

Plump Jack

A wise scholar has said that the real protagonist of the plays from which Plump Jack is drawn is neither Hal nor Falstaff, but the English people. We see an age in which war, peril and treason crowd everywhere, but in which spite and malaise cannot be imagined. There are no villains in the three plays, nor even a single unsympathetic character.

A chief theme is the conflict between the worlds of impulse and responsibility. Falstaff and Hal are large enough to be at home in both, but must take the main roles in the struggles between them. In the end Shakespeare endorses both worlds and both men, and so should we. We are meant to love Falstaff, and yet support every word of Hal's renunciation of him. Whether we humanly can do both these things has been much debated, but there is no doubt Shakespeare intended us to. It may be relevant that the defeat of the Armada was of very recent memory when the three plays were written, and that English audiences might have been willing then to give old friends' feelings a low priority against the soundness of the state.

And soundness of the state is the real issue of Falstaff's banishment, rather than any hollow "confirmation conversion: of Hal to establishment mores. Shakespeare takes pains to reassure us of this. Hal's wooing of Katherine in Henry V king after the banishment will be set in unbuttoned prose, full of humor and self-deprecation. Hal has not lost the common touch. He is never a prig, but rather always a king who does his duty to old friends and strangers even-handedly.

For Shakespeare's audience Henry V was one of the greatest Englishmen in history, and the three plays are built around this perception. Never mind that historians today take a dimmer view of him. What matters is that the plays and Plump Jack can't work if Hal loses our respect at any point, particularly in the banishment scene. He will lose it if he pulls his punches there. He must chill Falstaff to the bone without the least indication that he either enjoys the business or is squeamish about it. In particular, he must not smile. He must leave the crowd desperately glad they are not Falstaff, and convinced that they have a great and fair king. No doubt the scene plays easier, in an antiheroic age, if Hal is shown as a demagogue whose latent mean streak has been brought out by power. But it cheats Shakespeare and it cheats the audience in the end.

The court scenes are all gravity and melancholy, while the scenes in Eastcheap and Gloucestershire are all zest and sunshine. Stanislavsky must be forgotten when we enact the latter. The Falstaffian men are built on familiar theatrical models, but exalted and ennobled by genius. Pistol is the scowling miles gloriosus and blowhard, always in character. He must exaggerate his Gasconry to convince us of his harmlessness. Think of a college cutup playing Yosemite Sam. Better still, see Robert Newton's Pistol in Olivier's movie of Henry V. Shallow is the soul of Merry England, the glad-hand undepressable opposite of Pistol. Think of Mister Magoo.

Hostess has more dimension. By giving her some lines of Doll Tearsheet, I have cobbled together a romantic history and love duet between Hostess and Falstaff, which does not

exist in the plays. She can be as shrill as a fishwife in firing up the constables, and then otherworldly in recollecting moments of tenderness. Hostess and Shallow must draw tears as well as laughter.

Falstaff is all the world. We must meet him at the top of his game; outwitting his arresters, winning the crowd, pulling the Chief Justice's beard and borrowing another ten pounds for good measure. His next scene, at Gad's Hill, is the endearing opposite. Here Falstaff is flustered, flummoxed and apoplectic as Hal and Boy play their tricks on him. It makes little difference whether Falstaff is really fooled or pretending, since the scene plays and registers about the same either way. It is at Gad's Hill that we love Falstaff most.

Love him we must, since all who know him do. He is loved, and mourned in the end, as much as Hamlet or Brutus or Lear. "Falstaff, he is dead", says Pistol, "and we must yearn therefore." "He's in Arthur's bosom", says Hostess, even though she never saw a farthing back from him. Bardolph adds the most beautiful tribute of all: "Would I were with him, wheresome'er he is, either in heaven or in hell." Before Shakespeare and Falstaff, the world was not accustomed to comic figures who aroused feelings of that kind. A great performer can show us why this one does.

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