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Eng458

14 October 2014

“A Mere Scutcheon”

We may certainly look at Falstaff’s discourse on honor in *Henry 4, Part 1* as one of embodying his true-grit survivalist mentality. Seeing all the needless deaths of honorable people around him(Sir Blunt, Hotspur…), all in the name of England’s honor in some form or another, he realizes that the word is only a veil to help conceal and propel ones motives, ideologies, and wars; inherently meaningless superstition. With it, the realization that honor’s creed changes as easily as kings are deposed. Hence, when he questions [the audience] in lines 131-33 of Act 5 whether or not one’s personal honor can “set a leg or arm?/Take away the grief of a wound?” Falstaff is challenging the practicality of aristocratic abstractions into a shifting political environment. And we can almost even respect him for what he says. More modern phrasings of this question -- to set an emotional parallel-- may be: Can honor console the longing of a soldier’s family? Or, Can honor hoist one out of credit card debt?

In these lines we cannot say that Falstaff seems malicious in his discourse at all, and even comes across a tad emphatic. Who can argue his logic that abstract qualities do not necessarily have the ability to transfer into physicality? Falstaff is the type of man to realize that fairies have no dominion in daylight, and that honor is at its least only a word, a name-plate, and will not, as Hotspur learns, stop a knife wound to the belly. We feel the primal relief Falstaff feels at seeing Sir Blunt dead, “There’s honor for/ you! Here’s no vanity! I am hot as molten lead, and as/heavy too. God keep lead out of me” (Act 5, Scene 3, L:33). And as a reader, I’m even inclined to agree with Falstaff that even if honor did hold some intrinsic substance, one has no use for it after life anyway.

But in his monologue, Falstaff also may be revealing a much darker shade of his intentions that no decent reader *should* empathize with. I noticed that this defining speech came about directly after speaking with Hal on the night previous to the battle at Shrewsbury; in direct response to Hals insistent jokes and chides that Falstaff “Owes God a death” ( Act 5 Scene 1, L:26). In this light, Falstaff’s image of the escutcheon brings up a natural association to a grave or tombstone, one that he intends to metaphorically bury Hal in. This evidence seems to be backed up by the sheer bluntness of Hal who wishes to no longer fly the same flock of Falstaff, and respectively begins to unhinge any intimate connections from him. In Act 3 Scene 3 L: 153-5 Hal, after deciding to merge back with the court, spurns Falstaff as incapable of feeling any kind of faith, truth or honesty by reason of being too full of “guts and midriff”. And in Act 5, Hal refers less jokingly to Falstaff s’ “colossus” size, almost egging him into confrontation

Both scenarios are plausible. In Act 5 Scene 3 L: 48-55, Falstaff refuses to arm a defenseless Hal. Now, it’s possible that Falstaff, in the heat of battle, may have wanted from fear of injury to not give away his weapon. But, being that it was Hal, his ex-pseudo-son, makes the insult that much more poignant. There is clearly more evidence for Falstaff’s animosity towards Henry’s ascendance than any kind of benign ‘easy-going’ Falstaff jollity here. And though we *shouldn’*t empathize, we can even remotely understand why Falstaff is portrayed the way he is. For without Hal, Falstaff’s life ceases to be a kind of “squire of the night” fantasy nursed by the checkbook of a prince we see in Act 1. His meal ticket is being revoked and Hal’s transmigration into the role of Hero renders the relationship diametrically irreconcilable.

There seems to be here in Falstaff’s defining monologue, despite his venomous convictions, a semblance of truth that shows even more intensely contrasted with the regular bombastic attitude he usually cohorts in. Here he has an altogether different tone, more somber but not altogether any less genuine than when speaking of the ever-changing number of men [Hal & Poins] in Act 2 Scene 4 who robbed him and were subsequently destroyed.

What this does is contains the play spherically within terms of dichotomy between *honor* and *dishonor*, Falstaff’s comments lying just outside the context of the play able to comment roundly on all contained therein with only a few strokes. He leads us to question again the motives of the warring factions and invites us to think over again the happenings of the play. Who really does have the honor, and what has it gotten them? He serves as a function of de-sematic satiation for the play whose parties all claim to be in allegiance with some kind of honorable gain. It’s the same kind of critical thinking in which one arrives at the question: If Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all proclaim the *one* God as *their* God, who can be right?

The first sphere that comes into re-questioning is the political motivation for “honor” behind the battle itself. It’s not long before we piece together that almost the entirety of the battle is built on notions of dishonor. One may certainly view Henry’s kingship as ill-gotten or illegitimate, especially in the eyes of Lord Worcester who claims that, in Act 5 scene 1, L:56, “from this swarm of fair advantages/You took occasion to be gently wooed/To grip the general sway in your hand/ Forgot your oath to us at Doncaster.” Worcester believes his family to be shown dishonor and ingratitude for the political and social advantages his family provided for Henry and Hal.

It becomes no surprise to us then that dishonor brings about more dishonors. King Henry offers Worcester and the rebels a pardon, regarding the rebel’s cause as “the garment of rebellion/with some fine color that may please the eye/Of fickle changelings and poor discontents” (L:75-6). Worcester knows that his hands are too stained to be completely absolved, whereas Hotspur and the others can accredit their actions to be being led astray. He says in Act 5 Scene 2 L: 1, “O no, my nephew must not know, Sir Richard,/The liberal and kind offer of the king/… He will suspect us still and find a time/to punish this offense in other faults.” Because of this, the war goes on as scheduled, though the rebels proclaim at the end of Act 4 to more than willing to “withdraw awhile.” The battle and its subsequent deaths become almost all in some way products of these political dishonors, rather than any kind of dogmatic codex for honor manifest. Throughout the play King Henry and Hotspur speak of “greater causes” but we only actually seem to be shown the subtly selfish innards of their thoughts, of which have little room for the title: *honor for honor’s sake.*

This is not to say, though, that that their intentions are even malicious, for they seem to float subconsciously just under the surface of their speeches. King Henry and Worcester cannot let their people know that their intentions stem from the heart of fear: Henry of being deposed, Worcester of being beheaded. As stated, Falstaff is no ordinary fool. As a reader I feel that he is more than capable making these very same connections to the sematic satiation of the spheres of honor happening in the play and realizes that they become redundant. It begs the question: If all parties are fighting in the name of *honor*, is it really any topically different than if they were all fighting for *dishonor,* fighting for molecules in the *air*?

Yes, it does. Falstaff knows this too, knows that prince Hal can separate the redundancy of honor back into its rightful polarity. Echoing back to King Henry speech in Act 1 calling Hal “stained with dishonor”, Falstaff knows that Hal has the perfect opportunity to rectify himself. Thus we have the “dead man” in Falstaff’s monologue setting a parallel to this ascendancy, Hotspur dying in the name of honor so that Hal can rise. We know then what Falstaff must do to upset this equilibrium. And we get it in Act 5 as Shakespeare portrays it as Falstaff who carries a dead Hotspur in the eyes of King Henry although it is Hal who slays him in an honorable battle. The honor and resolution that Hal does win in the eyes of his father becomes tainted by a remorseless Falstaff. The chiasmus, the complete reversal of roles between Hal and young Percy, though completed, leaves a sour taste in my palate.

Whether or not we like Falstaff or not does not really merit any confrontational opinion. But, when deciding which side of the fence we take on whether what Falstaff says regarding honor is relevant to its audience is done a little more shakily. I for one do have to begrudgingly respect the sense of realism he exhibits in those Act 5 monologues. They seem to be unshaken by the crisis of existentialism or the fetters of nihilism. But, with that comes his complete separation from a moral compass, even those of common decency, and problematizes his character. I can agree with Falstaff’s political satires and his bitingly critical class and social commentary, but will not stand to oblige his moral deformities. I’d much rather see readers pitying Hotspur’s fall, or rejoicing Hal’s rising. But, Falstaff provides the play with comic relief and an integral sense of pragmatism for the audience.