THE DECLINE AND FALL OF SIR JOHN
FALSTAFF

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Start with Henry IV Part Two’s Epilogue: “If you be not too much cloyed with fat meat, our humble author will continue the story, with Sir John in it . . . where . . . [he] shall die of a sweat, unless already [he] be killed with your hard opinions” (Epilogue 24–29, emphasis added; all line references from Bevington’s Complete Works of Shakespeare, 5th ed. [New York: Pearson Longman, 2003]).

The subsequent play, Henry V, does kill Falstaff with a sweat (brought on, of course, by a broken heart), and he never appears onstage—suggesting, perhaps, that someone’s hard opinions have indeed killed him off.

We’ve known since act 1, scene 2 of Henry IV Part One that Hal will one day break off his association with Falstaff to reveal his stunning goodness and competence as sunshine long hidden behind “foul and ugly mists / Of vapors that did seem to strangle him” (1.2.196–97). During the deposition of the wayward prince by his father the king, Falstaff, portraying Prince Hal, responds after charges of being “a villainous, abominable misleader of youth . . . [and] old white-bearded Satan” (2.4.457–58), “Banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poins; but for sweet Jack Falstaff . . . banish not him thy Harry’s company . . . banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.” Hal, as king, answers simply, “I do, I will” (2.4.469–76).

We’ve seen Prince Hal perform his tasks as warrior prince against the triple-threat of Wales, Scotland, and rebellious English earls, while Falstaff proves himself a leech, a thief, a coward, and a liar by act 2, scene 4, when the Gadshill scheme is revealed and Hal pays off Falstaff’s tavern bills. So far, Falstaff is fat and funny, guilty only of good humor and a little fudging here and there. How can we condemn him for thievery when he’s so incompetent? How can we fault him for lying when he’s only trying to save face?

But when Hal “procures [for Falstaff] a charge of foot” as well as “money to equip them” (3.3.186, 202), the old fat man rapidly declines to more serious lapses. In 4.2, Falstaff reveals that his “charge of foot” is puny, weak, and few in number because “I pressed me none but such toast-and-butter, with hearts in their bellies no bigger than pins’ heads, and they have bought out their services” (4.2.20–22). He has extorted, in other
words, from able-bodied potential soldiers, funds to line his own pockets while procuring only meager support for his king and prince. Still, since he’s merely telling his tale with habitual exaggeration, his braggadocio provides humor; but when in Part Two we actually witness his chicanery, meet a handful of unsavory conscripts with names like Moldy, Shadow, Wart, Feeble, and Bulloch, and cringe that Falstaff uses Bardolph and Justices Shallow and Silence as aiders and abettors, it’s not so funny anymore.

*Part One* ends with the battle scenes. In act 5, scene 4, Falstaff “counterfeit[s]” death, since “the better part of valor is discretion” (119), prompting Prince Hal’s interesting eulogy: “What, old acquaintance, could not all this flesh / Keep in a little life? Poor Jack farewell! / *I could have better spared a better man./* Oh, I should have a heavy miss of thee / If I were much in love with vanity. / Death hath not struck so fat a deer today, / *Though many dearer*” (102–8). The added italics suggest that the prince values his association with Falstaff (for instructional purposes, perhaps), though he by no means honors him. Most ingloriously, moreover, Falstaff “recovers,” stabs the body of Hotspur, and claims the kill as he dumps the corpse at Hal’s feet—and it’s downhill from here.

While the main plot of *Henry IV Part Two*, dispenses of the remaining rebels from *Part One* and reconciles King Henry and Prince Hal, the Falstaff plot begins with images of disease and ends with murder and mayhem. “What says the doctor to my water?” are Falstaff’s first words. His page answers, “He said the water itself was a good healthy water, but for the party that owed it, he might have more diseases than he knew for” (1.2.1–5). The scene also ends with images of disease—incurable, consumption, gout, pox. Instead of raillery with Prince Hal, the scene pits Falstaff against the Chief Justice, who reprimands him for “failure to appear,” but acknowledges that his “service at Shrewsbury hath a little gilded over your night’s exploit on Gad’s Hill” (1.2.100, 147–48). Adding, “You have misled the youthful Prince” (1.2.143), “You follow the young Prince up and down, like his ill angel” (162–63), and “God send the Prince a better companion” (197–97), he announces, “the King hath severed you and Prince Harry” by assigning Falstaff to war with Lord John (1.2.200–3).

At the tavern in 2.1, Hostess Quickly has called officers to arrest Falstaff for “eating me out of house and home . . . putting all my substance into that fat belly of his” (72–73). The ensuing fracas attracts the attention of the Chief Justice, who upbraids him for “brawling here” when he “should have been well on [his] way to York” (63–65). “Pay her the debt you owe her,” the Chief Justice continues, “and unpay the villainy you have done her” (116–18). He again reminds Falstaff that he’s “loiter[ing] here too long” instead of gathering soldiers on his way north.

In the next tavern scene, 2.4, Doll Tearsheet feels unwell (it turns out she’s pregnant). Falstaff’s first words are, “Empty the [chamberpot].” The conversation turns to gluttony and diseases: “If the cook help to make the gluttony, you help to make the diseases, Doll. We catch of you, Doll” (45–46). The scene teems with odious puns relating weaponry to sexual activity and venereal disease. The light-hearted name-calling
of *Part One* succumbs to vulgarities that pervade the pages of *Shakespeare’s Bawdy*, a dictionary of crudity (available, incidentally, online as a free pdf). The scene includes “a goodly tumult!” (202) with Pistol and others; kissing, cuddling, and innuendo from Falstaff and Doll—despite their respective diseases; and for the only time in *Part Two*, the Prince Hal and Poins appear at the Boar’s Head for a very brief encounter before the prince is summoned to court and Falstaff is arrested for again avoiding his duty.

A curious scene sandwiched between a drinking party and the coronation parade demolishes whatever redeeming social virtue might remain among the Falstaff crowd. Officers drag Hostess Quickly and Doll Tearsheet onstage, obviously resisting arrest. “You lie,” Doll shrieks after the Beadle says, “There hath been a man or two killed about her”; “[If] the child I go with do miscarry, thou wert better thou hadst struck thy mother” (5.4.6–10). The Beadle insists, “Come, I charge you both, go with me, for the man is dead that you and Pistol beat amongst you” (15–17)—the same Pistol who accompanies Falstaff to the parade.

Finally, Falstaff arrives for the coronation parade in dirty, shabby—probably smelly—clothes. “But ‘tis no matter,” he rationalizes; “this poor show doth better. This doth infer the zeal I had to see him . . . my earnestness of affection . . . my devotion . . . [T]o ride day and night, and . . . stand stained with travel and sweating with desire to see him” (5.4.10–26).

As King Henry V pauses for a twenty-five-line reprimand and dismissal, though providing “that lack of means enforce you not to evils” (5.5.67), we concur with Prince John, his younger brother: “I like this fair proceeding of the King’s / He hath intent his wonted followers / Shall all be very well provided for, / But all are banished till their conversations / Appear more wise and modest to the world” (5.5.98–102).

Fat chance, Falstaff. He is defunct and cannot be restored—except as the humiliated buffoon in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. 