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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION: BACK TO JOHNSON

Until recently I took my critical notions about Falstaff and Prince Hal more or less ready-made from Andrew Bradley, whose noteworthy lecture on *The Rejection of Falstaff*, delivered before the University of Oxford in 1902, still I think holds the field for most Shakespearian students. Here and there, of course, writers may be found to challenge it. An excursus on Falstaff published in 1927 is, for instance, one of the more powerful offensives in the perennial campaign which Professor Stoll wages against the romantic school of Shakespearian criticism. I have learnt something from Stoll, on the negative side, as a reference to the notes at the end of this volume will show; but for all his learning and realism the interpretation of Falstaff's character which he offers in place of Bradley's fails to convince me, as it has failed, I believe, to convince most of his readers. To write off the succulent old sinner as a stage butt, even if a witty stage butt, is to dehydrate him, even to lay oneself open to the suspicion of possessing an insensitive aesthetic palate. Thus Bradley's portrait continued to satisfy me in the main, until I began checking it with yet another portrait—that which I find, or think I find, in the pages of Shakespeare himself.

From the beginning of 1939 I have been spending such leisure moments as a belligerent world allows on the task, now nearing completion, of editing both parts of *Henry IV* for a publication known to booksellers as 'The New Cambridge Shakespeare'. And the further I go (that is, the better I feel I understand this great twin-play as a whole), the less does Bradley's delineation of its two principal figures seem to correspond with the dramatic facts. A new Falstaff stands before me, as fascinating as Bradley's, certainly quite as human, but different; and beside him stands a

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still more unexpected Prince Hal. The discovery is subversive; it throws all my previous ideas of the drama out of focus; and before I can get on with my editing, it has to be worked out. Such is the origin of the book that follows.

But another surprise awaited me. As what I took to be the true features of Falstaff and Hal began to emerge from the mists of preconception, I naturally turned to the history of Shakespearian criticism in the hope of securing allies; and found one, to my delight, in Dr Johnson, who seems to have observed and quietly noted all, or almost all, these features in his edition of Shakespeare which appeared in 1765. So unobtrusive are his comments that their general purport has passed practically unnoticed ever since. Yet when we bring them together, his vision of the two becomes perfectly clear, while his Falstaff is nothing allied to the Plautine braggart, which was the accepted interpretation in the theatre of his own day, and which Professor Stoll would have us suppose the basis of Shakespeare's conception. Apart from the prestige of its author, there are two points I wish to stress about Johnson's criticism. First, it was published twelve years before Maurice Morgann's *Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff*, and was written, therefore, without reference to the romantic attitude towards Shakespeare's characters, of which that essay is the earliest and in some ways the most remarkable manifesto; a fact which probably accounts for Johnson's unemphatic manner—it just did not occur to him that another view of the play was possible. In the second place, most of what he has to say is to be found in a note at the end of Part II, that is, in one of those postscripts which he appended to each play as he finished it. In other words, it embodies his conclusions after editing the whole play. When I add that Johnson is the only one of the great critics whose estimate of Hal and Falstaff is based upon editorial experience, the significance of this is evident.<sup>1</sup> Nor will I conceal the fact that I derive considerable encouragement from it.

An editor of Shakespeare, who tries to do his duty, has, I need hardly remark, not only to establish the text and explain the

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language of his author, but also to imagine, as vividly as his knowledge and powers allow, every action and situation in the play he is engaged upon, as it would, or might, be represented by an Elizabethan company in an Elizabethan theatre. Moreover, through no virtue of his own but simply because there is no other way for him to go to work, he is obliged to do these things *in the dramatic order*. As Aristotle would say, he must begin at the beginning, go on to the middle, and finish with the end of the play; and he has to repeat this process, for one purpose or another, several times. It would be absurd, of course, to claim that this puts him in the position of a member of Shakespeare's audience who attended several performances of *Henry IV*, shall we say, in 1598. But it certainly protects him from the errors to which critics who have not submitted to his discipline are almost inevitably prone. One of these is the habit, which vitiates large areas of nineteenth-century Shakespearian criticism, of ignoring the fundamental fact of dramatic structure, its serial character. Thus Bradley begins his consideration of Falstaff with the Rejection, which takes place at the very end of Part II; Morgann, anxious to explain away the running and roaring on Gad's Hill, deliberately postpones his treatment of that incident, which belongs to the second of the Falstaff scenes in Part I, until he has reviewed what he calls the whole character of the man in the light of the rest of the play; and even Stoll, who professes great contempt for Morgann's sins against dramatic perspective and lays down the questionable canon that 'what stands first in the play... is most important of all and dominates the whole',<sup>2</sup> is himself completely silent about the first scene in which Falstaff and Prince Hal appear, and which fixes for us the relationship between them.

Closely allied with this practice of taking incidents in their wrong order is what I have elsewhere called the fallacy of omniscience,<sup>3</sup> that is, of treating a play like a historical document and collecting evidence in support of a particular reading of character or situation from any point of the text without regard

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to its relation to the rest. Being a play in two parts, *Henry IV* is a drama in which it is peculiarly dangerous to neglect the serial principle. Morgann's attempt, for instance, to establish Falstaff's claims to a considerable military reputation before the play opens, claims which have been accepted by Bradley and most modern critics, begins to look foolish when we note that practically all the evidence for them is drawn from Part II.

Scarcely less absurd are those, and they are in the majority, who, whatever their professions, in practice treat the two Parts as two separate plays. First things first, of course: Shakespeare must have finished Part I before Part II. It is probable also, since he was an actor-dramatist writing for a successful company, always eager for copy, that Part I was put on the stage directly it was ready and enjoyed a run before the 'book' for Part II could be completed and rehearsed. Part I possesses, indeed, a kind of unity, lacking in Part II, which seems to bear this out. But Johnson writes: 'These two plays will appear to every reader, who shall peruse them without ambition of critical discoveries, to be so connected that the second is merely a sequel to the first; to be two only because they are too long to be one.'<sup>4</sup> And I do not believe that anyone who has edited the two parts *together* can fail to perceive (1) that Shakespeare must have kept his intentions for Part II steadily in mind all the time he was writing Part I, and (2) that Part II, so far from being as one critic has called it 'an unpremeditated sequel'<sup>5</sup> to Part I, is a continuation of the same play, which is no less incomplete without it than Part II is itself unintelligible without Part I. In any case, the unity and continuity of the two parts is a cardinal assumption of the following study. As we shall find, it is impossible otherwise to make sense of Falstaff's character, to say nothing of Prince Hal's.

The two parts are more than one, however: they are together complete in themselves; an important point, which once grasped frees us from a serious misunderstanding. It is commonly agreed, except possibly by Professor Stoll,<sup>6</sup> that in studying the character of Falstaff, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* may be left out of account,

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that play being indubitably 'an unpremeditated sequel', the hero of which is made to bear the name of Falstaff primarily for reasons of theatrical expediency, not of dramatic art. But no one since Johnson seems to have observed that the account of Falstaff's death in *Henry V* is equally irrelevant to our conception of Falstaff in *Henry IV*, and probably, as I shall later suggest, for precisely the same reason. To point out that no spectator of *Henry IV* could possibly anticipate what was to happen to Falstaff in *Henry V* would seem superfluous, were it not that chronological matters of this kind are commonly ignored by our omniscient critics. In this instance, however, they have even less excuse than usual, inasmuch as Shakespeare has explicitly warned them in the Epilogue to Part II to expect something quite different. Here is Johnson's note in *Henry V* upon the famous obituary notice by Mistress Quickly:

Such is the end of Falstaff, from whom Shakespeare had promised us in his epilogue to *Henry IV* that we should receive more entertainment. . . . But whether he could contrive no train of adventures suitable to his character, or could match him with no companions likely to quicken his humour, or could open no new vein of pleasantry, and was afraid to continue the same strain lest it should not find the same reception, he has here for ever discarded him, and made haste to dispatch him.

After which he proceeds, in one of those self-revealing passages which often delight us in his notes on Shakespeare:

Let meaner authours learn from this example, that it is dangerous to sell the bear which is yet not hunted, to promise to the publick what they have not written.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of this book I shall put forward another explanation of Shakespeare's change of plan. But in whatever manner we account for it, change of plan there was, and such are the terms in which the death of Falstaff should be discussed. The Tragedy of Sir John Falstaff, with which we have been so often regaled of late, is not to be found in the play before us, and need no longer engage our attention.

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Johnson's views about *Henry IV* are, then, the more worthy of respect that he acquired them by studying the play, both parts of it, in the right order and for a purpose which involves close attention to its action, scene by scene. He was equally fortunate, I have said, in being, constitutionally and by accident of date, immune to romantic influence. Modern Shakespearian criticism draws much of its life from two great pioneers of that school, writing independently and at different times, each of whom labours under his special form of myopia, though it would be difficult to say which form is the more disabling to anyone examining this particular play. The critic of to-day, being heir to both writers, commonly inherits both handicaps. Behind the façade of Bradley's essay on Falstaff, for all its appearance of logic and coherence, lie the republicanism of Hazlitt and the sentimentalism of Maurice Morgann.

Every reader of Hazlitt has now come to make allowances for what Professor Elton calls 'the astonishing gusts of political fury' that 'sweep over his pages amidst the most innocent literary criticism'.<sup>8</sup> One such bitter gust,

as sudden  
 As flaws congealéd in the spring of day,

may be encountered at the opening of the essay on *Henry V* in his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*. All is calm and bright in the previous section. 'The characters of Hotspur and Prince Henry are two of the most beautiful and dramatic... that were ever drawn'; and though Hotspur is preferred to Hal on the ground 'that we never could forgive the Prince's treatment of Falstaff', the reflection is rather playful than seriously intended. Turn the page, however, and we are met with a hail-storm of abuse, directed at the devoted head of Henry V, but embracing also his conduct as Prince of Wales. He is 'fond of war and low company—we know little else of him'; he is 'careless, dissolute, and ambitious—idle or doing mischief'; in private, he has 'no idea of the common decencies of life'; in public affairs, he has 'no idea of any rule of

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right or wrong but brute force'—and so on for a paragraph of considerable length, until, all passion spent, Hazlitt as suddenly and almost apologetically returns to business as a critic, with 'So much for the politics of this play, now for the poetry'. It is easy to see what happened. Shakespeare's *Henry V* stands for everything that Hazlitt most hated in politics: absolute monarchy, the feudal system, the military virtues, the conquest of his beloved France, above all, perhaps, the conservative Englishman. The realization of this swept over him upon reading the play, especially as he read the speeches of the Archbishop of Canterbury at the beginning of it, and carried him off his feet. Yet this paragraph, no less an immediate product of French revolutionary ideas and hatred for the Holy Alliance than Shelley's almost contemporaneous *Prometheus Unbound*, is the origin of all later aesthetic criticism of Prince Hal. Reinforced by the reigning pacifism of the early twentieth century, it inspired an extraordinary outburst in a widely read book on Shakespeare by Mr Masefield in 1911, still quoted with approval in some serious quarters.<sup>9</sup> Most important of all, it was adopted a little earlier, in a more temperate and therefore more persuasive form, by Andrew Bradley, made use of to explain Falstaff's dismissal, and thus became one of the foundations of his critical edifice.

Shakespeare lived in the world of Plato and St Augustine; since the French Revolution we have been living in the world of Rousseau; and this fact lays many traps of misunderstanding for unsuspecting readers, of which the foregoing is a particular instance. And of all the plays, those dealing with historical or political themes are most liable to be thus misread. But Dr Johnson still lived in Shakespeare's world, a world which was held together, and could only be held together, by authority based on and working through a carefully preserved gradation of rank. He was never tired of proclaiming the virtues of the Principle of Subordination, a principle which lies at the root of Plato's *Republic* and finds magnificent rhetorical expression in the speech on Degree which Shakespeare gives his Ulysses. Johnson's views on

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the political plays, the greatest of which is *Henry IV*, merit therefore our most careful attention, since the chances are that, sharing as he did Shakespeare's political assumptions, he will understand his intentions better than we do.

What then does he write about this Prince of Wales, who seems to modern critics so ready 'to use other people as a means to his own ends'<sup>10</sup>, so common, selfish and without feeling,<sup>11</sup> so priggish and so calculating,<sup>12</sup> or—to put a rather finer point upon it—so typical of the militant Englishmen who founded the Empire in India, 'not less daringly sagacious and not more delicately scrupulous' than they?<sup>13</sup> Johnson's words show him to be completely unconscious of these sinister qualities:

The prince, [he writes] who is the hero both of the comick and tragick part, is a young man of great abilities and violent passions, whose sentiments are right, though his actions are wrong; whose virtues are obscured by negligence, and whose understanding is dissipated by levity. In his idle hours he is rather loose than wicked, and when the occasion forces out his latent qualities, he is great without effort, and brave without tumult. The trifler is roused into a hero, and the hero again reposes in the trifler. The character is great, original, and just.<sup>14</sup>

Perusing the play 'without ambition of critical discoveries', he clearly accepted the story at its face value: as a dramatic account of the unregenerate youth of one of the greatest of English kings. The idea of looking below the surface never presented itself to him. Above all he thought of Hal as a prince, that is, as a being differing not only in rank but almost in kind from other men. Such ideas may be, or may have seemed to the nineteenth century, old-fashioned, but they are not primitive. There was nothing primitive in the mind of the President of the Literary Club.

Rather it is the outlook of critics in the succeeding age to his which is primitive, displaying as it does a complete lack of balance in its dealings with Shakespearian character. The advent of romanticism stimulated the interest in individual human personality to such a degree that it came to exclude practically every other consideration. The first manifestation of this tendency in the



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criticism of Shakespeare to catch public attention was Coleridge's study of the character of Hamlet, but it was earlier exhibited in all its splendour and extravagance in Maurice Morgann's *Essay on Falstaff*, from whom Bradley directly inherited it. Its theoretic basis has, indeed, never been more clearly expressed than in Morgann's remark that the characters of Shakespeare, being 'whole, and as it were original, while those of almost all other writers are mere imitation', may be fitly considered 'rather as Historic than Dramatic beings', and their conduct accounted for 'from the *whole* of character, from general principles, from latent motives, and from policies not avowed'.<sup>15</sup> The trouble is that, when a critic has himself to supply latent motives and policies not avowed by his author, he is usually driven to go to himself for them. That Coleridge unpacked his own heart and intellect to account for the conduct of Hamlet is now generally acknowledged. Much the same thing has happened in the case of Falstaff, with the additional complication that through identifying themselves with the alluring old scoundrel many Victorian critics have found a vicarious outlet for their own repressions. The point is well brought out by that excellent and unassuming writer, John Bailey, who is himself a disciple of Johnson. After noting that humour tends to 'dissolve morality' and having cited the delight we derive from that 'abominable old woman' Mrs Gamp as an example of this, he continues:

Nobody exactly likes Mrs Gamp: we all love Falstaff. Why? Not only because Falstaff is greater than Mrs Gamp, but because she is a figure which we see in the street and he is a figure we find in the looking-glass. It is a magnifying glass, no doubt, but still what it shows us is ourselves. Ourselves, not as we are, but as we can fancy we might have been; expanded, exalted, extended in every direction of bodily life, all the breadth and depth and height of it. Not a man of us but is conscious in himself of some seed that might have grown into Falstaff's joyous and victorious pleasure in the life of the senses. There we feel, but for the grace of God, and but for our own inherent weakness and stupidity, go we.<sup>16</sup>

This is profoundly observed, and has a relevance to the attraction

of Falstaff for the modern mind which I must return to later. What it tells us about his critics seems at first innocuous enough. In similar fashion, it might be said, the writers of crime stories were fulfilling, in the days of our uneasy peace, a beneficial social function by furnishing starved intellectuals with an innocent vent for their inhibited tendencies to violence. Here, however, we are concerned not with the health of the state but with the sanity of criticism; and that Shakespearian critics should make use of Shakespeare's characters as a means of personal purgation may lead, and does lead, to grave lapses of critical judgement. While some traits in a character, for example, are welcomed for the sense of expansion they afford, others may be of a kind that the critic would not desire to associate with himself, in which case they are denied or unconsciously suppressed. To quote Bailey again: Falstaff is 'a being so overflowing with an inexhaustible fountain of life and humanity that they [the critics] love him and enter into him and become themselves so much a part of him that they are ready to explain away his vices as we all explain away our own... For men of more than ordinary susceptibility to intellectual pleasure Shakespeare has in Falstaff provided a too intoxicating banquet.' And he names Morgann and Bradley as special instances of subtle persons so seduced.

Nor is this all. As the nineteenth century went on, the art of Shakespeare came more and more to be regarded as that of a painter of literary or quasi-historical portraits, or rather as furnishing the materials, seldom unhappily quite complete, for the construction of such portraits by his critics. Characters were studied, as we have seen, apart from their dramatic context, and attention to the details and necessities of dramatic structure went out of fashion. And so, not only were features unattractive to the writer eliminated; but his absorption in the problems of character often caused him to overlook incidents in the story and elements of the plot. For both these reasons, as well as others, critics of *Henry IV* have tended to concentrate upon Part I and pass lightly over the events of Part II. Even Bradley, who is far too honest