what it could be. We suspect that it might be boring and therefore, paradoxically, imperfect. Our natures are contradictory; we desire incompatible things and pursue incompatible ends, often at the same time; and we sometimes secretly love what we disapprove of or hate. Universal agreement and goodwill, if possible, would be tedious to us because we know that malice has its rewards. As William Hazlitt put it in "preface to *Henry IV*:

> *He is a thief, and a glutton, a coward, and a boaster, always ready to cheat the weak, and prey upon the poor; to terrify the timorous and insult the defenceless. At once obsequious and malignant, he satirises in their absence those whom he lives by flattering. He is familiar with the prince only as an agent of vice, but of this familiarity he is so proud as not only to be supercilious and haughty with common men, but to think his interest of importance to the duke of Lancaster.*

Doctor Johnson's Falstaff is not just an irresponsible man of innocent fun, therefore; and Johnson is right. Falstaff's vices are not minor, unless armed robbery be discounted as minor; and his jollity is mixed with an unpleasant propensity to bully underlings such as the serving staff of the tavern in Eastcheap. Prince Hal draws attention to this early in Part 1 of *Henry IV*, contrasting his own politeness toward them with the fat knight's imperiousness: "Though I be but Prince of Wales, yet I am the king of courtesy, and [the serving staff] tell me flatly I am no proud Jack like Falstaff."

When Falstaff toward the end of Part 2 of *Henry IV* learns from Pistol that the old king is dead and that Prince Hal has succeeded him, he immediately sees his opportunity for the unmerited advancement not only of himself but of his cronies.

He knows the worthlessness of the rural magistrate, Robert Shallow, and of the ensign, Pistol, only too well; yet he says: “Master Robert Shallow, choose what office thou wilt in the land, ’tis thine. Pistol, I will double charge thee with dignities.” He gives not a moment’s thought—he is temperamentally incapable of doing so—to the consequences of treating public office as a means only of living perpetually at other people’s expense.

Again, when given the task of raising foot soldiers, Falstaff has no compunction in selling exemptions from service and appropriating to himself the money for arms and equipment, leaving his soldiers ill prepared for the battle and with, as he says, “not a shirt and a half” between them: “I have led my ragamuffins where they are peppered [with shot]. There’s not three of my hundred and fifty left alive.” Falstaff sheds not even a crocodile tear for his lost men; their fate simply does not interest him, once they have served his turn and he has made his profit from having recruited them. Even Doctor Johnson is too indulgent when he says: “It must be observed that he is stained with no enormous or sanguinary crimes, so that his licentiousness is not so offensive but that it may be borne for his mirth.” True, he is not sanguinary as a sadist is sanguinary; but depriving 150 men of the means to fight before a battle that ends in their deaths is no mere peccadillo, either.

Why, then, do we forgive and even still love him? If he had been thin, we might have been much less accommodating of his undoubted vices (Hazlitt, in his essay on Falstaff, emphasized the importance of his fatness). At a time when to be a “stuffed cloak-bag of guts,” as Prince Hal calls him, was unusual and most men were, of necessity, thin, Falstaff’s immense size was a metonym for jollity and good cheer—as fatness still is with Santa Claus. It would not have made sense for Julius Caesar, after noting that “Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look,” to say that such men are well

contented. And had Falstaff been slender, he would not have been what Johnson called him, “the prince of perpetual gaiety.”

Falstaff appeals to us because he holds up a distorting mirror to our weaknesses and makes us laugh at them. Falstaff’s dream is that of half of humanity: of luxurious ease and continual pleasure, untroubled by the necessity to work or to do those things that he would rather not do (Falstaff will do anything for money except work for it). There is luxury in time as well as in material possessions, and no figure lives in greater temporal luxury than Falstaff, to whom the concept of punctuality or a timetable would be anathema. Former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi was—or rather, appeared to be—a kind of Falstaff figure, admired by many, though eventually detested by even more, who seemed to lead an effortless life of merrymaking and who was unafraid of the world’s censure. He was therefore able to say heartless but witty things that the rest of us, cowed by the moral disapproval of others, laughed at under our breaths but would not dare to say ourselves.

Falstaff is not only the prince of perpetual gaiety but the prince of perpetual rationalization and self-exculpation. He has the extraordinary capacity to say what he knows to be untrue and to argue convincingly in favor of it whenever it is in his interest: a capacity that we all possess, to a certain extent, and of which we all sometimes make use. The more preposterous the thing argued for by Falstaff, the more we delight in it: our own dishonesty is held up to us, not as Puritans might hold it up—for uncompromising condemnation—but as comedy, as an inevitable part of the human condition. Falstaff both has self-knowledge and denies it, the condition of us all.

Some of his rationalizations have particular resonance for me because I heard them a thousand times from my patients (*I* would not stoop to such rationalizations, of course). In the

first scene in which he appears, Falstaff accuses Hal of corrupting him, though he is three or four times Hal's age: "Before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing, and now am I, if a man should speak truly, little better than one of the wicked." Later, he says: "Company, villainous company, hath been the spoil of me."

We laugh because it is so absurd. But in the prison where I worked as a doctor, practically every heroin-addicted prisoner whom I asked for the reason that he started to take the drug replied: "I fell in with the wrong crowd." They said this with every appearance of sincerity, but at the same time they knew it to be nonsense: for if they had not, they would not have laughed when I said to them how strange it was that, though I had met many who had fallen in with the wrong crowd, I had never met any member of the wrong crowd itself.

By the use of the words "little better than" in "now am I . . . little better than one of the wicked," Falstaff extenuates himself: for the words "now am I one of the wicked" would have a very different meaning. By such tiny verbal evasions do we all minimize our faults and our wrongdoing: we are one with Falstaff.

In the scene in which Falstaff first accuses Hal of corrupting him, Falstaff insincerely promises to change, from which promise Hal distracts him immediately by asking where they shall commit their next robbery. Falstaff responds enthusiastically, and Hal says: "I see a good amendment of life in thee: from praying to purse-taking." To which Falstaff replies: "Why Hal, 'tis my vocation, Hal. 'Tis no sin for a man to labor at his vocation."

More than 400 years later, I asked a burglar whether he intended to give it up. "How can I?" he replied. "I'm a burglar. Burglary's what I do."

Like all—or at least many—of us, and certainly like almost all

of the prisoners, Falstaff is angered by the just appreciation of his character, precisely because it *is* just. When he asks his page, just before going to the wars, what the cloth-merchant, Dommelton, said about the satin that he has ordered from him for a cloak and breeches, the page replies: "He said, sir, you should procure him better assurance than Bardolph [Falstaff's drunken associate in crime and revels]; he would not take his bond and yours; he liked not the security." Falstaff, who must be aware that he has never paid a debt in his life, and indeed would regard it as infra dig to do so, reacts with outrage and fury, which—such being the capacity of the human mind to think in two ways at once—is both real and bogus.

> *Let him be damned like the glutton! . . . I had as lief they would put ratsbane in my mouth as offer to stop it with security. I looked a' [he] should have sent me two and twenty yards of satin, as I am a true knight, and he sends me security.*

As many people do when confounded by those to whom they think themselves superior, Falstaff, in his impotence and rage, insults Dommelton and wishes him ill, in the same way that Malvolio, in *Twelfth Night*, retreats after his final humiliation with the words "I will be revenged on the whole pack of you!" Well, says Falstaff of Dommelton, "he may sleep in security; for he hath the horn of abundance, and the lightness of his wife shines through it: and yet cannot he see, though he have his own lanthorn to light him." (In other words, though he is rich, he is cuckolded; therefore, he is dishonored by a cuckold's horns.)

Falstaff is outraged that a mere merchant—and one supposedly dishonored by cuckoldry, at that—should impugn his honor, though his repudiation of honor as an ideal is expressed in one of his most famous speeches. Just before the Battle of Shrewsbury, he tells himself:

> *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. What is that word honor? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon, and so ends my catechism.*

It is obvious that no virtue or ideal could resist Falstaff's reasoning: but it is the reasoning that we are all tempted to use when it suits us. A man may never give a moment's attention to the metaphysical problems of moral philosophy, but as soon as he finds himself accused of bad conduct, he turns moral philosopher and questions the foundations of moral judgment.

Prince of perpetual gaiety Falstaff may be, but prince of perpetual untruth he is also (the two aspects are intimately connected, as if truth inevitably leads to sorrow). Lies come naturally to his lips, and when found out, he immediately thinks of a plausible explanation for them. Though he shows genius in this, it is of all the forms of human genius the most widely distributed, for even the most unimaginative man can usually find an ingenious excuse for himself.

When Prince Hal exposes Falstaff's lies after the robbery on Gad's Hill, after which Prince Hal and Poins, disguised, robbed the robbers of their booty without so much as an exchange of blows, Falstaff changes his story and says, in the blink of an eye, that he knew all along that he was being attacked by Hal:

> *By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye. Why, hear you, my masters. Was it for me to kill the heir-apparent? Should I turn upon the true prince?*

Falstaff’s cowardice, then, was loyalty.

During the Battle of Shrewsbury, Falstaff feigns death rather than continue a fight with the opposing Douglas. He lies down where Harry Hotspur is killed in combat with Hal. Hal then sees what he supposes is Falstaff’s corpse nearby, pronouncing a moving farewell speech:

> *Poor Jack, farewell!*
> *I could have better spared a better man.*

When Hal has left the scene, Falstaff rises and stabs the corpse of Hotspur (a supremely unchivalrous thing to do), preparatory to telling Hal later that Hotspur also rose from the apparently dead and that he and Falstaff fought a battle in which Falstaff killed Hotspur, this time for good. The cowardly Falstaff thus makes himself out to have been the hero of the day, and it is impossible not merely to be amused, but also captivated, by his effrontery.

But habitual liars end up by deluding themselves, perhaps because in the end they do not believe that there is a difference between truth and falsehood, appearance and reality. When Hal ascends to the throne, Falstaff hurries to the coronation with Shallow, the Gloucestershire magistrate and landowner, believing that his friendship with the madcap prince will bring him untold advancement and permit him to repay the thousand pounds (an immense sum) he has borrowed from Shallow on expectations of such advancement. He accosts Henry V, as he now is: “My king! My jove! I speak to thee, my heart!” The former Prince Hal turns to him and, with words of crushing finality, replies:

> *I know thee not, old man: fall to thy prayers;*
> *How ill white hairs*
> *become a fool and jester!*

In fact, Falstaff has mistaken Hal from the first; the prince has played along with him and his companions but also kept a psychological distance from them, a fine example of the human mind's ability to play two roles simultaneously. In his soliloquy early in the play, Hal says:

> *I know you all, and will awhile uphold*
> *The unyok'd humor of your idleness. . . .*
> *So when this loose behavior I throw off,*
> *And pay the debt I never promised,*
> *By how much better than my word I am,*
> *By so much shall I falsify men's hopes.*

When Henry V utters his dismissal of Falstaff that we all know to be absolute and final, we are seized by melancholy for the old man, but he bounces back by means of cheerful rationalization. He tells Shallow:

> *Do not you grieve at this: I shall be sent for in private to him. Look you, he must seem thus to the world. Fear not your advancements; I will be the man yet that shall make you great.*

We know this is pure illusion, which Falstaff knows is not true and yet half-believes at the same time; but we also know Falstaff well enough by now that when his untruth and illusion are exposed, he will, with his infinite capacity to invent, find another illusion to compensate. The Haitian peasants say, "Behind mountains, more mountains"; with Falstaff, it is "Behind illusions, more illusions." And is this not a very human thing?

Falstaff does not appear in *Henry V*, as promised in the epilogue of Part 2 of *Henry IV*. In the later play, Mistress Quickly instead describes Falstaff's death in her inn. For doctors, this passage is one of astonishing clinical accuracy; it is also deeply moving. Mistress Quickly, who (as we say in

England) is no better than she should be, and who misuses words atrociously, shows herself a woman of true feeling:

> *'A made a finer end than any christom child; 'a parted even just between twelve and one, even at the turning o' the tide: for after I saw him fumble with sheets and play with flowers and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and 'a babbled of green fields. "How now, Sir John," quoth I, "what, man! Be o' good cheer." So 'a cried out "God! God! God!" three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God. I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with such thoughts yet.*

Falstaff, then, very nearly dies with pleasant illusions; and Mistress Quickly speaks words that represent the triumph of life, kindness, and comfort over doctrine. According to doctrine, a man should always turn his thoughts to God, and not wait to his last moment on his deathbed; but who cannot warm to Mistress Quickly's generous desire "to comfort him"?

Falstaff in the abstract is abominable: a thief, a coward, a liar, a poltroon, an eternal sponger, and a parasite. We should hate and despise him, but we love him. He enriches our life. Reflection on this paradox by itself can preserve us from what George Orwell, in his *City Journal*.