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## Falstaff's Nadir

'Why, Hal, 'tis my vocation, Hal; 'tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation' says Falstaff, justifying a life of sloth, knavery, and indulgence. As usual, Shakespeare's best-loved rogue gets a laugh but this comment is more than a slice of banter, a wisecrack shared with Prince Hal. Here, Falstaff perverts a key *doxa* of popular early modern English religion: the Protestant commonplace originating in 1 Corinthians 7 but familiar to sixteenth-century readers and audiences through the 'Homily Against Idleness' from the second *Book of Homilies* (1571):

[B]y the ordinance of God which he hath set in the nature of man, everyone ought, in his lawful vocation and calling, to give himself to labour, and that idleness, being repugnant to the same ordinance, is a grievous sin and also, for the great inconveniences and mischiefs which spring thereof, an intolerable evil.

In a characteristic verbal sleight, Falstaff manages to parody the message of the homily, co-opt its structure and invert its form. It is no exaggeration to read Falstaff's life as one long 'Homily Against Vocation'. Or, to put a subversive spin on it, Falstaff dissolves the homiletic opposition between pious 'vocation' and the 'intolerable evil' of 'idleness'. In transposing – or, to borrow a favourite Falstaffian epithet, counterfeiting – idleness into a form of 'labour', Falstaff takes what the homily condemns as 'ease and rest' for a legitimate, if unchristian vocation. In the 17 short pages of the lyric-essay *Falstaff: Apotheosis* Pierre Sanges, translated wonderfully by Jacob Siefring, offers an effusive defence of the crowning act of Falstaff's torpid vocation: the moment he 'play[s] dead on the battlefield'.

The 'battlefield', of course, is at Shrewsbury in 1403, and the belligerents are, on the one hand, the forces of King Henry IV, lead by Prince Hal and, on the other, Henry Percy's rebels. Falstaff plays dead to avoid certain death at the hands of the Earl of Douglas. While Falstaff lies idle, Hal kills Hotspur in a duel. When the coast is clear, Falstaff leaps up



and stabs the lifeless Hotspur through the thigh: ‘I’ll make him sure, yea, and I’ll swear I killed him’.

As Siefring explains in his ‘Translator’s Afterword’, ‘each of Senges’s books takes part in an ironic dialogue with one or more literary touchstones, usually drawn from the canon of western literature’. This is a time-proven conceit cribbed from, among others, Jorge Louis Borges, each of whose texts, as Italo Calvino puts it, ‘doubles or multiplies its own space through the medium of other books belonging to a real or imagined library’. In Senges’s case, the idea shades from method into obsession. *Achab (séquelles)* (2015) is a novel about what Captain Ahab did next (what any sensible person would, of course: sell his story to Broadway and Hollywood). *Fragments of Lichtenberg* (2007; translated by Siefring 2017) hilariously imagines the futile scholarly effort to bring order to over 8,000 fragments left behind by the eighteenth-century German physicist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg. The early modern period, in particular, has furnished Senges with ample material. Macbeth, both person and play, inspires *Sort l’assassin, entre le spectre* (2015), whilst *The Major Refutation* (2004; translated by Siefring in 2016) ‘translates’ sixteenth-century Cantabrian chronicler Antonio de Guevara’s ‘Epistle to Charles V’, which vociferously denied the existence of the New World. As Siefring says here, Senges’s works are ‘intertextual and even parasitic [...] joined to other literary works at their premise’.

In taking Falstaff as a ‘touchstone’, Senges inserts himself into a long line of intertextual ‘parasit[es]’ riffing on Shakespeare’s much-loved drunkard. William Kenrick’s 1766 play *Falstaff’s Wedding*, James White’s *Falstaff’s Letters* (1796), and novels by Robert Brought (1858) and Robert Nye (1976) pick up Shakespeare’s literary threads. In music, Falstaff has featured in operas and librettos by Salieri, Balfe, Nicolai, Verdi, Elgar, Holst, and Vaughan Williams. On screen, Bob Pigeon takes up a Falstaffian role in Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), a loose adaptation of the Henriad. Volstagg, a ludicrous mish-mash of Nordic myth and Falstaffian carousing originally invented by Stan Lee for the Marvel comic books, appeared in the execrable *Thor* films (2011–2017).

As David Scott Kastan points out in his edition of the play, *1 Henry IV* ‘was almost immediately both a literary and a theatrical triumph’, its initial and ‘continued popularity’ down to the ‘comic action’ in general



‘and, in particular, the character of Falstaff’. Between 1598 and 1650 nine editions of the play were published. On the title page of the first quarto, the play advertises ‘the humorous conceits of Sir John Falstaff’ to entice prospective readers. In 1640, more than a generation after Falstaff first graced the stage, Leonard Digges said that whilst Ben Jonson’s plays failed to draw a crowd large enough to cover the costs of staging, ‘Let but Falstaff come, / Hal, Poins, the rest, you scarce shall have a room’. Samuel Pepys was disappointed upon seeing the play in 1660, but only because his ‘expectation’ had been ‘too great’. Besides, that didn’t stop Pepys returning to see it another four times. In 1784, the English writer Thomas Davies said that, ‘in the opinion’ of ‘all the best critics, the First Part of *Henry IV* is, of all our author’s plays, the most excellent’. W.H. Auden found it ‘difficult to imagine that a historical play as good as *Henry IV* will ever again be written’. The carousing, troublemaking, and ever-drinking friend and confidant to the future Henry V, Falstaff has fascinated audiences, authors, and artists for four hundred years. He spends most of his time telling tall tales, borrowing money he has no intention of ever paying back and running up outrageous tabs at the Boar’s Head Inn in Eastcheap. Repose, rest, and roguery form the triptych of an idle vocation.

Senges’s fascination with Falstaff, then, should come as no surprise. *Apotheosis*, in the original post-classical Latin, meant ‘deification’ and, in a later Christian context, the ‘ascent to heaven of a saint’. Given the hagiographical tone of Senges’s text, published in the original French in 2012 in the Quebec literary journal *Les écrits*, there are two apotheoses at work here. On the one hand, there is Falstaff, whose counterfeit death Senges praises the ‘highest act of heroism’. On the other, there is *Falstaff: Apotheosis*, which is itself a performative apotheosis or deification of its subject. ‘Falstaff is a harbinger, when the dinner bell rings, for the resurrection of glorious bodies’ says Senges, admixing solemnity with bare ludic cheek to silently, obliquely, compare Shakespeare’s corpulent rogue with another notorious resurrectee: Jesus Christ.

For Senges ‘there is nothing dishonorable about playing dead’ and ‘that in such circumstances as these, it is, on the contrary the highest act of heroism’ because what could be more heroic than ‘to be the master



of one's own death'? Falstaff attains to a 'tranquility' reminiscent of 'the tantric arts', 'drops his gesticulations of a master-at-arms and enacts a resolutely imperturbable stillness', and assumes 'the immobility of the wise man', a mode of being he has until now only aped full clownishly with a wink and a knowing ruddy smile. Drawing on Falstaff's predilection for dissembling and impersonation, Senges says 'the man who subtly counterfeits a corpse reconciles himself to his predictable end, an end devoid of fantasy, a death hardly embellished'. Seen in this way, to fake death is not to avoid it but to confront mortality head-on, shorn of its fearful power and exposed in all its dull and earthly banality. Fans of a lie-in are in illustrious company, for 'acting as a dead man in between two merciless duel scenes [...] provides an occasion for John Falstaff to restore the oft-maligned nap to its former glory'. After all:

How many different ways did Sir John Snooze and Snore lie down under the watchful gaze of the God of Genesis? on his back, on his stomach, on his side, sated, worried, drunk, nervous as a fresh shoot, in the early hours, at the shepherd's dawn, after the noon meal, or early in the evening, like a verger if three white nights got the better of him? There were fraudulent naps, sinful naps, [...] naps of pure form, naps of complacency, naps that were the unforeseen prolongation of meditation, naps to escape chagrin, others to try to better define it, pendular naps, status naps, stormy naps, snatching of naps, iambic pentameter naps.

Viewed in the fresh light of Senges's playful reading and self-consciously baroque language, the nap, epitome of the idle vocation, lays the ground for the 'heroic' 'stratagem' of playing dead, a tactic 'rife with meaning': 'victory deferred, mockery and diversion, non-violent wisdom, watercolorist's restraint, dandyish nonchalance, composure of the stoic sage, unmoving harmony with the surrounding landscape, composition and performance combined, a silent role bursting through the screen.'

According to Senges, Falstaff's nap is 'a motionless danse macabre, a trick played on death itself by adopting all its outward attributes in a parodic mode, but with the highest solemnity' and 'the mind-boggling



marriage of clowncraft and the macabre'. Yet, for all Senges's panegyric, the moment of Falstaff's 'apotheosis' is actually his nadir. Senges points out that Falstaff's death-playing runs counter to form: 'For once, he keeps silent, he falls right over, he doesn't put on any airs or spend a whole hour pretending to die.' The distinctly unfalstaffian execution of the mock-mortality is, as Senges says, 'precisely what fools his opponent'. At the pinch point, then, our hero enacts the most dishonourable of escapations, the most audacious shirking of responsibility in dodging the obligation to die, the culmination of the unchristian vocation of idleness, by erasing himself in all his Falstaffiness. To be silent, still, renounce attention, and recede into the background is resolutely, radically unfalstaffian. The moment of Falstaff's playing dead is, in fact, the very antipathy of what Senges later praises as 'Falstaff the ultrasignificant', the 'Falstaffianly Falstaffian Falstaff'. Falstaff may pull off the most impudent hoax by fulfilling his vow to a life of idleness to cheat death, but in order to do so he must temporarily redact and oblivate the bombast, the swagger, the blaggardism, the indignation, the weasel-tongue, and the verbal trickery that define him.

Of course, as Senges says, when the battle is done, Falstaff returns to his old tricks, safely ensconced in the best nook of the inn, calling for another sack of mead and taking 'leisure to weave stories into the original story, especially added repartee' and fabricating 'material with which to riff, riff, riff' and spin a base cowardice into 'highest act of heroism'. But in the very moment of the apparent apotheosis, Falstaff sinks to his nadir. Above all, to fulfil his life's idle vocation, Falstaff must stoop, not rise, to conquer, and relinquish everything that makes Falstaff Falstaff. Senges's text is nevertheless brilliant. It wears its learning lightly without being bookish, it is lined with delightfully vaunted, arch-Baroque constructions without being tortured, and stands as both a playful and seriously important 'touchstone' in the afterlife of one of literature's best-loved and most contested figures.

