

FALSTAFF

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I fairly recently met two medical specialists, clever men, who both complained that they had been put off Shakespeare for life at school by having to do *Henry IV, Part One*. What an indictment of our teaching. It should have been a riot.

You do need a bit of background, but this in itself has its interest. Henry is a usurper. He forcibly takes the throne from Richard II with the help of the powerful northern feudal barons, Northumberland and others. OK. What was the feudal system? Power politics? Right or wrong? Richard was legally King, by descent and by virtue of the sacrament of anointment at coronation, and they had all sworn allegiance to him. But he was a corrupt ruler. His uncle Gloucester tried to curb him (this lurks in the background), so Richard had him done away with, on the quiet. Cousin Bolingbroke, the future Henry IV, tries to challenge the suspected agent to single combat, which is supposed to prove right and wrong, so Richard, by arbitrary power, banishes him. This is all a family business. They are all descendants of the great Edward, but Richard was in the direct line of descent by *primogeniture*, which actually means the sons first, sorry girls. Queen Elizabeth I is on the throne by the skin of her teeth when WS wrote this play, the boy and older sister having died.

Bolingbroke returns, the people and barons support him. Richard says that all the water in the sea cannot wash off the balm, the holy oil, of coronation, but power works, so he abdicates in favour of Bolingbroke, who becomes Henry IV, but is a usurper, nevertheless, even if RII was a corrupt King. The new King sends round a hit man to complete the job. Well, well, well. When the text of the play was published (it was played many times first), the Master of the Revels, that is the censor, for the booming entertainments industry was watched closely, required that the abdication scene should be left out. It made a bit of a mess of the play, but censors do this. Queen Elizabeth was very touchy about certain things. Later, when the Queen was old and less popular, and the disappointed favourite the Earl of Essex attempted a coup, his supporters hired Shakespeare's company to put on

the play of *Richard II* the night before. They had to do some fast talking afterwards. The Essex crowd went to the block. There is already lots to keep a class going just on these preliminaries.

Hen IV is a usurper. He has got there with the help of the barons and their private armies. So now payday arrives. And Northumberland and pals are not so friendly anymore. And he has a warlike young son, Harry Hotspur who is spoiling for a fight. And Henry has a son, also Harry, but he is a bit of a layabout, hooked up with the wrong crowd. You know the scene. Father too busy running the country, (or the firm) too busy to take time off to get to know the youngster, who has lots of money and keeps himself amused. He is the Prince, after all. But are we going to have another Richard when he gets to the throne, that is to say if he does, because things are beginning to look a little dicey. How many father/son cases in the classroom? Or how many do they know of?

This is where Falstaff comes in, and the riot really starts. He is the archetypal fat man good companion, life and soul of the party, the one in the pub with the best jokes while everyone else buys the drinks. In his way, he adores the Prince and spends his life keeping him amused. He runs a little robbery show on the side, always has an eye for the quick buck and lives in the Boar's Head Tavern, run by Mistress Quickly, who is not too bright, where he never pays the rent. He can rely on the Prince to get him off when in trouble; that is to say, the future fount of law and justice. He is a Knight, Sir John, and is given a command and exploits the recruiting system for his own profit. The part was played by the clown in Shakespeare's company, Tarlton or Will Kemp, men of formidable capacities. Tarlton just had to stick out his face and the crowd roared with laughter. He was a master of fence and a gymnast, and a member of the Earl of Leicester's household and Sir Philip Sidney stood godfather to his son. Kemp danced the jig from London to Norwich. They would have had to pad themselves out for the part. In the battle scene, Falstaff encounters Hotspur of the North. Tarlton, a master of fence, but well padded out, and a gymnast, would have been able to put up a good comic show before falling down mock dead. The audience would be howling. Then the serious stuff, the Prince against Hotspur, both of them also well-trained performers, lots for the imagination of the class to work on, if they can be

brought to see that this is all done by top class actors on an apron stage. The Prince, of course proves himself in battle, but will he ultimately be morally up to the job? He bids an ambiguous farewell to the corpse of Falstaff and leaves the silent stage. Is he really dead? After a moment up he pops with one of his renowned realistic speeches: in a way, Falstaff speaks for us all, he is the supreme, down to earth realist. Harold Bloom, the famous critic, put the case that Shakespeare's three favourite characters were Rosalind in AYLI, Hamlet and Falstaff.

Perhaps the most famous scene is the tavern scene after the robbers have been robbed and Falstaff has to wriggle out of the lies he has told. It ends in a kind of play-acting exchange between Hal and Falstaff which has undercurrents that are not always understood. In the Church of England baptismal service, the godparents take vows on behalf of the infant to renounce the world, the flesh and the Devil. In the exchange between Hal and Falstaff it becomes clear that Falstaff represents the world, the flesh (too obviously) and the Devil, he is the "old White-bearded Satan". Has the Prince the power to renounce them. The play-acting, the fooling, suddenly becomes tense and real; Falstaff seems to be trying to cast some kind of spell over the young man. Hal says "I can, I will," a rejection of Falstaff, but then the action rushes on comically, he has to save him from arrest, the sheriff is at the door, and the scene ends with Falstaff snoring securely behind the curtains. Nevertheless, Hal's baptismal vows have been renewed, if in the midst of riot.

At the end of *Part Two* Falstaff is finally rejected, just as Hal is about to become King and Falstaff thinks that an endless vista of corruption is opening up before him and his enemy the Chief Justice is at his mercy. Some people hold the opinion that Shakespeare is irrelevant to Africa. Is he?