Examination and Mockery in *Henry IV, Part One*

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The "play extempore" that Prince Hal and Falstaff enact in Act II Scene 4 of *Henry IV, Part One,* is widely admired by critics as one of the most enjoyable, creative, and defining moments in the relationship between these two characters. News has just come to the tavern from King Henry's messenger that the prince "must to the court in the morning" (268).[1] The rebels in the North and West are taking to the field, and Henry is calling up the reserves, as it were, to meet the challenge. Falstaff remarks that Hal will be "horribly chid tomorrow" and urges him to "practice an answer." The prince seizes the opportunity to suggest a bit of play-acting: "Do thou stand for my father, and examine me upon the particulars of my life" (297-300). Falstaff, who is clearly something of a theater buff, immediately begins organizing the scene, collecting props, suggesting a way to simulate the effects of crying, and dictating the style of presentation. He will have a joint-stool for his throne, his hacked up dagger for a scepter, and a cushion for his crown; he will drink sack to make his eyes red; and he will deliver his lines in the bombastic manner of King Cambises, the title character of Thomas Preston's early Elizabethan tragedy (1570).

Falstaff's actual style is closer to that of John Lyly in *Euphues*, embellishing his text so much with balance, antithesis, alliteration, and references to proverbial natural history so that his meaning is nearly lost. He also displays a bit of the preacher in his biblical references to pitch that defiles and knowing the tree by its fruit. But the burden of his message, delivered in his assumed character as Henry IV, is one that we have come to expect: Prince Hal has a reputation as a waster of time, a frequenter of bad companions, and a thief; things not to be endured in a prince of the realm (318ff.). The actor Falstaff begins to peek through the mask of the character Henry IV when he qualifies his complaints about the company Hal keeps: "And yet there is a virtuous man whom I have often noted in thy company…a good portly man…his age

inclining to threescore...and now I remember me, his name is Falstaff....Him keep with, the rest banish" (332-41).

At this point Prince Hal objects: "Dost thou speak like a King? Do thou stand for me, and I'll play my father" (343-44). Falstaff responds with one of the sharpest puns in Shakespeare: "Depose me?" he asks, referring to his loss of his role as king in this little play but also glancing backward at Henry IV's deposing of Richard II and forward to that same Henry's fear, expressed in the next scene, that Hal will join forces with Hotspur and seek to depose his own father. It should be noted here that if there was anything that could not take place in a play (at least in print) during Elizabeth's reign, it was the deposing of a king, as Shakespeare knew well from the censoring of the deposition scene in his Richard II.[2] Apparently deposing a make-believe king was all right.

But "depose" has other meanings as well, both intransitive and transitive: to testify or bear witness, to swear to the truth of something; and to question or examine a witness, especially in a legal proceeding. Shakespeare has used "depose" in both these legal senses before in his history plays. In *Henry VI, Part Three*, the Duke of York has sworn an oath to let Henry VI reign in peace until his death. But his youngest son, Richard (later to become Richard III) argues that the oath was invalid because Henry had no authority over York, and therefore, "seeing 'twas he that made you to depose,/ Your oath, my lord, is vain and frivolous" (I.2.25-26). In *Richard II*, as Henry Bolingbroke approaches the lists to prove in arms the justice of his accusations against Thomas Mowbray, Richard instructs the Lord Marshal to question him about his name and reason for appearing, "And formally, according to our law,/ Depose him in the justice of his cause" (I.3.29-30).[3]

Surely Falstaff's use of "depose" reflects one of these legal senses as well, since he goes on to claim that he is, in fact, the better questioner than Hal: "If thou dost it [depose me] half so gravely, so majestically, both in word and matter, hang me up by the heels for a rabbit sucker or a poulter's hare" (345-47). I would suggest further that it is a particular kind of legal wrangling that Shakespeare is glancing at in this scene, and that its significance is signaled when Prince Hal tells Falstaff to "examine" him on the particulars of his life.

In an earlier article,[4] I proposed that Shakespeare developed a dramaturgical technique that I called the "examination scene," and that he based it on conventions and tropes found in the published examinations of Protestant and proto-Protestant martyrs, disseminated primarily through John Foxe's martyrology, *Acts and*

Monuments of the English Church. In its most developed form, the examination scene involves an accused person being brought before a powerful judge to be examined about actions and beliefs that, if continued, merit the death penalty. There may be an accuser who seeks justice or revenge against the accused, but frequently the accusation is arbitrary or unjust. The accused, often a woman, claims to be powerless and have no standing or ability to mount a defense, but then finds within herself a previously unsuspected power to speak and match wits with the judge. Frequently the judge is sympathetic, but claims to have no authority to change or mitigate the effects of either the law or his own sworn decision. Often the judge grants the accused time to meditate and repent or at least find the resources to extricate herself from her predicament. Frequently the examination scene sets up the terms for the final resolution of the play's conflict. As examples of examination scenes I cited the openings of *Comedy of Errors* and *Midsummer Night's Dream,* the questioning of Othello and Desdemona before the Senate, Lear's early confrontation with Cordelia, and Angelo's second interview with Isabella in *Measure for Measure.*

What I am proposing here is that the scene we have been looking at is also an examination scene, but that it does not take the conventions of the examination seriously; rather it makes a mockery of them. Because they are play acting, Prince Hal and Falstaff can switch around the roles of accused and judge, using them to score points off each other, and not take the outcome of the examination seriously.

It may seem something of a stretch to look for the source of this particular scene in Protestant polemical literature; certainly examination is a common enough concept that we don't need to look for any specific connection to the examinations of heretics. But before we dismiss the connection out of hand, it would be well if we remembered that the character who has come down to us as Falstaff in all the printed versions of Shakespeare's plays, was originally named Sir John Oldcastle, a knight who was commemorated in Protestant reformation polemical literature as a martyr.

Oldcastle appears to have served Henry IV capably in campaigns in Scotland, Wales, and France, and came to be good friends with Prince Hal during their joint service in Wales. In 1404, after the battle of Shrewsbury, he served in Parliament as a knight of the shire for Herefordshire and in 1408 he became sheriff. In 1409 he married Joan Cobham and acquired the right to be styled Lord Cobham and to attend the upper house, which he did

beginning in 1410. It was at about this same time that he began to run afoul of Church authorities on suspicion of heresy for harboring an unlicensed chaplain who was preaching the condemned doctrines of the Lollards, followers of the fourteenth century reformer John Wycliff.[5]

Bishops and secular authorities had become increasingly concerned with Lollardy after the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Heresy not only imperiled souls. "Its frequent links to sedition made its suppression even more urgent..... To rulers preoccupied with stability and acutely aware of its fragility, heterodoxy signified political unrest and war".[6] This urgency led Archbishop Arundel in 1396 to petition Richard II and Parliament for the power to burn heretics at the stake. It was not until 1401 under Henry IV that Parliament passed the statute *De Haeretico Comburendo,* and William Sawtrey, a Lollard priest, became the first heretic to be executed in England.

Lollard sympathizers in Parliament fought back in 1410, introducing measures that would modify the heresy statute and confiscate large portions of Church property. The measures failed, and during the Easter recess John Badby, a layman who denied the doctrine of transubstantiation, was burned at the stake. By March 1413, the last week of Henry IV's life, the reformers had become so troublesome that he called a convocation of bishops to deal with them. After his death, the convocation resumed in June and Oldcastle's troubles began in earnest. Charges of heresy were brought against him, and he was referred to the new King Henry V, who tried unsuccessfully to get him to submit to the bishops. His trial was held in September, and he refused to subscribe to the Church's doctrines of transubstantiation, auricular confession, adoration of the cross, and primacy of the pope. He was condemned but was granted a stay of forty days in which Arundel and Henry apparently hoped he could be made to recant. A formal retraction of his beliefs was printed, but it appears he refused to sign it.[7] In any event, he escaped from Tower prison in September and was implicated in the Lollard uprising on Twelfth Night, 1413. According to later indictments, the purpose of this massive gathering in St. Giles Field was to capture the royal family, "wholly...annul the royal estate as well as the estate of prelates and religious orders in England, and to kill the King, his brothers,...the prelates and other magnates of the kingdom, and to turn men of religion to secular occupations: totally to despoil cathedrals...and religious houses of their relics and other ecclesiastical goods, and to level them completely to the ground."

The man to be appointed regent was none other than Sir John Oldcastle.[8] King Henry managed to foil the plot, and put to death many of the conspirators, but Oldcastle was not apprehended until 1417, when he was carried to London, hung in chains in St. Giles Field, and burnt as a heretic.

Fifteenth century chroniclers generally depicted Oldcastle as a heretic and traitor whose elimination was necessary to stabilize both church and state. His adherence to heretical doctrines endangered people's souls and their hope of salvation; his attacks on king and clergy threatened the late medieval hierarchy on which the social order was seen to depend. With the spread of Reformation ideas in England during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI, historians John Hall, and even more decisively, Rafael Holinshead, began to back off from such harsh judgments of Oldcastle. Protestant polemicists such as William Tyndale, John Bale, and John Foxe decisively reinterpreted late medieval religious dissent as an unfinished proto-Reformation, and Oldcastle as one of its most important martyrs.

Shakespeare almost certainly borrowed the name Sir John Oldcastle from an old anonymous play called *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth,* first performed in 1588, registered with the Stationer's Company in 1594, but not printed until 1598, perhaps to cash in on the popularity of Shakespeare's then new Henry plays.[9] The Oldcastle of the *Famous Victories* plays a fairly minor role, participating in a robbery near Gad's Hill with Ned and the Prince, but displaying no signs of Falstaff's corpulence, cowardice, or comic wit. After that early scene he seems to be around only to express his desire that Henry IV die soon; but when he does, the much changed new King Henry V forbids Oldcastle, along with other knights, to come within ten miles of his person.

In fact the character that Shakespeare bestows on Falstaff borrows far more from the clown Derick in *Famous Victories* than from Oldcastle. Derick is a Carrier who has been robbed by Cuthbert Cutter, also known as Gadshill. Derick gives evidence against Cutter before the Lord Chief Justice, in the presence of Prince Hal, and he witnesses the scene in which Prince Hal boxes the Justice on the ear—a scene that is alluded to in Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part Two, but never dramatized.[10] Immediately afterward, Derick acts out the scene with John Cobbler, a London watchman who was also there, in a way that strongly resembles the "play extempore" enacted by Falstaff and Prince Hal. Derick says, "'Faith, John, I'll tell the what; thou shalt be my Lord Chief Justice, and thou shalt sit in the chair; and I'll be the young prince, and hit thee

a box on the ear.... John responds, "Come on; I'll be your judge! But thou shalt not hit me hard?"[11] As they reenact the scene, the humor derives largely from their falling out of character, and from the knockabout business of the box on the ear. But there is no mistaking that it inspired Shakespeare to the far funnier, subtler, and also more serious scene that he assigns to Prince Hal and Falstaff.

Although Shakespeare probably took the name Oldcastle directly from the *Famous Victories*, he was certainly aware of the historical figure, who appears also in the narrative sources of his history plays—the chronicle histories of John Hall and Raphael Holinshead, and the ecclesiastical history of John Foxe. And he must have been aware that the story of Oldcastle was a hotly contested one. Sir John was either a dangerous heretic who threatened true doctrine and the king's person; or he was a steadfast and valiant reformer who died at the hands of vengeful clerics who misled and deceived the king. This is what politicians today call a wedge issue. You could not have it both ways. As Brad Gregory puts it: "More dramatically than sermons, catechisms, or common worship, martyrdom trumpeted what was at stake in disputes over the content and practice of true Christianity;"[12] or as Thomas Freeman maintains more succinctly, "Martyrdom was perhaps the most extreme form of mimesis": any man willing to imitate the sacrificial act of Jesus, even to the death, for his specific beliefs, focuses the minds of his witnesses in a remarkably powerful way.[13]

The majority of critics maintain that Shakespeare and/or the Lord Chamberlain's men removed Oldcastle's name from the printed versions of the plays because of objections from Oldcastle's wife's descendants Sir William Brooke and his son Henry, the sixteenth century's Lords Cobham. Presumably they did not want to see their ancestor's husband parodied as a drunken coward, and since they had oversight of the licensing of plays, they were able to force the issue. So Oldcastle became Falstaff in every printed edition of the play until Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor restored Oldcastle's name in the 1986 Oxford edition of the complete plays, forcing scholars to face once again the historicity of the Falstaff character.[14]

It seems to me that the Brooke family were probably not the only segment of Elizabethan society who might object to Shakespeare's portrayal of Oldcastle. During the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward, and Elizabeth, the English Church had rejected the doctrines of transubstantiation, auricular confession, adoration of images, and papal supremacy; in fact, through the 1580s and into

the 90s, missionary Catholic priests were being executed by Elizabeth's government as traitors for preaching exactly those doctrines. Would Shakespeare, then, deliberately manipulate the character of the historical Oldcastle, knowing the kind of political firestorm it might create?

The answer must remain conjectural, but I think there is good reason to believe that he did. For one thing, there is external evidence collected by Taylor and Wells, and summarized by Susan Hodgdon in her edition of the play, that even though Oldcastle's name never appeared in the printed record, "it was apparently retained in court and private performances—another form of publication—and audiences certainly continued to identify Oldcastle with Falstaff... well into the seventeenth century."[15] But more important to literary critics is the internal evidence that Shakespeare frequently depicts Falstaff in ways that suggest features of Oldcastle's life and death. In the examination scene that I began this article with, when Hal has taken Falstaff's place acting Henry IV, he unleashes a stream of comic invective that includes a metaphorical epithet depicting Falstaff as "that roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly" (II.iv.360-61). This verbal image bears an uncanny and unsettling resemblance to the woodcut in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* which depicts the 1417 martyrdom of Oldcastle.[16] He hangs from a large wooden frame by chains around his lower thighs, his belly, and his neck, facing upward and raising his hands toward heaven with burning faggots of sticks or reeds piled below him and the flames licking upward and beginning to engulf his body. Soldiers, prelates, and townspeople surround him as two men tend the fire. It could easily be a scene from the popular Manningtree fair in Essex, with revelers gathering around waiting for an ox to finish roasting. This possible allusion to the image of Oldcastle's martyrdom is strengthened by references to Falstaff as roast meat. As J. Dover Wilson pointed out 60 years ago, Hal summons Falstaff into the Boar's Head with the words, "Call in ribs, call in tallow," summoning up the image of "roast Sir Loin-of-Beef, gravy and all." He goes on to suggest that human sweat was "likewise thought of as fat, melted by the heat of the body," as Falstaff on Gad's Hill "sweats to death, and lards the lean earth, as he walks along."[17]

But where does Shakespeare stand with respect to the contested history of Oldcastle: does he portray him as heretic and traitor, or reformer and martyr. The answer, I believe, is neither. Shakespeare was seldom interested in historical accuracy in his presentation of characters: ask members of the Richard III society. What

Shakespeare does, I think, is attack the image of Oldcastle the martyr in order to make some important points about martyrdom and its place in the religious and political realm of Elizabethan England.

Shakespeare's Oldcastle/Falstaff is no martyr. His vanity, gluttony, and drunkenness mark him as a sinner, and his cowardice in the face of death or injury confirms the case. He runs away from Hal and Poins on Gad's Hill, then makes up a ridiculous story to justify himself. When appointed to command troops in the battle against the rebels, he undermines his sovereign's cause to line his own pockets, has no regard for his men, and shows up on the battlefield at Shrewsbury with a bottle of sack in his case instead of a pistol. Brad Gregory points out that one conceptual requirement for martyrdom is that there must be people willing to die for their beliefs.[18] Falstaff's attitude toward dying for a cause is perfectly summed up in his Act V soliloquy after he has risen from his apparent death at the hands of Douglas: "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 valor is discretion, in the which better part I have saved my life" (V.4.115-18).

The true martyr in *Henry IV, Part One*, is Hotspur, who has all the temperament to die for a cause and is offered up to his father and uncle's ambition. When we first encounter Hotspur, he jousts verbally with King Henry about the status of his prisoners, refusing to turn them over unless the King will ransom his brother-in-law Mortimer, whom he believes has fought valiantly for Henry against the Welsh. When Henry dismisses him and orders him to speak no more of Mortimer, Hotspur burst out to Northumberland and Worcester:

> Speak of Mortimer?
> . . . . . .
> Yea, on his part I'll empty all these veins,
> And shed my dear blood drop by drop in the dust,
> But I will lift the downtrod Mortimer
> As high in the air as this unthankful king...(I.iii.130-36)

This willingness to die for a just cause is one of the earmarks of martyrs. Also like a martyr, he takes his uncle and father to task for having abandoned the true king Richard for "this canker Bolingbroke" and urges them to repent and make amends:

> Yet time serves wherein you may redeem
> Your banished honors and restore yourselves
> Into the good thoughts of the world again... (180-82)

He sees it as his role to

> dive into the bottom of the deep,
> . . . . . .
> And pluck up drowned honor by the locks,
> So he that doth redeem her thence might wear
> Without corrival all her dignities. (203-07)

Later, when an unidentified correspondent questions the practicality of the plot that his family has undertaken against the King, his response turns to religious based bigotry, calling the man "a pagan rascal,... an infidel." And when Owen Glendower tries to impress him with the portents that attended his birth and his miraculous powers, even extending to calling up spirits and commanding the devil, Hotspur rebukes him as a good Wycliffite might have:

> If you have power to raise him, bring him hither,
> And I'll be sworn I have power to shame him hence.
> O, while you live, tell truth and shame the devil! (III.i.57-59)

Later still, when it appears that his father and Glendower will not be able to join him in the field, and the prospect looks bleak, he welcomes the prospect of dying, "Doomsday is near; die all, die merrily" (IV,i.134). This willingness to die, this confidence in the righteousness of one's cause, this willingness to call those who question your beliefs infidels and pagans—these are some of the characteristics of martyrs, and though chivalry, like martyrdom, has a romantic appeal to the purer side of our nature, it is not ultimately a good basis for the creation of stable governments.

At a time when the Elizabethan religious and political compromise was in danger from both Catholics and Reformers, there was no room for martyrs who threatened the stability of the realm. The valiant and headstrong Hotspur is more like the historical Oldcastle, and the future Henry V sacrifices him as surely as his historical predecessor sacrificed Oldcastle. Shakespeare uses Oldcastle to get his audience thinking of martyrdom in its historical context, then makes Falstaff such a winning rogue as an anti-martyr of mockery that the audience will reject the simple either/or of the religious and political zealots and begin to see life in its complexity, as Prince Hal does while he moves through the various stages of his preparation for kingship. As for Falstaff, as the epilogue from *Henry IV, Part Two*, expresses it, "Oldcastle died martyr, and this is not the man."

Notes

1. All line references to *Henry IV, Part One*, are to Barbara Hodgdon, *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth: Texts and Contexts*, text edited by David Bevington (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1997).
2. The first three quartos of Richard II were printed without the deposition scene in Act IV, which did not appear until the fourth quarto in 1608. Showing the deposition scene on stage could be controversial, too. In 1601 friends of the Earl of Essex commissioned a special performance of Richard II on the night before Essex arrived in London in an unsuccessful attempt to usurp the throne from Elizabeth. One of the company's shareholders was called before the Privy Council to testify about the circumstances of this performance. See the introduction to Richard II in Stanley Well, Gary Taylor, et al. (eds.) *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 413, and Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents*, 2nd ed. (Boston and New York, Bedford/St. Martins, 2001), pp. 124-25, 140.
3. Shakespeare also uses "depose" in both these senses later in his career. In *Measure for Measure*, when Angelo tries to trick Isabella into agreeing sleep with him to by questioning her about the nature of sin and the law, he says:

   > Then I shall 'pose you quickly.
   > Which had you rather: that the most just law
   > Now took your brother's life, or, to redeem him,
   > Give up your body to such sweet uncleanness
   > As she that he hath stained? (II.4.51-55)

   Later in the same play, Marianna testifies to Duke Vincentio that Isabella's accusations against Angelo are false, because she is prepared to swear that he was with her at the time:

   > [She]charges him, my lord, with such a time
   > When I'll depose I had him in mine arms
   > With all th' effect of love. (V.1.194-96)

   Citations from *Henry VI, Part Three*, are from John D. Cox and Eric Rasmussen, *King Henry VI, Part 3* (London, Arden Shakespeare, 2001). Citations from *Richard II* and *Measure for Measure* are from the Oxford Complete Works.
4. David Crosby, "Shakespeare's Use of Examinations in *Measure for Measure*," *Journal of the Wooden O Symposium*, Vol. III (2003), pp. 23-35.
5. This summary of Oldcastle's career is indebted to Alice-Lyle Scoufos, *Shakespeare's Typological Satire: A Study of the Falstaff-Oldcastle Problem* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1979), pp. 45-56.
6. Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 88.
7. Scoufos, pp. 49-50.
8. Hodgdon, p. 351.
9. Hodgdon, p. 291. Both Hodgdon and David Scott Kastan accept that the anonymous *Famous Victories of Henry V* served as a dramatic source for Shakespeare as he was writing the Henry IV plays. See Kastan, ed., *King Henry IV, Part 1* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2002), pp. 342-43.

10. *Henry IV*, I.2.194-95. Oxford Collected Works.
11. *The Oldcastle Controversy: Sir John Oldcastle, Part I and The Famous Victories of Henry V*, ed. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), V.95-97,99.
12. Gregory, p. 176.
13. Thomas Freeman , "The Importance of Dying Earnestly: The Metamorphosis of the Account of James Bainham in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*," in *The Church Retrospective*. Ed. R.N. Swanson. (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1997). 267-288. Freeman goes on to quote the somewhat irreverent statement by Donald Kelley that martyrdom is "*imitatio Christi* with a vengeance." Donald R. Kelley, "Martyrs, Myths and the Massacre: the Background to St. Bartholomew, AHR 77 (1972), 1328.
14. For a statement of the evidence and reasoning behind the decision of the Oxford editors see Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).
15. Hodgdon, p. 350.
16. The woodcut is reproduced in Hodgdon, p. 361.
17. J. Dover Wilson, "Falstaff and the Plan of *Henry IV, Part I*," reprinted from *The Fortunes of Falstaff* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1944), pp. 15-35, in James L. Sanderson, ed., *Henry the Fourth, Part I* (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1969), p. 269.
18. See Gregory for a summary of four conceptual requirements for martyrdom, pp. 26-29.