

“Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on?”: Can Falstaff be taken seriously?  
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I read *Henry VI, part 1* for the first time when I was in high school, and at that time protests against the Vietnam war were seemingly everywhere, and the idea that young men should join the military to go fight that war because it was the “honourable” thing to do was highly contested. Thus, I took Falstaff at face value. I didn’t think about the fact that his is a vice character, at worst, and simply a buffoon at best. But what does it mean that ll. 2752 – 67 are offered by this character? I do not think it means we are to take this critique of honour lightly, or as ironic.

After Prince Hal has reminded Falstaff that death is inevitable—“thou owest God a death” (2751)—Falstaff replies with:

’Tis not due yet; I would be loath to pay him before  
his day. What need I be so forward with him that  
calls not on me? Well, ’tis no matter; honour pricks 2755  
me on. Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I  
come on? how then? Can honour set to a leg? no: or  
an arm? no: or take away the grief of a wound? no.  
Honour hath no skill in surgery, then? no. What is  
honour? a word. What is in that word honour? what 2760  
is that honour? air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it?  
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. Why? detraction will not suffer it. Therefore 2765  
I'll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon: and so  
ends my catechism.

In the first three sentences, Falstaff shows us he is like anyone else; he wants to postpone his death as long as possible. But, he admits, “honour pricks [him] on” (2755-6). In other words, he is driven by honour to behave in such a way as might imperil him (by going to war in support of the King). After these first three lines, however, Falstaff starts to inquire into the nature of “honour.” It cannot repair wounds suffered in battle (2757-9). It is only a word, he reasons (2759-60), and being only a word it is only “air” (2761). In so saying, Falstaff plays with the idea that words are created by the exhalation of breath at the same time as he implies that the word “honour” has no special status and is as empty of content as is a volume of air. In ll. 2762-64 he makes the point that although “honour” is often applied to the dead, the person who is praised thusly, being dead, is not around to benefit from such praise. That seems to leave only the role honour might play for a living person. Yet here, too, Falstaff denies to “honour” any beneficial force because no matter how hard won is a person’s honour, all it takes to lose it is “detraction” (2765). According to the *OED*, at the time Shakespeare was writing “detraction” meant “the action of detracting from a person’s merit or reputation; the utterance of what is depreciatory or injurious to his reputation; depreciation, disparagement, defamation, calumny, slander” (“detraction,” 2). In other words, when someone insults or defames a person, or denies that s/he is honourable, honour is taken away from, detracted from, that person. If true, then honour does the living no

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more good than the dead, it is a mere “scutcheon” (2766) or shield. This means that honour does not attach to a person, the way a body part does, but is simply something added on that can be taken away at least as easily as it was added.

Ultimately, understanding Falstaff’s position does not help me decide whether or not Shakespeare meant to persuade me of the airiness or hollowness of the concept of honour, but it does help me understand that it, like so many concepts seemingly central to and unchallengeable in our culture, can in fact be questioned, challenged, and quite possibly rejected in the formation of my own values.