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Falstaff: The Invention of the UberMocker

Who or what is Sir John Falstaff? Is he a man, a myth, or an alcoholic beverage? Perhaps he is all three. The creators of Falstaff Beer explain the reason for naming their beverage thus: “Sir John was a ‘man’s man’ whose philosophy was to ‘eat, drink, and be merry’ and his sense of good fun was tempered by an exceptional intellect. Sir John was beset by no frustrations, fears, or problems of protocol” (Falstaff Brewing Company website). “No problems of protocol” quite succinctly describes Falstaff, the Shakespearean stage character who barrels through 1 and 2 Henry IV, stealing every scene he appears in. That “man’s man” also peeks in at Richard II, and graciously bows out in Henry V. If we could stop laughing at his antics long enough, we might be able to see past his massive girth and great white beard to his immensely complex personality.

So many critics have had their way with Falstaff, that a difficult choice was made to narrow the list down to three for analysis: Alice-Lyle Scoufos, Roderick Marshall, and Harold Bloom. Through synthesizing these critical interpretations of Falstaff, a recurring theme emerges that helps to shed light on the fat knight’s universal appeal. Frequent mention is made throughout this essay of what seems to be the “Falstaff phenomenon.” All who read the Henry plays, or views a performance of them, seem to develop an instant opinion of the fat knight. He inspires either love or hate, but rarely a lukewarm response. The attempt to isolate and analyze this phenomenon forms the crux of this essay.

Like many other seemingly simple questions, “Who or what is Falstaff?” is immensely complex. We already know that he is an Elizabethan-era stage character and a modern alcoholic beverage. It is up to us to decipher the rest. In order to become as timeless as Falstaff, a character must have some trait that all of humanity through the ages can relate to. As long as man has engaged in civilized society, he has had to endure laws and those who would impose them. The urgent need for lawbreakers must have quickly ensued. We all have experienced the frustration and annoyance of being stymied by some stupid law or problem of protocol, and secretly wished that some braver soul would come along and flout it just for kicks. Of course, that braver soul is Falstaff. Regardless of the situation he finds himself in, Falstaff can usually find some-
thing to make fun of. Scoufos would have him mock the Lollard martyr, Sir John Oldcastle; Marshall calls on him to mock the true king, which he does admirably; Bloom asks Falstaff to mock time, death, the state, bravery, and other such lofty, nebulous ideals that others take way too seriously. These are all tasks that Falstaff performs willingly and splendidly. In a world beset by protocol and its defenders, Falstaff shows us just how much fun life can be ignoring, or better yet, making fun of it.

In her book, Shakespeare’s Typological Satire, Alice-Lyle Scoufos delivers up a Falstaff who serves the very specific role of satirizing the power-grabbing antics of the noble Cobham family. Scoufos painstakingly reinterprets both parts of Henry IV, identifying innumerable references to the Lollard martyr, Sir John Oldcastle, Lord of Cobham. Most critics seem to agree that Falstaff was originally named Oldcastle, but Scoufos reveals what she believes to be Shakespeare’s motive behind naming his errant knight thus. If we are to follow Scoufous’s argument, that Shakespeare roots practically all of Oldcastle’s life into Falstaff’s words and deeds, an entirely new and humorously macabre facet of the bard’s psyche emerges. A short history of Oldcastle will help make sense of what motivated Shakespeare to base such an outrageous and irreverent character as Falstaff on a victim of religious persecution.

Sir John Oldcastle lived during the reigns of Henrys IV and V, and died either a martyr or traitor, depending on how you choose to view him. He married the widowed Lady Joan Cobham in 1409, received the title of Lord Cobham, and “not only the notable estates of the Cobham family, which included manors and land in five counties, but also the right to attend parliament as one of the lords temporal” (Scoufos 46). So, after marrying the well-off widow, it seems that he used his newfound prestige to fund some less than noble pursuits. He was a Lollard, a pre-Reformation reformer, in a time and place that was staunchly Catholic, and he used his money and power to advance an anti-Catholic doctrine. On September 23, 1413, the king’s forces captured Oldcastle, imprisoned him in the Tower, and on the 25th, Henry V declared him a heretic (Scoufos 49). In an unusual display of leniency, King Henry gave Oldcastle 40 days in the Tower with which to reflect and repent of his heresy. The knight responded to the king’s generosity by escaping from the Tower on October 19th (Scoufos 50). Oldcastle spent that winter organizing a Lollard rebellion, which Henry promptly squashed, and the knight escaped into the interior regions of England and Wales for the next several years. Henry repeatedly offered clemency to the knight, but Oldcastle chose to remain in hiding, forcing Henry’s agents to conduct a manhunt for him. Scoufos explains, “On 1 December 1417 word reached London that Oldcastle had been captured at Broniarth in Wales... after a
violent struggle; one story adds that a woman broke the rebel's leg with a milkstool in the scuffle" (55). Oldcastle was hauled back to London in a cart, tried and convicted of treason, and sentenced for the previous conviction of heresy.

Oldcastle's death was no less infamous than his heretical, treasonous life. A guilty verdict of treason and heresy most certainly called for the sentence of death by burning, but the problem of Oldcastle's broken leg called for an unusual solution. Scoufos states that "almost every chronicler of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries noted in his account of the death of Sir John Oldcastle the rare manner in which the martyr had been hung horizontally in chains and burned" (74). As notorious as Oldcastle was in life, he also continued to enthral the nation with his death. The horrific method of his execution reinforced the resolve of his followers, and he became an instant martyr in their eyes. To them, he died two deaths - hanging and burning - for their crusade. In fact, they massed at St. Giles field where the knight died, because of his promise to rise Christ-like three days after his death (Scoufos 55). Although his followers continued to have faith in their newly-demised leader, those subjects remaining faithful to God and the Crown called him "Behemoth, Leviathan, faithless knight, perfidious follower of Wyclif [sic], satelite of satan, and so on" (Scoufos 56). It seems that Oldcastle caused an outpouring of either love or hate throughout the country, and his fame (or infamy) became instantly the stuff of legends.

So goes the story of Sir John Oldcastle. Although critics may disagree about Shakespeare's motivation for naming his comedic character Falstaff, they generally agree that he was originally named Oldcastle, and evidence exists to prove the bard's intent. In the essay "Historical Background" (of Henry IV, Part 2), editors Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine note that a quarto version of 2 Henry IV, dated 1600, contains the speech prefix "Old." denoting one of Falstaff's lines (295). All major sources consulted for this essay confirm this small, yet significant fact. What motivated Shakespeare to name him thus remains a mystery, though. Obviously, we moderns cannot question the bard (who probably would give only a vague answer at best), but Scoufos conducts exhaustive research within Shakespeare's texts, the historical chronicles he consulted, and the history of the Cobham family, to draw some interesting conclusions.

Scoufos argues that Shakespeare purposely satirizes the martyr's life and death through Falstaff's outrageous antics. 1 Henry IV most clearly illustrates Scoufos's thesis, although she cites evidence of Oldcastle in both 2 Henry IV and Merry Wives of Windsor. The Falstaff of the first part of Henry IV is so audacious, and the ironic humor alluding to Oldcastle so thick, that we need not look any further to
provide ample evidence supporting Scoufos. Analyzing three major scenes that Falstaff dominates provides fertile enough fields to reap—his introductory scene, the tavern scene, and the battle of Shrewsbury (which actually encompasses the entirety of the fifth act).

Act one, scene two, Falstaff’s introductory scene, portrays Oldcastle as a villainous rogue through Hal and Poins’s censure of the fat knight. Bearing in mind that the Oldcastle legend was well know in Shakespeare’s day, the audience attending the play is well aware of Falstaff’s satirical function. Scoufos explains, “two contrasting images had developed in the legends about the Lollard knight, one an image of saintliness and virtue, the other an image of depravity and vice,” and that Shakespeare “apparently found one version more useful than the other in his creative art” (43). If we are to believe Scoufos, Hal’s opening lines confirm the bard’s negative portrayal of Oldcastle/Falstaff. “Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon,” he chides the old knight (1.2.2-4). Within the first ten lines of the play, the Lollard martyr devolves into a dirty old man. Poins continues the assault as soon as he appears on the scene. He asks, “How agrees the devil and thee about thy soul, that thou soldest him on Good Friday last for a cup of madeira and a cold capon’s leg?” (1.2.109-11). To eat meat on a Friday, during Lent, and especially Good Friday, is bad enough, but to sell one’s soul to the devil for it ascends to the heights of wickedness. Falstaff ridicules the Catholic Church by reportedly selling his soul for a chicken leg, a stunt that comically mirrors Oldcastle jeopardizing his soul by spreading heresy. The irony thickens palpably when Hal, Falstaff, and Poins’s discussion turns to thievery, and, inevitably, the gallows. When Falstaff defends his less than noble profession as a highway robber, Hal compares the unpredictability of wages earned dishonestly to the ebb and flow of the tides. “Now in as low an ebb as the foot of the ladder, and by and by in as high a flow as the ridge of the gallows” (1.2.36-7), he explains, much to Falstaff’s discomfort. Considering that Oldcastle was hung in chains as well as burned, this gallows reference makes a tense moment for Falstaff. The knight, uncomfortable with so much talk of ropes and ladders, immediately changes the subject to Mistress Quickly, “hostess of the tavern” (1.2.39). The gallows humor continues when Hal predicts that, after he becomes king, Falstaff would make a fine hangman. The joke concludes with Poins and Falstaff threatening to hang each other for the robbery they both will commit (1.2.126-8). All totaled, there are nine references to gallows and hanging in a relatively short scene that also introduces three characters and explains the play’s subplot.

Falstaff himself utters the clear-cut damnation of Oldcastle. When Hal threatens to bow out of the Gad’s Hill robbery, Falstaff
exclaims, “By the Lord, I’ll be a traitor then, when thou art king” (1.2.139), to which Hal glibly replies, “I care not” (1.2.140). You can almost hear the Elizabethan audience, well in on the inside joke, roar with laughter at this seemingly serious comment. Without the auspices afforded by Hal’s involvement in the robbery, Falstaff and company are left vulnerable to the authorities should they be caught. Rereading the line with Oldcastle in mind, you cannot help but think, “Never a truer word spoken, you poor sap.” The Elizabethan actor playing Falstaff need only slightly exaggerate the delivery of this line, sort of a figurative wink to the audience, to produce the desired comic result out of an otherwise unremarkable line.

Rereading 1 Henry IV with the Oldcastle legend in mind leaves very little doubt that Shakespeare had someone specific in mind to lampoon. To make sure that his audience got in on the joke, the bard slipped a quick line into the scene, perhaps under the censors’ noses, to connect fact to fiction. As obvious a non sequitur as Falstaff’s post-gallows comment on how sweet Mistress Quickly is, Hal’s reply proves equally unexpected: “As the honey of Hybla, my old lad of the castle,” (1.2.40, italics added). Shakespeare may be forbidden to call his buffoon Oldcastle, but Falstaff certainly is old, and who cares to argue whether he lives in a castle or not?

Act two, Scene four, in which Falstaff “usurps” the joint-stool throne, builds on Scoufos’s already convincing theory that Falstaff and Oldcastle are one in the same. Falstaff again alludes to Oldcastle’s treason by threatening Hal: “If I do not beat thee out of thy kingdom with a dagger of lath and drive all thy subjects afore thee like a flock of wild geese, I’ll never wear hair on my face more” (2.4.130-2). A “dagger of lath” is a wooden sword, an impotent stage prop. Using a wooden sword to drive the king and his loyal subjects out of England wouldn’t get Falstaff very far – probably only as far as Oldcastle’s rebellion got him. When Falstaff “ascends” his joint-stool throne, takes up the scepter and crowns himself, his sacramentals prove to be as ineffective as the wooden sword he threatens to drive Hal out of England with. Falstaff’s reign certainly proves to be as impotent and short-lived as Oldcastle’s rebellion. When Hal dethrones the knight and lets his impassioned plea for mercy fall on cold, indifferent ears, Falstaff twice begs, “Banish not him [Falstaff] thy Harry’s company, banish not him thy Harry’s company. Banish plump Jack and banish all the world” (2.4.465-7). After Bardolph and the Hostess exit, leaving the two would-be kings alone, Hal utters his most infamous denial of Falstaff: “I do; I will” (2.4.468). This passage can easily be interpreted as the failed rebellion that Oldcastle mustered, and Henry V’s swift overtaking of the rebel force.
The final bit of black humor occurs during Act five, Scene four, when Falstaff delivers the resurrection that Oldcastle promised his followers. Recall that Oldcastle, upon his funeral pyre, vowed to rise on the third day after his death. The Lollard failed to deliver on his promise, much to the disappointment of the masses that converged at St. Giles field to await their leader’s rebirth. Never one to pass up ripe comic material, Shakespeare makes good on Oldcastle’s promised resurrection. Although some 200 years later, Oldcastle finally rises from the dead and usurps at least something from the soon-to-be King Henry V - the honor of killing Hotspur. “Therefore I’ll make him [Hotspur] sure, yea, and I’ll swear I killed him,” (5.4.123-4), Falstaff reasons to the audience. For all of the abuse that Falstaff/Oldcastle endures throughout 1 Henry IV, this unearned victory is payback enough for the fat knight. There are no hard feelings, and everyone goes home happy. Our modern sensibilities recoil at the thought of poking fun at a religious martyr’s gruesome death, but who’s to say that Elizabethans didn’t find this topic great fun?

As well as making good theater, lampooning Oldcastle served a much more serious purpose. He was a man before his time, advancing the Protestant cause some 200 years before it became a legitimate religion in England. Elizabeth’s realm was still deeply divided between Catholicism and Protestantism, and when the pope excommunicated her, the threat of rebellion intensified. Without the legitimization of the pope, Elizabeth had no right to the crown in the eyes of her Catholic subjects. By lampooning the martyr through Falstaff’s massive girth and outrageous actions, Shakespeare gave his audience a safe, relatively innocent way to release tensions surrounding issues still fresh and dangerous. Regardless of whether Oldcastle was a hero or a villain, he made the perfect scapegoat for Elizabethans to heap their sins upon. A little comic relief was desperately needed during Elizabeth’s long and turbulent reign. Oldcastle provided the perfect source material, and Falstaff served it up hot, like a pistol case full of sack.

Scoufos provides far more evidence than we have analyzed here to support the Falstaff/Oldcastle legend. Her hypothesis serves as a pair of glasses with which to read the Henry plays. We have only to put them on and refocus our vision to notice the uncanny resemblance Shakespeare intended between the two men. To identify much more than these major events in the play would belabor the subject. So Scoufos assigns the fat knight the very earthly and limited role of lampooning one family’s antics, but what happens if Falstaff assumes a meatier role, a little more responsibility for his actions? Roderick Marshall analyzes the possibilities in his book, Falstaff: The Archetypal Myth.

Marshall asserts that Falstaff embodies the timeless, universal archetype of the Mock King. Throughout human history, he argues, there
has consistently been a figure in lore that is a grotesque, fat, feral, oversexed, crapulous, witty, profane, old-young creature who in times of trouble undertakes to misrule-rule a waste country and educate the heir of its sick and dying monarch in practices calculated to restore peace and prosperity.

(Marshall ix)

Although his definition of the Mock King is quite a mouthful, it more than adequately describes Falstaff. Throughout his book, Marshall identifies several world mythology figures that share at least some of Falstaff’s characteristics, namely his old-young status and his ability to undermine established authority.

Marshall’s definition of the Mock King provides a profile with which to analyze Falstaff as the chaotic, boisterous counterbalance to Henry IV’s formal courtly life. Henry IV and Falstaff provide great examples of the king/mock king duo. Henry attributes his success to an aloof, majestic appearance. He explains to the wayward prince in 1 Henry IV, “Thus did I keep my person fresh and new,/ My presence like a robe pontifical,/ Ne’er seen but wondered at” (3.2.55-7). He speaks in a highly stylized form of iambic pentameter and measures his words carefully. Falstaff, on the other hand, rules the stews and taverns of Eastcheap, speaking his mind in a loose, bawdy prose that flies out of his mouth as swiftly as sack gets thrown into it. Unlike Henry who keeps his majestic presence unseen, Falstaff wears out his welcome (and his credit) in the taverns. Unfortunately, Henry never seems to achieve what he sets out for without much aggravation. Falstaff, who sets his sights much lower – acquiring sack, capons, and fair wenches – always seems to get what he strives for.

Falstaff explains his antithetical philosophy on life during his famous speech on honor in Act 5, Scene one. “Who hath it?” he asks to no one in particular, and answers,

He that died o’Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. ‘Tis insensible then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. (5.1.135-8)

The other noblemen on the battlefield at Shrewsbury all don armor to fight for that “trim reckoning” (5.1.135). Falstaff shows up only because Hal has conscripted him and, once he arrives, he refuses to fight. Conversely, not only does Henry IV join the fray, six other “Henrys” (loyal servants used as decoys) lay their lives down as well. The image of King and Mock King intensifies at this point, with several false kings fighting for an ideal that the Mock King finds dubious at best, and refuses to defend. Falstaff so abhors the thought of fighting for no good reason that he plays dead during swordplay, surely the ultimate disgrace for a knight.
Once again, the Mock King flouts the ideals of the Real King by getting something for nothing. During the battle, Falstaff stabs the already-dead Hotspur and claims victory over the corpse. To Hal, he unabashedly states, “There is Percy. If your father will do me any honour, so; if not, let him kill the next Percy himself” (5.4.140-2). Curiously enough, Falstaff asks for honor when it suits him - when he does not have to sweat or shed blood for it. The honor that he once reserved for the deceased Walter Blount he would gladly request from Hal.

In 2 Henry IV, Falstaff again gets his honor gratis by way of Sir John Coleville’s surrender at Gaultree. During what is surely a spoof of the Shrewsbury/Hotspur-nabbing scene, Falstaff takes Coleville without any pretence of a fight. Falstaff asks, probably with more than a hint of feigned weariness and eyerolling, “Do ye yield, sir, or shall I sweat for you?” (4.3.11-12). Coleville yields, and Falstaff once again has his honor without fighting for it. The Real King, Henry IV, is so wearied with the continual battle for his honor and crown that he is exhausted unto death. Falstaff neither sweats nor bleeds for his honor, and remains hale and hardy in the process. In case the audience did not quite get the joke in 1 Henry IV, Shakespeare ups the ante, revving up the absurdity of Falstaff’s theft of honor. At least with Hotspur, Falstaff was concerned enough about his enemy’s fierce reputation to stab the corpse again. He is so blasé with Coleville that he asks for name, rank, and place of origin before he can be bothered to press the man to surrender.

Numerous examples of Sir John Falstaff as the Mock King exist, many more than have been presented here. We have only to peruse the tavern scenes to understand that Falstaff exists on some level as a foil to Henry IV. But the Mock King serves another purpose; he teaches the heir what the real king cannot or will not. As early as Richard II, we get a taste of Henry’s disdain for Falstaff and his nocturnal activities. “Unrestrained loose companions [of Hal],” he calls the knight and his followers, complaining that they “stand in narrow lanes/. And beat our watch, and rob our passengers” (5.3.7-9). Henry attributes King Richard’s downfall to the same type of behavior. “The skipping King, he ambled up and down/ with shallow jesters and rash bavin wits/ Soon kindled and soon burnt,” (3.2.60-2) he explains to Hal in 1 Henry IV. So what Henry disdains, Falstaff embraces and teaches to Hal. Frequently throughout 1 & 2 Henry IV, Falstaff the Mock King can be seen teaching the heir what the real king eschews. They commit robberies together, dream of maidenheads bought “as they buy hobnails: by the hundreds” (1 Henry IV 2.4.354), drinking sack, and tapping full hogsheads.

During the Battle of Gaultree in 2 Henry IV, Falstaff finally imparts to us the “secret powers” of sack, and why it is so important for
any heir apparent to partake of it. At the end of Act 4, Scene 3, Falstaff slips into the role of tutor, explaining that the difference between Hal and his brother, John of Lancaster, lies in their drinking habits. Of John, Falstaff explains, “this same young sober-blooded boy doth not love me, nor a man cannot make him laugh; but that’s no marvel, he drinks no wine” (4.3.85-7). While older brother Hal still traipses around the taverns with Poins, young John manages to convince rebel forces to disperse and has captured their leaders with nary an unsheathed sword. Falstaff attributes this coldness of John’s soul to his teetotaling ways. He further explains,

A good sherris-sack hath a twofold operation in it. It ascends me into the brain, dries me there all the foolish and dull and cruddy vapours which environ it . . . The second property . . . is the warming of the blood, which before, cold and settled, left the liver white and pale, which is the badge of pusillanimity and cowardice (4.3.94-104).

Any good leader, in Falstaff’s opinion, must have a healthy infusion of liquor to make himself valiant and brave. It can hardly be denied that Falstaff has done his duty as the tutor of Hal’s riots, instilling in the heir a goodly love of drink. Thus, in Falstaff’s esteem, Hal will make a magnificent leader, partly due to the cold and calculating nature he inherits from the king, and partly from the love of drink that the Mock King imparts to him.

So Falstaff does his duty well as the Mock King, undermining the ideals of the current monarch, and instilling in the heir a love of those habits that the real king abhors. Sadly, as a last duty, the Mock King must endure rejection by his former pupil and death; only then will the kingdom prosper, according to Marshall. He explains that “the tutor is thrown into prison by the pupil who has successfully mastered his lesson. Finally, the rejected but still devoted old tutor is killed or otherwise dies” (26). Upon Falstaff’s hasty demise in Henry V, the battle for France commences at Agincourt, the new king defeats the French despite incredibly unfavorable odds, and he wins the hand of the lovely Katherine, ushering in an era of unaccustomed glory for England.

With Scoufos, we’ve seen Falstaff in the relatively tame role as lampooner of the notorious Sir John Oldcastle. Marshall assigns him the duty of challenging the Real King’s status quo, and infusing the heir with a healthy love of habits and appetites unbefitting a monarch. Our last critic greatly expands Falstaff’s role as a mirror of the human condition. Rather than the image of one person, or even the image of a world archetype, Harold Bloom ambitiously argues that Falstaff reflects the image of the perfect immanent human.
Of all the theories we are analyzing, Harold Bloom advances the most radical. In his book, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Bloom credits Shakespeare with creating the modern human personality, mainly via the characters of Hamlet and Falstaff. He explains, “Falstaff and Hamlet are the invention of the human, the inauguration of personality as we have come to recognize it” (4). He further notes that “for Hamlet, the self is an abyss, the chaos of virtual nothingness. For Falstaff, the self is everything” (5). It is this “self is everything” philosophy of life that makes Falstaff so controversial. He seems to provoke either admiration or revulsion in his readers, but seldom a lukewarm response.

So, we either love him or hate him, but why? Bloom asserts that Falstaff teaches us “the perfection and virtual divinity of knowing how to enjoy our being rightfully” (293). Falstaff enjoys himself mentally, physically, and emotionally, refusing to let social mores hinder his continual pursuit of happiness. Those uptight stuffed shirts among us who pass their quick judgment would disagree with Falstaff’s epicurean morality. “Those who do not care for Falstaff are in love with time, death, the state, and the censor. They have their reward,” Bloom explains (288). They are rewarded when Hal, now Henry V, rejects, banishes, and imprisons the errant knight. At the end of *2 Henry IV*, Falstaff gets his comeuppance, and those who hate him are vindicated. Those who love Falstaff see things a little differently. He certainly pokes *Tim* at such institutions as time and the state, and even has the nerve to mock death, but lovers of Falstaff believe that such stuffy concepts deserve a little ribbing.

We could struggle with formulating an adequate description, but Bloom perhaps unwittingly defines Falstaff’s role in our world, stating that “*Henry IV, Part Two*, is *The Passion of Sir John Falstaff*, who exuberantly surges on to his humiliation and destruction by the brutal hypocrite, the newly crowned Henry V” (306). If *2 Henry IV* is the Passion of Falstaff, then surely he must be some sort of messiah. If so, what does he deliver us from? For starters, he saves us from our own seriousness and self-importance. Whenever those around him start taking themselves a little too seriously, he delivers a jest or gibe to keep them from getting carried away. If Jesus represents the ultimate transcendent human, eschewing earthly pleasures in preparation for eternal life in Heaven, then Falstaff must be the anti-Jesus, the ultimate immanent human who scorns fame, honor, virtue – even eternal salvation – for earthly pleasures.

Falstaff the Anti-Jesus disregards the promise of eternal life in Heaven in favor of a guilt-free, sack-and-capon-full immanent life. If we were not already convinced by his massive girth that Falstaff embraces
earthly pleasures, the tavern scene of 1 Henry IV confirms it. After much insult-hurling and general frivolity in the Eastcheap tavern, we obtain written proof of Falstaff’s appetites. When Hal and Peto rifle through the sleeping knight’s pockets, they find the damning evidence on a bill of credit. Hal exclaims, “O monstrous! But one halfpennyworth of bread to this intolerable deal of sack! [two gallons]” (2.4.527-8). At least Jesus gave as equal an importance to bread as he did to wine. Our Anti-Jesus offers no pretence for his gluttony.

Prior to marching off to Shrewsbury, Falstaff gives Bardolph an account of his virtue, or lack thereof. Facing more wars in defense of his king, Falstaff laments his shrunken condition, to which Bardolph exclaims, “Sir John, you are so fretful you cannot live long” (3.3.11). The knight replies,

> Why, there it is. Come, sing me a bawdy song; make me merry. I was as virtuously given as a gentleman need to be. Virtuous enough: swore little; diced not above seven times – a week; went to a bawdy-house not above once in a quarter – of an hour; paid money that I borrowed – three or four times; (3.3.12-18)

When faced with the prospects of marching off to war, he briefly contemplates repenting of his sins, but opts for a “bawdy song” to ease his soul’s unrest instead. While the common man chooses to repent in sackcloth and ashes with prayers of contrition, Falstaff opts for sack and bawdy songs in the tavern.

Whereas Jesus invited the destruction of his mortal life and embraced his eternal one, Falstaff chooses the opposite, proving to be annoyingly indestructible. During the battle of Shrewsbury, we catch a few glimpses of Falstaff’s particular brand of immortality. Upon discovering the dearly departed Walter Blount, Falstaff exclaims, “I like not such grinning honour as Sir Walter hath. Give me life, which if I can save, so. If not, honour comes unlooked for, and there’s an end” (5.3.59-62). Other soldiers might hasten their deaths, receiving their justly deserved honor, but Falstaff craves life – the more the better. He unapologetically loves living, providing a stark contrast to that morbid gunpowder Hotspur. Bloom rhetorically asks, “Are we to prefer Hotspur’s ‘die all, die merrily’?” (284), and the answer must be a resounding “Not on your life!”

Jesus proved his divinity by resurrecting himself on the third day after his crucifixion; Falstaff proves his humanity by refusing to die. Perhaps the most audacious act that Falstaff perpetrates is playing dead for that “hot termagant Scot,” Douglas (1 Henry IV 5.4.112). On the heels of Hotspur’s noble death, and Hal’s tribute to the fallen warrior,
Falstaff very dishonorably resurrects himself, offering the following explanation:

'Sblood, 'twas time to counterfeit, or that hot termagant Scot had paid me, scot and lot too. Counterfeit? I lie; I am no counterfeit. To die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man. But to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be no counterfeit but the true and perfect image of life indeed. The better part of valour is discretion, in the which better part I have saved my life.

(5.4.112-20)

Indeed, Sir John is the true and perfect image of life – immanent life. Those less enamored of Falstaff will recall at this point (with no small amount of indignation) that he freely admits, “I have led my ragamuffins where they are peppered; there’s not three of my hundred and fifty left alive” (1 Henry IV 5.3.35-7). How could he lead his men to their deaths and then fake his own death? Falstaff has such a cavalier attitude toward others’ deaths, and such a strong sense of self-preservation that many readers and viewers could rightly be disgusted by the knight’s cowardice. After all, he calls his conscripts “good enough to toss; food for powder, food for powder” (4.2.64-5). This apparent contradiction in Falstaff’s appraisal of life can be quite baffling. Bloom offers some solace: “Would it be more honorable if you tossed on a pike better-fed, better-clothed impressed men?” (311). The only difference between Falstaff and Westmoreland or Blount is that he makes no pretence about why his men are here: “They’ll fill a pit as well as better” (4.2.65-6), he offers. As much as it offends our sensibilities to watch Falstaff treat life so callously, we cannot lose sight of the fact that his are one hundred fifty out of thousands that will die at Shrewsbury while chasing that elusive honor. He just has the good sense to save himself from honor coming uninvited.

So, Falstaff the anti-Jesus teaches us to love our immanent lives, and not wait for the promised joys of the transcendent. Whereas God accounts for even the smallest sparrow, Falstaff loses track of his recruits, about whom he cared very little anyway. “How outrageous,” many readers might think. “What a horrible, fat, unapologetic coward!” Lest we forget, Falstaff never seeks our approval, and perhaps that is what irritates us the most about him.

As any good Anti-Jesus does in his Anti-Passion, Falstaff performs a few “miracles” along the way to “Jerusalem.” He manages to talk his way out of being arrested twice – upon meeting the Chief Justice during Act 1, Scene 2, and when Mistress Quickly presses him to pay his tavern debt before marching off to the wars. He also takes Sir Coleville, “a kind fellow [who] gavest [himself] away gratis” (4.3.67), without
lifting a finger. Before all is said and done, he even manages to talk a thousand pounds out of Justice Shallow, but he fails to perform one last miracle when he tells Shallow, “I will be the man yet that shall make you great” (5.5.89-90). Sadly, he cannot do this while banished ten miles from the royal person.

Our Anti-Jesus returns to Jerusalem on an ass, “stained with travel, and sweating with desire to see [Hal]” (5.5.24-5), who promptly banishes him and has “Pilate,” the Chief Justice, imprison him in the Fleet. The state has finally had enough of the gadfly buzzing around its ear and has swatted it away, which it has firmly intended to do ever since Act 1, Scene 2 of 1 Henry IV. Hal makes good on his promise to break through “the foul and ugly mists/Of vapours that did seem to strangle him” (1.2.192-3). As long as he causes no trouble, the Roman government allows Jesus to preach his gospel. But when he becomes a serious threat, he must be eliminated. So too does Hal turns a blind eye to Falstaff’s antics as long as they are relatively harmless. Bloom admiringly calls him “mocker of hypocritical ‘honour,’ parodist of noble butchery, defier of time, law, order, and the state” (305), all characteristics of a man that the state cannot suffer for long. After Henry IV dies and Hal throws off his “loose behaviour” (1.2.198) as promised, things become serious. Bloom notes that “Hal, who plays with the possibility of hanging Falstaff, doubtless would have executed his mentor at Agincourt if the antics performed at Shrewsbury had been repeated there. Instead, Bardolph swings as the master’s surrogate” (298). Shrewsbury and Gaultree occurred on Henry IV’s watch, but now that Henry V is king, there will be no such blaspheming of the royal battleground.

Bloom makes much of the fact that Shakespeare chose not to continue Falstaff into Henry V. He is not welcome in Henry V’s kingdom, and according to Bloom, Shakespeare “understood the magnitude of his creature” (314). Falstaff has no purpose in a jingoistic history play. Henry V represents everything that Falstaff scoffs at – honor, bravery, machismo, blind loyalty. Bloom concludes, “We need Falstaff because we have so few images of authentic vitalism, and even fewer persuasive images of human freedom” (314). If Jesus represents the perfect image of transcendence, then Falstaff represents, nay is, the perfect image of immanence, free from guilt, contrition, and self-loathing. Shakespeare emancipates Falstaff in Henry V, much like Jesus was emancipated at Calvary. The bard spares us the heartache, and Falstaff the indignity, of watching the death scene firsthand. How very civilized of him.

We have analyzed three critics who assign Falstaff very different roles, so how might we synthesize all three views of Falstaff into one coherent vision? The first logical step must certainly be discarding that which does not meet our needs. Heretofore, I have presented a fairly
straightforward synopsis of each critic’s argument along with textual support. Now would be the appropriate time to offer a brief criticism of each critic, figuratively separating the wheat from the chaff. Once we have gathered all of the necessary information, we can begin to construct our own version of Falstaff.

Alice-Lyle Scoufos presents a most convincing argument, backed with almost painstaking textual and historical evidence. It is widely accepted that Shakespeare originally named his character Oldcastle, and Scoufos argues very thoroughly that Falstaff exists to lampoon the rebel knight. Very little that she presents is indefensible. I am willing to accept her entire argument. The only footnote to her thesis is that I believe Falstaff represents much more than just the lampooning of a man, and that Shakespeare’s talents as the supreme creator of life-like stage roles was far greater than she gives him credit for. Falstaff is much larger than the stage Scoufos constructs for him to act on.

Marshall’s argument that Falstaff represents a universal archetype holds some credence. Falstaff fits the description of a Mock King perfectly. Furthermore, my entire paper (and more) could be devoted to outlining the differences between Henry IV and Falstaff. They quite neatly suit the roles of King and Mock King, respectively. Where Marshall loses my respect, however, is the way he presents his argument. He labels Falstaff the archetype, and then delves into antiquity to find examples that match the knight’s profile. It seems that, to be a true archetype, one must have been the first to do it. Marshall does admit that none of the historic figures he analyzes has all of Falstaff’s characteristics, yet it seems out of place to go back in relative history to find examples of an archetype. Marshall’s theory of Falstaff as the Mock King serves us very nicely, though. To elevate him to the realm of archetype seems overblown and unnecessary. We will discard the archetype myth and allow Falstaff to showcase his real talent — mocking those in power.

Harold Bloom is difficult to analyze because of the sheer volume of knowledge he has amassed on Shakespeare over the course of his career. It seems almost sacrilege to naysay him — but we will anyway. Bloom provides the most human vision of Falstaff (and rightly so, considering the title of his work), but it seems that he assigns the knight too large a role. Whether Falstaff and Hamlet are responsible for inventing the human being as we know it is highly debatable. One of many discussions I’ve had with a professor of Colombian upbringing shoots a wide hole in Bloom’s theory. When presented with the title of Bloom’s work, the professor asked, “Which humans?” to which I had no defense. Certainly, Bloom could not title his work “Shakespeare: The
Invention of the Anglo-Saxon” and expect to win much critical acclaim. His crime is the opposite of Scoufos’s. Whereas she gives him too little credit, Bloom gives Falstaff too much. To call Falstaff “the veritable monarch of language, unmatched whether elsewhere in Shakespeare or in all of Western literature” (294) raises a personal “cock-and-bull” alarm, as my hastily scrawled margin note of “Oh, really?” will attest to. We can accept that Falstaff is an image of “authentic vitalism” (314), but to ask him to invent the human is more than the fat knight could possibly be bothered to undertake. Falstaff generously provides ample insight into the human condition without having to write the book on it.

So, Falstaff is more than a lampoon and less than the übermensch; we can accept him as a Mock King, but not an archetype. He is definitely more human than the likes of Henry IV or his living-dead grandson, Henry VI (Hal personifies the Machiavel, but that subject waits patiently for another paper). The role that seems best suited for Falstaff is “Mocker of All Things Proper.” Surely all three critics presented here would agree on this universal title for Sir John. He’s never grander than when he ascends his joint-stool throne at Eastcheap, or when he leaps up from that gunpowder Percy’s side and defiles and steals the noble corpse. Tragedy might never be served up more bitterly than when Henry V silences the great wit with a curt “Reply not to me with a fool-born jest” (2 Henry IV 5.5.55). It causes us either great pains or supreme delight to witness the king of irreverence silenced by Hal. Whichever camp one wishes to reside in, pain or delight, Falstaff rarely fails to evoke strong emotion from his audience. Answering “Why does he affect us so strongly?” will help to solve the mystery that is Falstaff.

To put it quite simply, Falstaff pulls our pants down. He takes everything that we hold close and dear, and exposes it to everyone as the insignificance it really is. Our noble causes, bravery, loyalty - even our funny names and bodily oddities - are all grist for his mill. Thinness accounts for a large portion of his insults. Of course, Hal is a “starveling,” “eel-skin,” “dried neat’s tongue,” and the ever popular “bull’s pizzle” (1 Henry IV 2.4.238-9). In 2 Henry IV, Falstaff likens Justice Shallow to a “forked radish, with a head fantastically carved upon it with a knife” (3.2.305-6). “O, thou art a perpetual triumph, an everlasting bonfire-light!” (1 Henry IV 3.3.40-3) quite succinctly describes Falstaff’s views on Bardolph’s nose. If your name happens to be Pistol, Mouldy, Bullcalf, Shadow, or Feeble, in 2 Henry IV, forget about it. Just resign yourself to being fair game for Falstaff’s pun-fest. Obviously, not much is sacred around the fat knight. Whether accusing Doll of condemning many a man to burn in some venereal disease-infested hell, or calling his future king a “whoreson mad compound of majesty” (2 Henry IV 2.4.291), no one is safe from his witticisms.

To show no hard feelings, he pulls his own pants down, too.
He's remarkably well humored about his own massive girth. In the tavern scene of 1 Henry IV, when Hal asks, “How long is’t ago, Jack, since thou sawest thine own knee?” (2.4.319), the fat knight barely blinks an eye: “My own knee? When I was about thy years, Hal, I was not an eagle’s talon in the waist . . . A plague of sighing and grief, it blows a man up like a bladder” (2.4.320-2). Although we all know his thoughts on bravery, he has this to say regarding his own lack of it: “Though I could scape shot-free at London, I fear the shot here . . . God keep lead out of me; I need no more weight than mine own bowels” (1 Henry IV 5.3.30-35). He tends towards cowardice, but he is not afraid to admit it. Certainly, Sir John dishes out vast quantities of insults, but we can never accuse him of not being able to take one.

We also love or hate Falstaff because he wheels out a full-length mirror while our pants are down. What determines your love or hatred of him depends on your feelings about your own reflection. Falstaff is the human we all wish we could be – free from guilt and shame, fully in love with himself. Those Chief Justices among us gleefully impose upon Sir John the guilt and self-loathing they cannot emancipate themselves from. Bloom nicely sums up the enigmatic knight: “We all of us beat up upon ourselves; the sane and sacred Falstaff does not, and urges us to emulate him” (313). To know Falstaff is to love him; to love him is to scorn seriousness, propriety, honor, status – all the tools with which we measure up, and, unfortunately, tear down our fellow humans. The first step towards loving Falstaff is admitting that a little bit of him resides in everyone. Who among us really prefers the cold, unforgiving battleground of Shrewsbury to a nice, warm tavern or brothel? I thought so.

Works Cited