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Stage Props of Natural Nobility: Falstaff’s Possessions as Identity in *I Henry IV*

Written in the late sixteenth century, William Shakespeare’s *I Henry IV* centers on a medieval king who has usurped the crown and must contend with an heir, Prince Hal, that appears to reject the chivalrous nature exhibited by the family’s domestic enemies. This father and son conflict intersects into Hal’s relationships with Sir John Falstaff and the people of Eastcheap, as he attempts to develop his own identity as a future king while balancing the legacy his father desires. As a result, the audience is left considering what these central characters truly believe about nobility and birthright.

In “The Primacy of Natural Nobility in the Cambridge *Octavian,*” Ryan Naughton considers the implications of an ideology known as natural nobility within medieval literature. As defined by Naughton, natural nobility “is the medieval notion that a person who is born into the upper class has certain innate characteristics, including handsomeness or beauty, a sense of honor, proper deportment, courteous manners, etc., precisely *because* he or she comes from noble lineage” (343). He claims this medieval ideology is a more multifaceted subject than previously believed because of its infiltration into the “social, political and economic functions…[within] the very fabric of chivalrous society” (344). Historically, Henry IV ruled England from 1367-1413 and during that time the noble classes were changing. The Black Death of 1348-49 and the emergence of knighthood earned from battlefield bravery combined to alter the makeup of the elite classes and definitions of nobility. Those who ascribed to the idea of natural nobility believed that only men who could prove noble lineage, and were therefor born noble, should be knighted. They opposed the ideas that one could earn the inherent qualities associated with nobility (Naughton 346-47).

While it is apparent that Hal and his father are both struggling with questions of legitimacy and power, the character of Sir John Falstaff, who is sometimes reduced to a simple gluttonous thief and theatrical clown, also presents a unique opportunity to consider the concept of natural nobility. Appearing in three of Shakespeare’s plays (and mentioned in a fourth), we are never informed of how or when John Falstaff became Sir John Falstaff. The character is given the title “sir” as a medieval knight; yet, he lacks the inherent chivalrous nature and discipline attributed to the upper class. As a result, he is described by Jean Howard in *The Norton Shakespeare’s* introduction to the play as “utterly indifferent to the decorum expected of a knight of advanced years” (1166). Of course, not all nobles were chivalrous, brave or honorable, and by the Renaissance period, wealth and social status, did not solely depend on ancestral lineage but could also be achieved through commercial success in the urban class. For purposes of this essay, I assume Falstaff’s knighthood by birth designates him as member of the noble class within the play, despite the fact he is seemingly unwilling to prove his knighthood through chivalrous deeds or courteous manners. Seen in this light, Falstaff may depend on the inherited birthright to define his identity and as such, the character could be presenting questions about the validity of the medieval belief of natural nobility.

One way of considering these questions is by looking at the stage props Falstaff uses and relies on in relationship to Hal and the others in his social circle. In his essay, “Othello’s Black Handkerchief,” Ian Smith argues that theatrical stage props that are considered a character’s possessions become more than objects. Smith asserts that significance should be attributed to objects closely associated with characters by considering their meaning both in the written period where in the play is set and the period in which the play is performed. Smith explains that this “cultural identity” can make the stage props “assume different functions and manifest different identities at various stages in their social circulation up to and including their transition into the theater space” (3).

In relation to Falstaff, Shakespeare gives us a unique set of possessions and stage props that might typically be ignored, but on closer examination may be outward extensions of Falstaff’s identity. When these objects are considered in relation to the question of natural nobility, Falstaff may not emerge “utterly indifferent” to knightly propriety as Howard suggests, but rather as a man who relies on objects and façade to support his elevated status within society. In this essay, I will show how the food bills found in his pockets, the questionable value and form of his inherited ring, and the nature of his personal weapons all provide insights into the potential outward representation of natural nobility in the character of Sir John Falstaff.

In early modern England, food and drink consumption could reveal “economic circumstances [and] social aspirations” (Fitzpatrick 74). After Falstaff falls asleep behind a curtain while Prince Hal protects him from the sheriff, Peto is instructed to go through his pockets where he finds “[n]othing but papers, my Lord” (2.4.485). These apparently insignificant stage props reveal a great deal about Falstaff. Among other notations, these papers include the following list of purchases:

“*Item*: a capon, 2 shillings, two pence. *Item*: sauce, four

pence. *Item*: sack, two gallons, 5 shillings, eight pence. *Item*:

anchovies and sack after supper, two shillings, six pence.

*Item*: bread, oh” (2.4.487-90)

Hal, upon reviewing what appear to be bills, is primarily shocked with the ratio of sack to food, “But one halfpennyworth of bread to this intolerable deal of sack?” (2.4.491-92), but the specific items listed on the bills may suggest more than Falstaff’s gluttonous drinking or overspending on alcohol. Although it is unclear if the bills have been paid, an examination of the quality of food, and not the quantity purchased, suggests a man who might be trying to present his social status through consumable products.

In *Digesting Falstaff: Food and Nation in Shakespeare's Henry IV Plays,* Joshua Fisher explains that although imported foods were more available in late sixteenth and early seventieth century England, not all social classes could afford them (8). After 1587, when Sir Francis Drake captured 2,900 pipes of sherry from a Spanish fleet, drinking sack was considered an “act of patriotism” (Fischer 12). Thus, the fact that Falstaff appears to only drink sack (and in large quantities) may suggest he wanted to appear patriotic or believed sack was a drink consumed by the upper class.

The correlation between food and class is also reflected in Falstaff’s purchase of capons and anchovies. Defined as a “castrated cock” (*OED*, capon, n.), a capon was typically a fat bird and often associated with the higher ranks of society (Fitzpatrick 78). This is the fourth time in the play Falstaff’s enjoyment of capons is referenced and the bill provides extended proof of this attachment. The consumption of anchovies is also revealing because according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this is the earliest recorded use of the word. Anchovies are “[a] small fish of the Herring family found on the European coasts, especially in the Mediterranean, where it is extensively caught, and pickled for exportation” (*OED*, anchovy, n.). Perhaps this was a new food imported from the coasts of Spain in early modern England, and its uniqueness likely suggested an exotic quality. Falstaff’s consumption of this fish becomes representative of someone in the upper class. When the items listed on the bills are examined for what they might reveal about social status, they become more than papers found in Falstaff’s pockets and suggest a man who might use drink and food to help establish his noble and superior nature.

Falstaff’s concern about his missing “seal ring” presents an additional example of stage prop possessions informing identity. In the third act, Falstaff claims he had his pocket picked while he slept behind a curtain in the tavern. Falstaff blames the tavern’s Mistress Quickly, “I have lost a seal ring of my grandfather’s worth forty mark” (3.3.74). The existence of the ring is not contested, but the Mistress disagrees with its value, “I have heard the Prince tell him, I know not how oft, that that ring was copper” (3.3.75-76). This ring, and its questionable worth is significant on several levels. Falstaff is careful to identify the ring’s provenance because it establishes ancestry through blood lines and thus seems to support the medieval ideology of natural nobility. The specific identification of a seal ring also represents the upper class because such a ring would have been used by important families for official purposes. When Falstaff reminds Hal of the ring, the Prince claims it is, “A trifle, some eightpenny matter” (3.3.94). Perhaps this is a critique of Falstaff’s exaggeration of the ring’s monetary value or familial lineage, but this dismissal does not deter Falstaff to continue the argument until Hal finally states, “I say ‘tis copper” (3.3.131).

One of the mysterious aspects of this ring is that the text does not include the handling of the object as a stage direction. In this way, Shakespeare raises the concept of the ring and calls attention to it but does not resolve the questions that are presented. Perhaps the ring was truly valuable and inherited or perhaps Falstaff wore the common copper ornament so it would look like he owned an authentic and valuable seal ring as part of his created façade. In either case, Falstaff had a ring of some sort and Shakespeare calls attention to the fact that he is deeply distressed that it is missing. While the text does not list the ring as one of the items taken from Falstaff’s pockets, and the text never restores the ring to him, certain productions have highlighted the importance of the object. For example, in *The Hollow Crown’s* version of the staged “robbery” in Act Two Scene Four, Peto removes the ring from Falstaff’s finger as he rummages through his pockets. This action allows Prince Hal to return the ring in the third act after he challenges Falstaff’s pick pocket claims, again calling attention to the nature and value of the prop. This decision of how and if a production depicts the ring impacts the audience’s understanding of Falstaff’s identity, the meaning of his possessions, and his relationship with Prince Hal.

Like the bills and ring, Falstaff’s weapons raise questions of his inherited rather than earned nobility. In chivalrous terms, a knight is reliant upon his weapons and the outward appearance of those items is an extension of the character’s identity. Falstaff seems to be aware of this correlation and as such, falsely claims that the appearance of his “sword hacked like a handsaw” (2.4.153-54) is the result of him fighting off over one hundred men. Acutely aware of the truth, but interested in the details, Prince Hal inquiries about the object’s appearance:

PRINCE: Faith, tell me now in earnest, how came Falstaff’s

Sword so hacked?

PETO: Why, he hacked it with his dagger, and said he would

swear truth our of England but he would make you believe

it was done in a fight, and persuaded us to do the like (2.4.275-79).

The same sword that is purposely banged up, is disputed again during the final battle at the end of the play. Falstaff and Hal meet on the battlefield and the Prince asks three times, “lend me they sword” (5.3.38,42,47). Falstaff refuses by professing false bravery “Well, if Percy be alive, thou gets not my sword” (5.3.48-49), despite the fact that there is no outward indication that he intends to use it. In both cases, Falstaff obviously wants his sword to be an objective proof of bravery, but it is not. The weapon’s poor condition illustrates his failure of bravery and action, and suggests a potential problem with the validity of his nobility, perhaps despite his birthright. Similarly, Falstaff is seen “*playing upon his truncheon like a fife*” (3.1.78). This baton like weapon was likely carried more as symbol of “office, command, or authority” (*OED,* truncheon, n. 3) but in Falstaff’s hands it becomes yet another example of his fake status as a knight.

Falstaff’s character and the question of his nobility can and should be considered not just through his actions and dialogue, but through the stage props associated with him. Falstaff appears to lack the personality qualities associated with medieval virtue, honor and truth, but his purchasing behavior and personal possessions present the façade of knighthood. This contrast between title, behavior, and possessions may provide insight into the statements being made about the nature of nobility in *I Henry IV* and by extension, the medieval period. Furthermore, the meaning of these objects and how a production presents them and draws attention to them clearly influences the audience’s interpretation of Falstaff and how his character sheds light on Prince Hal’s evolution to the throne.

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