

## Flastaff and Laughter\*

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Laughter is an important factor in the character of Falstaff. It is caused by Falstaff or by others through the medium of him, which greatly governs our impression and even makes us suspend various rules and logic. It is reverberating as a symphony of laughter sometimes strongly, sometimes weakly, and adds more luster to *Henry IV* than any other plays of Shakespeare. So an elucidation of Falstaff's laughter will lead at the same time to the elucidation of his complicated and controversial character, which is extremely important to an interpretation of *Henry IV*.

### I. Some Functions of Falstaff's Laughter

"I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men" (II 1. 2. 9-10).<sup>1</sup> This is the famous speech of Falstaff. Indeed, he says and does in a witty manner, and makes many dramatic characters laugh, and moreover makes himself the medium through whom other characters laugh. Sometimes Falstaff makes a "jest with a sad brow" (II 5. 1. 80). Characters nevertheless burst out laughing in spite of themselves. Though there are many kinds of laughter, it is almost always that laughter is catching. It is naturally communicated from characters to an audience (i. e., characters share laughter with an audience). Sometimes characters on the stage are expected not to laugh while the audience laughs; sometimes Falstaff stands alone on the stage, and speaks directly to the audience and makes them laugh.

Anyway, laughter has useful functions not only to characters but also to the audience. So it is necessary to think of the functions of Falstaff's laughter from two levels of the communication of laughter. First of all let us think of laughter which characters share with the audience.

Enormous corpulence, owing to which one cannot see one's own knee, is a kind of deformity or ugliness, and causes laughter if pure misery is not communicated to us. It will be clear when we remember Aristotle's definition of laughter (by the way, laughter is equivalent to one of "the

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ridiculous”):

The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not producing of pain or harm to others.<sup>2</sup>

And Falstaff is enormously corpulent and is often in a delightful contrast with things and people around him. So Falstaff is a good example of laughter without any misery in it. Hal sends a lean page to Falstaff to cause laughter (like “a sow that hath overwhelmed all her litter but one”) (II 1. 2. 10-12). It is not only the page but also the words of the people around him that exhibit a striking contrast to Falstaff. Bardolph, Quickly and his queer lover Doll choose his corpulence for their laughter. And it is Prince Hal that makes sport of him most amusingly:

this bed-presser, this horseback-breaker, this huge hill of flesh . . . that trunk of humours, that bolting hutch of beastliness, that swollen parcel of dropsies. (2. 4. 240-497)

Hal mocks at Falstaff’s corpulence over and over again. Does Falstaff remain silent to Hal? No, he heaps much abuse upon Hal’s lean figure: “you starveling, you eel-skin, you dried neat’s tonque, you bull’s pizzle, or stock-fish!” (2. 4. 242-43). Although Falstaff and Hal vehemently exchange words of abuse, what are said are not so severe as they seem but cause laughter around them. These words also make both of them more intimate as well as all characters on the stage, arouse laughter to the audience, and arouse a blizzard of exciting laughter throughout the theatre at the same time while they see others still laughing delightedly.

In addition to his corpulence, Falstaff is advanced in age, and is steeped in vice. But strangely, he does not communicate the misery or harm which is usually attached to a fat old man in vice. He is “the martlemas” (II 2. 2. 100). When he attacks unfortunate travellers, robbing them of their money, he says; “they hate us youth . . . young men must live” (2. 2. 84-89). We burst out laughing in spite of ourselves without thinking of the real meaning of his behaviour. So we cannot but say that Shakespeare intends to remove scrupulously the painful feelings from what Falstaff says and does. He is thus a constant target for jocularities.

Next, contrary to the cumbersome movement of his corpulent body, Falstaff can boast of his swift mental activity like the function of “any levers to lift up.” The following conversation gives us a good example of this activity.

*Falstaff.* I must give over this life, and I will give it over: by the Lord, an I do not, I am a villain. I’ll be damned for never a king’s son in Christendom.

*Prince.* Where shall we take a purse to-morrow, Jack?

*Falstaff.* ’Zounds, where thou wilt, lad, I’ll make one; an I do not, call me villain and baffle me. (1. 2. 94-99)

Falstaff is dead to all sense of shame when he takes back immediately without any hesitation

what he has asserted most positively. His complete audacity makes us burst into laughter, because we cannot help being dumbfounded and admiring of his swift mental activity at the same time which none ever possess with such impudence.

It is not always that he takes back his assertion. He tells a palpable lie at the Boar's Head Tavern after the robbery. He persists: "if I fought not with fifty of them, I am a bunch of radish" (2. 4. 182-83). The persons in front of him know that he did not fight with "fifty of them." However, he does not feel ashamed at all when his lie is found out, but audaciously says: "if I tell thee a lie, spit in my face, call me horse" (2. 4. 190-91). This kind of lie causes a bigger laugh than his above assertion. Anyway, he is audacious both when he takes back or continues to assert. It is, we can say, "the pure, philosophical joy of transcendental audacity."<sup>3</sup>

Next, let us think of laughter mainly caused by the audience though other characters are on the stage with Falstaff. The function of this laughter happens to be more advanced and positive.

When Hal says :

I am good friends with my father, and may do any thing, (3. 3. 180-81)

Falstaff immediately responds :

Rob me exchequer the first thing thou doest, and do it with unwashed hands too.  
(3. 3. 182-83)

These vile things, which are shamelessly said but not accomplished by Falstaff, do not communicate a bad impression of Falstaff to the audience at a theatre. Hal certainly laughs. And the audience cannot avoid laughing before they become aware of his immorality later, because they are too much delighted at the fascination of irresponsibility. It must be also known at this time that artistic morality is different from actual morality.

It is, however, strange that their impressions remain the same when Falstaff accomplished a similar vile deed. He falls upon the party of travelling merchants at the highway near Gadshill. He does not injure them, but heaps much abuse on them: "Hang ye, gorbellied knaves, . . . No, ye fat chuffs . . . On, bacons, on!" (2. 2. 87-89). This abuse is, however, applied not to the travellers but (strange enough) to Falstaff himself. He abuses himself! So he directs the audience's attention entirely to his follies. They burst out laughing. In this case some characters are with Falstaff on the stage, but they cannot afford to laugh in such a serious situation. Falstaff's speeches and behaviour are transmitted directly to the audience and cause them to laugh. Of course they know that the travellers are not injured and that the robbed money comes back to them later. So the feeling of the actual harm is wiped out and their pain is reduced when they witness his immoral deed. But can we fully explain this kind of laughter? It would be better for us to listen to Neil Schaeffer who generally says of laughter :

... for the purpose of pleasure, and during the extent of the ludicrous event, we may allow ourselves to suspend the rules by which we normally live—the laws of nature, the restrictions of morality, the sequences of logical thought, the demands of rationality—in short, we are encouraged to suspend the internal law of gravity, our seriousness. We are asked to find in matter presented to us whatever gives us the pleasure that expresses itself in laughter, and we are also given a general pardon and indulgence against whatever breaches of logic, decorum, and morality we may make in arriving at that pleasure.<sup>4</sup>

Though Schaeffer does not refer to Falstaff, I think that his opinion happens to point out this function of Falstaff's laughter clearly. Indeed, this kind of laughter may allow the audience to suspend the rules so that they do not have bad impressions of him regardless of his robbery. It is not too much to say that Falstaff's laughter greatly governs their impressions. However, it is not true that any kind of laughter always makes them suspend the judgement. The bitter and cold laughter caused, for instance, by some of Jonson's plays, does not often possess this function, because an audience feel cold at the bottom of their hearts, even while laughing. By all means we need such big-scaled laughter by which the audience forget themselves.

Next, we have cases in which Falstaff is alone on the stage and speaks directly to the audience in his soliloquies. Generally speaking, characters seriously disclose their real selves in their soliloquies, however playful they may be in presence of their friends. In Shakespeare's other plays, the complicated characters of Hamlet and Iago, for instance, can be seen through in their soliloquies. After all, soliloquies serve as a convention for the revealing of their real selves. Falstaff, too, is serious and reveals himself in his soliloquies in the Second Part (II 3. 2. 301-32, 4. 3. 84-121, 5. 1. 60-83). We can know that he has a touch of weirdness, which he never shows except in his soliloquies. His famous soliloquies on honour (5. 1. 127-40) and valour (5. 4. 111-28), however, are quite different. He is still jesting or playing upon words and speaks directly to the audience to excite laughter rather than to disclose his real intention. With practical value he half for fun measures the ideal value which conventional idealism calls honour or valour ; his contradictory speeches and behaviour on honour and valour are all collected in both soliloquies. Allowing themselves to suspend their real judgement or understanding, the audience after all take his contradictory speeches without doubt. The fact is not that contradictions are clarified to the audience, but that contradictions do not seem contradictory because of the function of Falstaff's laughter. In other words, their impressions are subject to the influence of Falstaff's peculiar laughter, though their understanding remains basically at variance with their impressions. Indeed, he obtains the exclusive possession of their attention when he faces them alone, and his witty questions and answers serve to fulfil the same function as his big-scaled laughter.

But this is only a temporal reservation of their judgement and it is not always that Falstaff lives outside the range of ethical judgement. When we know that more than poetic justice in Shakespeare's tragical period is strictly given to Lear who commits small errors, we cannot

think that Shakespeare is not strict to Falstaff even in this period. Falstaff's banishment will come sooner or later with the weakening of the effects of his laughter in the Second Part. After all, what is fatal to him is not his vile deeds but the normal communication of pain or harm from him to dramatic characters and an audience, or his normal subjection to morality, with the weakening of his laughter. So we can know that our impressions and undersanding come to be no more at variance, as Falstaff's impressions are getting accordingly worse, and that he is finally rejected by the new King. Shakespeare does not make, however, a one-sided judgement of Falstaff.

## II. Different Function of Falstaff's Laughter

Falstaff himself is always making a jest, though the effects of his laughter are getting weaker, and we usually enjoy what he says and does without any doubts. But once we begin to entertain doubts, we come to know that another function is prepared for him and that it becomes the sword which Shakespeare thrusts before the court represented by the usurper, Henry IV and the dissolute Hal in compensation for Falstaff's banishment.

First of all, a sentence seen in common dictionaries will give us a clue to think about Falstaff from another angle :

I an damned if I do such a thing (if it is true).

The quoted main clause shows the most undesirable thing or situation to the speaker, and in this way, practically using the main clause only as the lever of negation, he decisively denies the statement in the subordinate clause. This is a conventionally rhetorical sentence.

On the other hand, Falstaff's sentence similar in construction,

I am a rogue, if drunk to-day, (2. 4. 149)

seems conventional, but is not confined only to a rhetorical level. Here the main clause precedes the subordinate clause to negate his deed in the subordinate clause. It is, however, extremely doubtful whether the main clause (being supposed to work only as the lever of negation) reveals himself to be far different from the real Falstaff when we think of his past speeches and behavior. It is the more comical because it is apparent that, as he says after he drinks, the fact to be firmly denied cannot be denied at all. This kind of statement is still simple, but the following,

if I be not Jack Falstaff, then am I a Jack, (5. 4. 138)

becomes rather complicated. "Jack" placed behind in the main clause has a meaning of villain, which is partly intercommunicated to "Jack" in the subordinate clause. We cannot deny from

the same word and connoted meaning that "am I a Jack" is far different from his real self, so even the fact in the subordinate clause which he wants to emphasize seems doubtful. Then can we say that he does not pretend to state the obvious fact, but that he really insists that he is not the man he seems ?

When we stand stiff in the appreciation of his rhetorical sentence, it does not communicate to us any more than a conventional meaning. But once a doubt is entertained, the sentence breathes afresh and is thus provided with a double construction. When it becomes more complicated in construction like this :

An 'twere not good a deed as drink, to turn true man and leave these rogues, I am the veriest varlet that ever chewed with a tooth, (2. 2. 21-23)

the fact to be stressed is called in question over and over. We must admit that ifs of this kind and various similar examples are in the unrivalled sphere of Falstaff's thinking. We are, however, apt to lose sight of the peculiar meanings and his real self in dizzy vicissitudes. Accordingly we must look more carefully for his real self from his other statements mingled with laughter.

From this standpoint, look again at the imaginary court-scene presented both by the Prince and Falstaff, and we can see the joking Falstaff in the true light. Falstaff jests thus :

banish not him thy Harry's company, banish not him thy Harry's company, banish plump Jack, amd banish all the world. (2. 4. 468-70)

But is his real entreaty not concealed here ? Here we know that he discloses his real intention under the mask of his laughter. This is the new function of his laughter. Moreover, Falstaff dares to take another step and criticize the princes for their meanness, falsehood and injustice.

But this is not easy. If words can be communicated with relevancy to speakers' qualifications, Falstaff who is deeply steeped in vice is not well qualified to criticize their evils. But is there any man well qualified to criticize others in both parts of *Henry IV* ?

Of course, falsehood spreads itself far into the court in the Second Part. The King, being conscious of it, lives the rest of his life in deep agony in spite of his glorious triumph, and Prince Hal, who indulged in dissipation with Falstaff, puts him in prison, contrary to his hot expectation. On the contrary, Hotspur is destined, after all, to be branded with the infamy of a rebel and be killed, though his justice shines brilliantly with the injustice and falsehood of the court for a background. Indeed, Hotspur is too direct, and so it is not easy for him to be well understood in the political structure. From the clear-cut viewpoint, however, we may acquiesce that this is the reality of politics ; yet Shakespeare does not leave it as it is.

Shakespeare, who occasionally seems to take things too easy, cunningly and shrewdly, provides Falstaff with a device for shooting the arrow of criticism to the court in compensation for his banishment : Falstaff, the begetter and the butt of laughter, criticizes the men full of

falsehood and injustice in the majestic main street from the miserable back street of politics under the mask of laughter. The noteworthy main clause in combination with the conventional “if” (an) construction :

An the Prince and Poin be not two arrant cowards, there's not equity stirring,  
(2. 2. 97-98)

and the common-looking sentence :

Lord, Lord, how this world is given to lying !  
(5. 4. 144)

are both brilliant from that standpoint. Everyone thinks that Falstaff is joking as usual, and bursts out laughing. But when we think deeply of these statements, leaving out his personality and qualifications, we come to know what he really means. So we find the court and ourselves laughed at by Falstaff. He exposes himself to mockery and at the same time shoots the arrow of criticism at a court full of falsehood and injustice. Although we may be surprised by own sudden realization of the underlying seriousness of Falstaff's laugh-provoking lines, it is of the utmost importance for us to recognize that Falstaff's big-scaled joking contains big-scaled seriousness hidden within it.

## NOTES

- 1 All the quotation and act, scene, and line references are from *The New Shakespeare*, ed., J. Dover Wilson (London : Cambridge University Press, 1944 ; rpt. 1964—Part I., rpt. 1965—Part II).
- 2 Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry* (English Version by Ingram Bywater), (Tokyo : Kenkyusha, 1968), p. 16.
- 3 Louis Gazamian, *The Development of English Humor* (New York : AMS Press, 1965), p. 235.
- 4 Neil Schaeffer, *The Art of Laughter* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1981), pp. 19-20.

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