

## **“The king has killed his heart”: The Death of Falstaff in *Henry V***

R. Scott Fraser  
*University of the West of England*

### ABSTRACT

Even with the multitude of religious, political, social and gendered readings of the character, critics have invariably (and understandably) tended to focus most often on the events leading up to and including the rejection scene in 2 *Henry IV*, and have given far less attention to the report of his death in *Henry V*. In light of criticism concerning the relationship between Falstaff and the actor Will Kemp, as well as the roles of the stage Vice and clown, this essay will focus on the report in an attempt to reinterpret it and its importance for the play as a whole. As will be seen, in performance it actually formed an integral part of an iterative process that would have served to problematize the presentation of kingship in *Henry V* on the early modern stage.

KEY WORDS: Shakespeare, Falstaff, *Henry V*, Will Kemp.

Criticism concerning Falstaff is most often focused on his relationship with Prince Hal; and while the interpretation of that relationship can vary widely, it is as often dependent on the variety of symbolic attributions to Falstaff as it is to the critical approach taken by the author. Even with the multitude of religious, political, social and gendered readings of the character, critics have invariably (and understandably) tended to focus most often on the events leading up to and including the rejection scene in 2 *Henry IV*. However, this essay will focus on references to the heart in both 1 and 2 *Henry IV* and *Henry V* as a means of exploring the symbolic relationship between Falstaff and Henry in the latter play. As will be seen, in performance such references formed part of an iterative process that would have served to problematize the presentation of

kingship of Shakespeare's Henry on the early modern stage, and nowhere is this more evident than in the report of Falstaff's death.

Central to this reading is the established criticism concerning Falstaff and the actor Will Kemp, as well as the roles of the stage Vice and clown. It is, of course, Hamlet who famously complains about but also defines the comic role of the early modern stage clown:

And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them, for there be of them that will themselves laugh to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it. (3. 2. 34-40)<sup>1</sup>

Given his own ambitions as a playwright, Hamlet sees the clown as a threat to any planned performance: because the role was one given to improvisation and direct address, the clown subverted the authority of the written text. Even the clown's scripted lines were frequently asides of complaint or comment; and his function was as the audience's direct and frequently crude (in both senses of the word) commentator on the action.

While it was Brinsley Nicholson who first argued that Hamlet's speech was a reference to Will Kemp (1882:57-66), it was John Dover Wilson who went so far as to argue that Shakespeare created a character based directly on the comic actor's abilities (1943:47). Expanding on a suggestion by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (1918), that *2 Henry IV* is built around the morality play structure, Wilson argues that the prince has to choose between the two characters of Falstaff (who stands for misrule) and the Lord Chief Justice (who stands for law and order) (1943:75). He also makes a significant point regarding the absence of Falstaff from *Henry V*, by arguing that the character was absent (despite the promises of the Epilogue to *2 Henry IV*) because Kemp left Shakespeare's company in 1599 (1943:124-125).

However, numerous critics have since challenged this emphasis on the morality structure, as well as the paratextual reason for Falstaff's absence. For example, A. P. Rossiter first took exception to what he saw as the reductiveness of Wilson's reading, claiming that

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Shakespeare's plays are from the Norton collected edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt.

“any ideological view which makes *Henry IV* into a princely morality tale reduces Falstaff to little more than a symbol of all the fat and idle temptations which royalty rejects” (1964:103). For Rossiter, the absence of Falstaff from *Henry V* can therefore be explained by the need for the new king to remove the political liability of the comic criticism of his leadership (1964:111).<sup>2</sup> Kristen Poole, while acknowledging the influence of the Vice, also sees Wilson as being too simplistic in his reading. She locates the character in the tradition of the Puritan of the staged Marprelate Tracts, and determines that when an audience saw Falstaff they also saw Oldcastle. Yet, she argues that as “a multivalent, polyvocal entity, ‘Falstaff’, the epitome of the carnival grotesque, encompasses and embodies contradictions, rather than flattens them” (1998:105-108). But as refined and accurate as her argument is, to tie Falstaff to a single signification paradoxically limits his possibilities as a “polyvocal entity.” Arguably not the focus of her essay, she does not consider the significance of Kemp playing Falstaff in and of itself.

David Wiles convincingly argues that not only did Kemp play Falstaff, but that again the part was actually written for the actor, as Wilson first suggested. Wiles constructs this argument with four points. First, he follows Wilson’s lead concerning the absence of Falstaff from *Henry V*, restating that the departure of Kemp coincides with the dating of the play. Second, he points out that Kemp was the probable pirate of the quarto text of *Syr John Falstaffe, and the merrie Wives of Windsor* (1602). Third, he again follows Wilson’s lead, this time over the assertion that the stage direction “Enter Will” in second act of the quarto of 2 *Henry IV* refers to Kemp playing Falstaff. And finally, he describes how the clowning “rhythm” of Kemp’s roles fits with those of Falstaff (1987:118-119). While the plausibility of Kemp’s piracy is certainly questionable, overall this is an argument that has been given considerable critical acknowledgement. And central to this essay’s reading of Falstaff is Wiles’ assertion that, “Kemp and Falstaff are one and the same” (1987:120). This is of notable importance, particularly if one considers the possibility that when Kemp walked on stage some early modern audience members might have seen Falstaff, some might have seen Oldcastle, and some might have seen Kemp

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<sup>2</sup> The first quarto does not include the same references to Falstaff, truncating the report of his death as it does with so much more of the play.

himself. Indeed, as a “polyvocal entity,” some might have seen a combination of all three. Such a view depends not simply on Wilson and Wiles’ argument that the part was written for the actor, but that Kemp performed in the metatheatrical tradition of the early modern Vice figure.

While secularized, the Vice never fully lost its symbolic function in the early modern period. Such a view is influenced by the work of Bernard Spivack, who argues that the Vice’s role, “much older than his histrionic title, came into its key position as soon as the martial allegory for the *Psychomachia* was transformed by the stage into a plot of intrigue” (1958:140-141). Wiles continues and expands this critical tradition, noting that “‘vice’ is often used as a synonym for fool in the sixteenth century [...] Just as the fool in the Morris dance broke formation and danced where he pleased, so the Vice swept aside the confines of the script” (1987:4-5). In terms of the relationship between Falstaff and the prince, Wiles points out how Hal refers to him with language drawn from the morality tradition (such as ‘devil’, ‘vice’, ‘iniquity’, ‘ruffian’ and ‘Satan’), and that Falstaff wields a wooden (as opposed to actual) dagger (1987:122).

The view of the role of the Vice begun by Spivack and expanded with the work of Wiles has led to a number of interesting interpretations of Kemp’s influence on early modern drama, most notably in terms of the subversion of the “confines of the script.” Robert Weimann notes the negative stage reference to Kemp in Everard Gulpin’s *Skialetheia* (1598), and Kemp’s appearance in *The Return from Parnassus* (1599/1601) to conclude that “the performed clown, good-humoredly, or so it seems, is made to attest to a distinct gap between learned pens and vulgar voices by ‘disfiguring’ classical authority at one of its most highly respected levels” (2000:123).<sup>3</sup> And just as Weimann reads the roles of this particular actor as illustrating the overall struggle between actor and author in the early modern period, one can also read Kemp’s role as Falstaff as illustrating through its improvisational performance a critique of both the prince of the *Henry IV* plays and the king in *Henry V*.

That Kemp was famous beyond his individual stage roles around the time of the first performance of *Henry V* is evidenced by

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<sup>3</sup> For an argument contrary to the interpretations of the Vice by Spivack and others (including Weimann), see Cox (2000).

the popularity of his *Nine Days' Wonder*, the account of his London to Norwich dance published in 1600. And while it is, of course, impossible to know precisely what he did on stage, there are internal consistencies in the clown's scripted lines that shed further light on his symbolic importance. Wiles notes the fact that the clown speaks in prose when most of a play is in verse, and this creates an "illusion of spontaneity, of an actor who is speaking to the audience in *propria persona*" (1987:9). And on a more political level, Phyllis Rackin suggests that Falstaff's prose is so given to wordplay and improvisation that it subverts the rigidity of "official language" (1991:238). Thus, the fame of Kemp at the time, combined with the metatheatricity and onstage independence of the clown/Vice, suggests that what members of the audience might have seen was not simply a character *per se*, but a cameo by a well known actor given to improvisation and subversion.

There is a notable verbal repetition that runs through Kemp's Shakespearean appearances, and which supports this point. For example, building on the stage direction in Q2, "Enter Will Kemp" Wiles concludes that he played the part of Peter in *Romeo and Juliet* (1594-1596). These were Kemp's scripted lines:

PETER. Play 'Heart's Ease'

MUSICIAN. Why 'Heart's Ease'?

PETER. Oh musicians because my *heart* itself plays, my *heart* is full.

Oh play me some merry dump to comfort me. (4.5.100-103; my emphasis)

It was William Hazlitt who first critically applied the phrase "heart's ease" to that other Kemp character, Falstaff: "Falstaff's wit is an emanation of fine constitution; an exuberance of good-humour and good-nature; an overflowing of his love of laughter and good-fellowship; a giving vent to his heart's ease, and over-contentment with himself and others" (1889:82). Hazlitt's use of the phrase was perhaps determined by its appearance in *Henry V*. Following his argument with Williams on the eve of Agincourt, Henry has the soliloquy in which he states:

[...] What infinite *heart's ease*

Must kings neglect that private men enjoy!

And what have kings that privates have not too,

Save ceremony, save general ceremony?

And what art thou, thou idol ceremony? (4.1.233-237; my emphasis)

The suggestion from Henry is that “heart’s ease” relates to the private lives that commoners enjoy and that kings must neglect in order to create the public image of kingship; or, indeed, to separate the king’s two bodies.

Arguably, this is simply one of the frequent references in 1 and 2 *Henry IV* and *Henry V* to the burdens of kingship. Yet the repetition of the phrase “heart’s ease” is particularly interesting as it only appears in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry V*, and *Julius Caesar* (1599). In the latter play, an exact contemporary of *Henry V*, these lines are spoken by Caesar in his description of the politically ambitious challenger to his political power, Cassius:

Would he were fatter! But I fear him not.  
Yet if my name were liable to fear,  
I do not know the man I should avoid  
So soon as that spare Cassius. He reads much,  
He is a great observer, and he looks  
Quite through the deeds of men. He loves no plays,  
As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music;  
Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort  
As if he mocked himself and scorned his spirit  
That could be moved to smile at any thing.  
Such men as he be never at *heart’s ease*  
Whiles they behold a greater than themselves,  
And therefore are they very dangerous.  
I rather tell thee what is to be feared  
Than what I fear, for always I am Caesar.  
Come on my right hand, for this ear is deaf,  
And tell me truly what thou think’st of him (1.2.199-215; my emphasis)

A fat man, it would seem, is not someone with obvious political ambition: Cassius’s leanness suggests that he denies his “heart’s ease,” or private pleasure, as he wishes to overtake those with a greater public position than himself (“Would he were fatter”). At the same time, Caesar, because he is a public figure (“for always I am Caesar”), cannot express the thoughts of his private self.

This is not to state that Kemp appeared in *Julius Caesar*, but to note that the same symbolism can be said to be true in the *Henry IV* plays: Falstaff’s political ambitions are not for himself, but the younger, leaner Hal. Unlike Rossiter’s objection to Wilson’s morality reading, which he claimed reduced Falstaff to “little more than a

symbol of all the fat and idle temptations which royalty rejects" (1964:103), much has since been made of the symbolic nature of Falstaff's corpulence in relation to Hal's thinness, most notably in readings that focus on the carnivalesque. For François Laroque, the juxtaposition serves as "a comic counterpoint to the real battles opposing the rebels to the king. This is a popular form of psychomachia where the strings of parodic litanies belong to the genre which Bakhtin calls 'praise-abuse'" (1988:87). And Jonathan Hall argues that the symbolic corpulence and leanness can be read as follows: "The language of the 'grotesque body' in this play is made to appear as an agent of potential chaos and civil war [...] Thus the casting-off of Falstaff, which is correlative to the stern policies of the centralizing state, is also intensely desired." Yet at the same time, "When [Henry] finally replaces the monologizing mockery with an act of banishment, separating his controlling self from the grotesque old body, he is denying something in himself" (1998:126-128).

That such banishment was to be expected is, of course, foreshadowed in *1 Henry IV* in the scene in which Falstaff, playing the role of the king says, "Banish plump Jack and banish all the world." Hal famously replies, "I do; I will" (2.5.438-439). When confronted by his real father, Henry IV, he promises: "I shall hereafter, my thrice gracious lord, / Be more myself" (3.2.92-93). That is, he will be more the prince and heir to the throne than the young man indulging a private existence; for like Caesar, when he becomes the ruler he will have to appear only as his public self. Further, that Henry's public success as king would require not only the banishment of Falstaff, but his death, is hinted at in the Epilogue to *2 Henry IV*, which promises not only the return of the knight, but his death of a sweat. With the loss of Kemp, there is a sense in which Falstaff could not physically return at all; but the character could still die in *Henry V*, albeit off stage.

Significantly, the symbolism employed in the report of Falstaff's death in *Henry V* forms part of an iterative process begun in *1 Henry IV*. On stage, in the penultimate scene of the play, are the "bodies" of the two characters Hal must symbolically overcome before he can be king: Hotspur and Falstaff. Over the body of Hotspur, Hal says these lines: "Fare thee well great *heart*. / Ill-weaved ambition, how much art thou shrunk!" (5.4.86-87; my emphasis). Then, in the "rejection" scene of *2 Henry IV*, we have the following:

FALSTAFF My king, my Jove, I speak to thee my *heart*.  
KING I know thee not, old man. (5.2.42-43; my emphasis)

One might be tempted to dismiss the repetition of the word “heart” as a coincidence, but arguably Hotspur’s “heart” has to be killed because it is too great with ambition and cannot last; Falstaff’s “heart” has to be rejected because it is given to misrule.

Of course, the rejection scene is not the end of 2 *Henry IV*. There is the Epilogue, obviously spoken by Kemp himself, and his final jig. As Wiles points out, “With Kemp/Falstaff’s dismissal by Hal, and his reappearance in the jig, the conventional structure of comedy is restored. Clown and protagonist are relegated to their separate spheres which, in other Shakespearean comedies, are much more sharply demarcated” (1987:129). Such symbolic demarcation prepares the way for *Henry V*, where the language with which the death is reported, and the location of the report within the play, can be read as particularly significant:

HOSTESS. By my troth, he’ll yield the crow a pudding one of these days. The King has killed his *heart*. Good husband come home presently [...] As ever you come of women, come in quickly to Sir John. Ah, poor *heart*, he is so shaken of a burning quotidian, that it is most lamentable to behold. Sweet men, come to him.

NIM. The king hath run bad humors on the knight, that’s the even of it.

PISTOL. Nim, thou hast spoke the right.

His *heart* is fractured and corroborate. (2.1.78 -113; my emphasis)

Given that in the psychomachia tradition of the Vice, Kemp/Falstaff has represented all that Henry must deny, the ambiguity of whose heart is “His” becomes quite palpable. It is certainly possible that the reference is to the heart of Henry as much as the knight. Gary Taylor cryptically suggests this in his notes to the lines in the Oxford edition: “His probably Falstaff’s; arguably Henry’s *fracted and corroborate* broken and healed. The apparent nonsense is easily explained by Pistol’s plunge into Latinity” (1982:130; his emphasis). T. W. Craik, in the Arden edition, provides a slightly different gloss to the lines, but also sees Pistol as being inaccurate: “*Fracted* (Lat. *fractus*) does mean ‘broken’ [...] but *corroborate* (Lat. *robur*, ‘strength’) means ‘strengthened’, not as Pistol perhaps supposes, ‘in ruins’, ‘reduced to rubble’” (1995:166). Yet the latin *robur* can also mean “hardness”, “firmness”, “vigor”, and



“power” (Lewis 1879:1597). By glossing the word with any of these, one can see that Pistol may actually be correct on a symbolic level: the private heart has had to be broken and killed off so that Henry’s public self can be either hardened, or made more firm, vigorous and/or powerful, and he can be an effective king.

In *Henry V*, the king is referred to as the cause of Kemp/Falstaff’s death (“The king hath run bad humors on the knight”); and its report has highly symbolic connotations. For David Ruitter, the sense of community and festivity that Falstaff engendered through his actions and the expectations surrounding his promotion in *2 Henry IV* are continued in *Henry V*, but are now based on the expectation of his death. “In addition, Falstaff’s imminent demise is not attributed to his wild and gluttonous life, but to the reformed and severe King Henry” (2003:152).

Given that, with the absence of Kemp, Falstaff could not appear in *Henry V*, the death is understandably reported as early as possible (otherwise an audience would spend too much time waiting for Kemp/Falstaff to arrive). Yet this does not mean the end of references to the missing character. Shakespeare goes out of his way to remind his early modern audience that he is not in the play as late as the penultimate act, by having Fluellen and Gower discuss him directly:

GOWER Our King is not like him in that: he never killed  
any of his friends.

FLUELLEN It is not well done, mark you now, to take  
the tales out of my mouth ere it is made an end and  
finished. I speak but of the figures and comparisons of  
it. As Alexander killed his friend Clytus, being in  
his ales and cups, so also Harry Monmouth, being in  
his right wits and good judgements, turned away  
the fat knight with the great-belly doublet: he was  
full of jests and gipes, and knaveries, and mocks; I  
have forgot his name.

GOWER Sir John Falstaff.

FLUELLEN That is he. I tell you there is good men  
porn at Monmouth.

GOWER Here comes his majesty. (4.7.39-53)

As many have noted, the implication is that, like Alexander, Henry indeed is one who kills his friends. But once again the conversation provides a juxtaposition of the banished/killed private

self ("Sir John Falstaff"), and the successful public one ("his majesty"). Interestingly, while acknowledging that this scene would therefore recall the sadness of the report of Falstaff's death, Craik also notes the inherent comedy based on the nature of Fluellen's comparison, and his need to describe the dead knight because he has forgotten Falstaff's name. Craik asks, "Did some wag in the audience hereupon cry 'Oldcastle'? The covert joke between actors and audience implies the latter's familiarity not only with the history plays themselves but with their recent theatrical history" (1995:60). Given all of the above, some "wag in the audience" might have cried "Kemp."

But it could be argued that all references to the Eastcheap characters remind the audience of Kemp/Falstaff's absence, thereby providing an implied critique of the king throughout the play. And as Gary Taylor has noted, Shakespeare "clearly makes Henry responsible for the deaths of two of them, Falstaff and Bardolph – and does so as part of a dramatic sequence which shows Henry increasingly burdened and isolated" (1982:46). But there are also implied references. For example, Barbara Hodgdon has pointed out how Fluellen's beating of Pistol and forcing him to eat the leek reworks Falstaff's banishment in *2 Henry IV*, and that "Pistol's last words, based in part on Dericke's return to England in *The Famous Victories* and on Falstaff's similarly positioned soliloquy in *1 Henry IV* (5.4.158-161) [...] link him rather precisely with Falstaffian lies" (1991:193).

Similarly, the earlier comic scene between Williams and the king provides another possible allusion to Kemp/Falstaff. Williams, not knowing to whom he is speaking because Henry is in disguise, argues with him on the eve of Agincourt. A Shakespearean invention, and the most direct criticism of the king since the report of the death, it is also the conversation which leads to Henry's soliloquy concerning heart's ease. Later, when Williams discovers his error, he describes it as follows:

WILLIAMS All offences, my lord, came from the *heart*:  
Never came any from mine that might offend your  
majesty.

KING It was our self thou didst abuse.

WILLIAMS Your majesty came not like yourself: you  
appeared to me but as a common man – witness the  
night, your garments, your lowliness; and what your

highness suffered under that shape, I beseech you take  
 it for your own fault and not mine, for had you been as  
 I took you for, I made no offence; therefore I beseech  
 Your highness pardon me. (4.8.47-57; my emphasis)

Again there is the juxtaposition of the private self (“the heart”), and the public self (“Your majesty came not like yourself”). But as Craik has pointed out, the passage is in verse but metrically defective (“It was our self thou didst abuse”). “The phrase ‘our royal self’ [...] would be appropriate to the tone here, and is not disproved by Williams’s reply, for ‘Your majesty came not like your royal self’ (quoting the phrase back in a prose sentence) would smack of insolence” (1995:327). The line could be defective because the references to the gap between the public (“majesty”) and private self (“heart”) actually upset the king, reminding him of the frustrations expressed in his own soliloquy. While such a point cannot be proven, Henry does indeed pardon Williams, thereby implying he accepts that the fault was his own for disguising “himself” as a common, private man. What the scene does provide is yet another instance where we are reminded of what the king has had to give up in order to achieve his political ambitions.

In light of the work of numerous critics, but particularly Wiles’ conclusion that Kemp and Falstaff are one and the same, it has been possible to reinterpret such references to the heart in *Henry V*. As noted above, it is impossible to know precisely what Kemp/Falstaff did on stage, but the scripted lines suggest that at least one of his symbolic functions was, in the theatrical tradition of the Vice, to provide an opposite to the prince’s public self, an opposite which has to be rejected in order for him to become an effective king. Because of Kemp’s absence, Falstaff could not appear in *Henry V*; but he could still be referred to, either directly or indirectly. References to the heart in the play therefore form part of an iterative process that serves to continue to problematize the role of the king as Kemp/Falstaff himself had previously done on stage. Central to these references is the report of the death. For an ambitious playwright like Hamlet, such a figure must be contained; for an ambitious ruler, such a figure must be killed, leaving a king’s heart both “fracted and corroborate.”

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*Author's contact:* Scott.Fraser@uwe.ac.uk

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