Falstaff as a Woman

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My concern is with the moment in Act 4, scene 2, of the *Merry Wives of Windsor* where Falstaff escapes from the Ford household disguised as a woman. As well as the general interest that cross-dressing gives rise to as a defining characteristic of Elizabethan comedy, the special interest of this moment is that it is the only instance in Shakespeare's plays where a male character adopts female disguise. And not just any male character, but the most fully-formed of his comic creations, and the completest embodiment of his idea of comedy.

Beyond this, it has to be said, the disguising of Falstaff as a woman seems devoid of almost all interest. It contributes little to the coherence or richness of the plot, and on the contrary creates the demand for some awkward filling in of detail. In its essentials, the device of disguise repeats the laundry-basket scene in Act 3. It creates another way for Falstaff to hide that is actually a source of degradation and danger, another means of escape that is turned against him into a punishment. But it adds nothing to these comic twists, and makes them seem merely formulaic. Verdi was surely following a sound dramatic instinct when he dropped the episode entirely from his opera.

The disguising scene suffers from the weakness of all sequels, in lacking the surprise or energy of the original. To be boxed in amongst dirty laundry is to be abused in and by a female world in a far more vivid way than to be gowned and mufflered in a "maid's aunt's" clothes that happen to have been left upstairs. To be tipped out of the laundry-basket into the Thames is to turn indignity into physical punishment in a far more economical way than to have Master Ford reported as cudgelling Falstaff down the street, particularly since this entails a tiresome explanation of Ford's belief that the woman is a witch who will be beaten out of his house if he ever sees her again. The laundry-basket scene gives rise to some marvellously comic conceits about Falstaff's weight and wateriness, about heat and sweat and sudden cooling, in his speeches in Act 3, scene 5, whereas the disguising scene allows for no such development, merely the feeble continuation of mistaken identity into scene 5. The possibility that the "fat woman" or "witch of Brainford" (or Brentford) would have put the original

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audience in mind of Gillian of Brentford may have given the scene a topicality that is lost to us,[1] but the fact that Falstaff is also named in the scene as Mother Prat does little to support such an idea. In truth, the only comic invention in the scene worthy of the name is the opportunity it gives to Ford to go through the laundry-basket once more, as if Falstaff could be hidden in its smallest recesses. "If you find a man there," says his wife, "he shall die a flea's death." But this merely re-emphasizes the scene's dependence upon the original.

The disguise plot is hatched. Falstaff is bundled off-stage. The ensuing dialogue sets up the Master Ford-witch of Brainford connections. Ford enters searching for Falstaff. Falstaff enters in disguise. Ford beats him out of the house and into the street, leaving the wives in much merriment. That is all that happens. It is a moment lacking in all but the crudest mechanics of comedy. If it has a potential, Shakespeare fails to exploit it. Its apparent lack of significance becomes its main significance, suggesting something about Shakespeare's uncertainty or unresponsiveness when faced with the cross-dressing of a man as a woman.

Women dress as men in Shakespeare's plays, not only in order to take on a freedom that would otherwise be denied them, to speak and to act with a capaciousness that the story requires, but also to add their voices to a general statement about the androgynous beauty of young nubile people, beardless youths and chaste maids. Such cross-dressing serves both the confusion and the idealism of Elizabethan comedy. In this single instance of a man dressed as a woman, Falstaff comes in as a repulsive old witch, a fat hag, a cozening queen—not the progenitor of the glamorous drag-queen so much as of the grotesque pantomime dame. If any statement is being made about gender identities it is one about the sexual inadequacy of fat people that goes back to Aristotle,[2] and comes up to date with the fat man on the beach in the McGill postcard with the caption, "I can't see my little Willie!" W.H. Auden, in his essay on Falstaff, "The Prince's Dog," comments persuasively on the sexual indeterminacy of the fat-bellied man, "a cross between a very young child and a pregnant mother,"[3] and one might note in other areas of comedy how much more readily than anyone else the funny fat man produces a comic twin sister, Billy with Bessie Bunter, Doberman with his sister in *Sgt. Bilko*, as if the gross physicality of a fat male body lends itself inherently to the physicality (negatively viewed) of women.

If Falstaff's appearance as a fat woman makes a negative statement, doing nothing except briefly to earn our ribald and derisive laughter, what is more significant is that Falstaff himself makes no statement at all. In his disguise as a woman, the man of multiple identities—the essence of whose ability to play the warrior or the lover, the honest man or even the self-displaying thin man, lies in his powers of speech—is silent. Where the usual expectation would be that

Falstaff would cap any physical ploy with a deft display of verbal trickery, extricate himself from any awkward situation with rhetorical ingenuity, here he loses not only his power to act, but his tongue as well. The much later reference to the way his "admirable dexterity of wit" (IV.v.112) had saved him from the stocks, is so perfunctory as to confirm the point. To take on a woman's appearance is to lose not only dignity but power, even the power of speech. It would seem to be this essential loss of power at the level of gender that makes Shakespeare powerless to do anything more with the scene dramatically.

And yet the power of women over men's lives is at the heart of the play. Not only is it the mainspring of the plot; it is also, if tradition is to be believed, the reason the play was written at all.

The story of the female Prince, Elizabeth, ordering Shakespeare to revive Falstaff for a new play in which he would be shown "in love" is significant even if it may not be true. It calls upon ancient representations of the informing power of female figures over poets as muses or patronesses, and at another remove of the magical power of witches to bring the dead to life (an image that Shakespeare is to re-visit more directly through Paulina's rôle in the last scene of *The Winter's Tale*). It also draws attention to the delicate relationship between patronage and popularity in the Elizabethan playhouse, and the particular importance of comic and romantic, rather than heroic or martial, celebration in Elizabeth's court.

There is, of course, something ironic about a Falstaff who had been banished to within ten miles of the court by Henry V being ordered back to court by Elizabeth. But the ironies tend to work against the play rather than in its favor. A comedy that is a command performance is limited in its capacity for transgression. A comedy that is solely comic, and removes its hero not only from the court world of Henry IV, but from history itself, is further limited in its ability to test what Falstaff stands for against the values of others. There is no room for Falstaff in the the *Merry Wives* to play a mock-king or Lord of Misrule, to re-assess the nature of rebellion or the definition of time itself in relation to the priorities of history, because there are no kings, lords, rebels or historical realities in the play for him to set himself against. Falstaff "in love" is therefore Falstaff already lessened, according to the hierarchies of Elizabethan genre. And when the play shows Falstaff less as being in love and more as being hemmed in by the women of Windsor from the outset, defeated by the very conception of the play, one may begin to suspect that Shakespeare is writing from a position of extreme ambivalence towards his character and the terms upon which he has been resurrected. The resurrection itself, Falstaff's reappearance in another age and

setting, is in one way a great triumph of comic indestructibility—akin to Bugs Bunny after a spiralling plane-crash coming on with the final credits to say, "I bet you thought they'd got me then, folks". But it is robbed of the transgressive power it might have, and which the mock-resurrection of Falstaff alongside Hotspur's corpse in Act 5 of *Henry IV, Part 1* does have, because death itself has been demoted in this play, reduced to a sequence of comic punishments.

The same limitations apply to the women in the play. Mistress Quickly, the only female character to carry over from the history plays, no longer presides over her own tavern world, but is reduced to a go-between. The still-existent sexuality she displays in her Eastcheap realm, as a procuress and woman of the world, is present only as a string of earthy malapropisms, whereby "femaleness," especially in the teaching-routine scene (Act 4, scene 1), speaks for ignorance and low physicality against the male preserve of Latin and high discourse.[4] From having had some of the force of a Wife of Bath, she has become as sweetly inconsequential as Juliet's Nurse, and this in a scene that is designed purely to fill the gap before Falstaff himself will appear, silenced, as a woman.

More importantly, the merry wives themselves are limited in what they can do. The play emphasizes that they act to defeat the male excesses of Falstaff's lechery and Ford's jealousy. Their disruptive rôle is in the service of moderation; they cause confusion only in order to teach. In the middle of the disguising scene, as if to put some control upon the chaos, Mistress Page steps forward to speak in the couplets of a morality play:

> We'll leave a proof, by that which we will do,
> Wives may be merry and yet honest too. (IV.ii.95f.)

This stress on their honesty makes them prototypes of the *femmes savantes* of later bourgeois comedy, rather than the disruptive women of an older tradition. They are matrons, not maenads.

Something of these new allegiances is suggested in the romantic under-plot which brings Fenton, the penniless aristocrat, together with Anne Page, a fantasy of upwardly-mobile cross-class love which is no part of Shakespeare's traditional courtly model, but becomes a staple of later comedies, novels, and musicals. If the story suggests a shift from an interest in gender transgressions to a milder interest in class transgressions, this is confirmed at one level of the play's staging. The underlying assumption of transferability between Ganymedes and Rosalinds that underlies the cross-dressing of male actors in female rôles on the Elizabethan stage has no part to play here. The riskiness of gender ambiguity in Elizabethan theatre kept actual women off the stage, and then returned to the question as the subject of its comedy. But the concerns of the *Merry Wives*, both as characters

and as comedy, are with issues of marital fidelity and mature bourgeois propriety in ways that make the playing of these rôles by male actors virtually irrelevant. The play tends significantly towards the post-Restoration era, when such interests no longer predominated and women could be admitted to the public stage. The vestigial comedy that arises from the "marriage" of both Slender and Caius to pageboys disguised as Anne Page in the final scene only serves to show how late and how limited is the play's reversion to a festive mode.

The fleeting, fleeing presence of Gillian, the witch of Brentford, at the center of the play is its way of having without having, having only in order to be rid of, the female identity that is implied in the older tradition. Evans's identification of the fat woman as a *Macbeth*-like witch, "I like it not when a 'oman has a great peard," is an aptly comical reminder of this underlying female threat at what is actually a moment of male gender confusion. Ford's own crazed searching for Falstaff is of a piece with his jealousy and his attitude towards the supposed witch. "This is not well, Master Ford," says Shallow, "this wrongs you." "You must pray, and not follow the imaginations of your heart," says Evans; "this is jealousies." Falstaff is "nowhere else but in your brain," adds Master Page. So that when the witch is revealed, Ford can triumphantly expose a world of female conspiracy in the face of this chorus of male doubt: "See but the issue of my jealousy; if I cry out thus upon no trail, never trust me when I open again." Of course, Ford's jealousy is as much based upon grotesque imaginings as is his fear of the witch. It is this attitude towards women that will be exorcised from Ford in the chase, and the next time we see him he will rapidly have become a formally contrite husband: "Pardon me, wife. Henceforth do what thou wilt" (IV.iv.6). But the dramatic means of this transformation in Ford are to present us with the forces of a transgressive female order, in a brief and false appearance, and to beat them off the stage. The comedy of Ford's mental state is manifested through the ancient devices of a comedy of appearances, scapegoats and rituals.

To put it in these terms is to see that the disguising of Falstaff, however insignificant in itself, is following a larger necessity than that of the immediate dramatic moment. It allows the play to shift from a domestic setting to the pastoral world of the Herne the Hunter scene in Act 5, and so back to the terms, however half-heartedly, of Shakespeare's mainstream comedies.

In common with that later line of plays which the first four acts of the *Merry Wives* resemble, from Restoration comedies down to Aldwych farces and today's television situation-comedies, the humor of the first three acts depends for its physical effects upon the interior spaces of rooms and chambers, screens and hiding-places and doors, as much as it does for its motivation upon the intimate world of secrets, gossip, embarrassment, wifely conspiracies and hen-

pecked husbands. "Neither press, coffer, chest, trunk, well, vault" will hide Falstaff, says Mistress Ford; "there is no hiding you in the house." With Falstaff's succinct reply, "I'll go out, then," the root of the comic action changes from the household to the community as its implied audience, and Falstaff brings upon himself what amounts to a wholesale change from private revenge to public display and humiliation as the nature of the action. "Going out" as a woman (the challenge and fantasy of transvestism, as Dustin Hoffman for example confirms in the Manhattan street-scene in *Tootsie*) is in fact, for Falstaff, coming back into the stage-space, a private room opened up for public spectacle, and then leaving that space for the imagined outside world. But it is still this moment which turns the play round to the idea of public display, and the reclamation of the stage as a communal space. At the end of the scene, the merry wives confirm the change of direction: "methinks there would be no period to the jest should he not be publicly shamed."

It is a change towards a "female" world, not in terms of identity, but in terms of a reversion to an older, capacious order of things. What is enacted in the *Henry IV* plays as a movement from city underworld to Gloucester rusticity is here re-enacted on a more frivolous scale. The tendency towards pastoralism in Shakespearian comedy that seems to leave even such an urban creature as Falstaff finally always "babbl[ing] of green fields" (*Henry V*.II.iii.17), here has him talking of himself as a "beast" and "a Windsor stag," and offering himself to his two would-be mistresses as a kind of festive meal: "Divide me like a bribed buck" (V.v.24), once again a frivolous echo of the way he is portrayed in the history plays, where Hal addresses Falstaff's body on the field of battle at Shrewsbury:

> Death hath not struck so fat a deer today,
> Though many dearer, in this bloody fray. (*Henry V*.I.iv.106f.)

Such Dionysiac undertones take on a specifically female, or sexually indeterminate, quality in a number of ways throughout Falstaff's dramatic career. There is the ambivalence of the fat man referred to above, as well as occasional vivid lines such as: "my skin hangs about me like an old lady's loose gown" (*1 Henry IV*.III.iii.2). But more importantly, Falstaff's comic cowardice places him in a direct confrontation with the manly, militaristic values of the court, and in unspoken alliance with the courtly women. What Falstaff says as self-indulgence on the field of battle: "I would 'twere bed-time, Hal, and all well" (*1Henry IV*. V.i.125) had already been said by Lady Percy, Hotspur's wife, in terms of the marriage-bed and child-bed threatened by her husband's death:

> For what offence have I this fortnight been
> A banish'd woman from my Harry's bed? (*1Henry IV*.II.iii.39f.)

What Falstaff goes on to say as comedy about the wordiness of warriors: "What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? Air," is said by Lady Percy as pathos:

> In thy faint slumbers . . .
> . . . thou hast talk'd
> Of sallies, and retires, of trenches, tents,
> Of palisadoes, frontiers, parapets,
> Of basilisks, of cannon, culverin,
> Of prisoners' ransom, and of soldiers slain.

If Falstaff's unmanliness makes him a real if unlikely ally of the female world, it is his most triumphant moment of bogus manliness—the defeat of Sir John Coleville in *Henry IV, Part 2*, purely on the strength of his undeserved reputation at Shrewsbury—that leads to the strangest identification of his femaleness. To Coleville's identification of him as the famous Falstaff, he replies:

> I have a whole school of tongues in this belly of mine, and not a tongue of them all speaks any other word but my name. And I had but a belly of any indifferency, I were simply the most active fellow in Europe: my womb, my womb, my womb undoes me. (*2Henry IV*.IV.iii.18ff.)

Falstaff here equates his belly with his identity, as also with his wordiness and his inactivity. His verbal fecundity, which is somehow the same thing as his lack of deeds, is both what makes him and unmakes him. It allows him to turn what might be a confession into a boast. It also allows him in this speech to add "woman" to all the other identities he has acquired along the way. But what is more important is that it allows him to offer "femaleness" as the defining characteristic of the fertile, multiple, comic selfhood that Falstaff embodies, the equation that has existed since the outset between Jack Falstaff and "all the world" (*1Henry IV*.II.iv.474).

Falstaff's slippery multiplicity is what Hal must reject in order to adopt the univocal identity of a king. Significantly, he identifies the abstractly named figure of the Lord Chief Justice as his father as the prerequisite for banishing the father-mother-baby-dog figure of Falstaff from the court. First as a woman, and then with Herne the Hunter's head of horns, Falstaff appears in the *Merry Wives*

of Windsor to be allowed to retain his comic multiple identity, a conception of identity that is rooted in dressing-up and games and ritual rather than in states of mind. But, in fact, such identities are punishments within the play's story. And, within its overall structure, they work towards a finale that is not so much a festival as it is a cross between a townswomen's fête, complete with the children playing their carefully schooled rôles, and a court-masque capped by Mistress Quickly's (of all people) flattering address in verse to Windsor Castle's "worthy . . . owner" (V.v.61). With the presence of the Queen in the audience, and the merry wives on stage still insisting unequivocally on their "virtue" (V.v.148), the last scene is more like a deliberate commentary on Falstaff's nature, and on the part that rôle- and gender-reversals might play in such a conception of comedy, than a dramatic realisation of this. Nowhere is this gap between idea and performance, between "festive" and "female" principles and the actualisation of them on stage, clearer than in the process that leads Shakespeare to dress Falstaff up as the fat woman of Brainford, and then fails to find anything for him/her to say or do. It is a failure that suggests a good deal about the inability of traditional theatrical forms to accommodate new notions of gender and identity, and about the inability of the new order to accommodate theatre.

It is always perverse to argue for things that are significant by their absence. And it is perhaps risky to ask even of Falstaff that such a small moment should bear such a weight of examination. It seems proper, therefore, to conclude with a comment that returns us to the theatrical reality of that moment, and to the one dimension of it that almost certainly succeeds.

All the dialogue and all the explanation in the end only prepare the way for Falstaff to make his entrance. And Falstaff's entrance, dressed as a woman, can hardly fail to bring the house down, even if nothing else that follows seems to justify or to be equal to it. "Making an entrance" in an extravagant costume, particularly an outrageous or demeaning one, is a very particular theatrical statement. It confirms display and concealment as the paradoxical centre of dramatic experience, and in this particular moment it allows the audience the mixed celebratory and denigratory response that Falstaff demands. It is a statment that has its familiar parallels in later forms of cross-dressing—the preening self-display of the drag-queen, or the grotesque absurdity of the pantomime dame—and we are familiar in those instances too with the way that "making an entrance" leads to a pause in which the delighted audience is invited to take the spectacle in, and rarely leads to further action or dialogue that lives

up to the initial promise. But, of course, it is not restricted to cross-dressing. From the outset, the *Merry Wives* is constructed around the need to "make an entrance" for Falstaff, the reappearance of the much-loved figure on the stage. The opening scene builds up to his first appearance through the use of characters and kinds of dialogue that are familiar to us from the last scene of *Henry IV, Part 2*. His entrance dressed up to woo Mistress Ford in Act 3, scene 3, where we must assume his costume is as extravagant as his language ("Have I caught thee, my heavenly jewel?"), is carefully built up to with Robin coming in first, dressed like a "little Jack-a-Lent," and equally cunningly allows for his re-entry in scene 5 with the same clothes now soaking wet. Whatever conclusions we may come to about Act 4, scene 2, and Falstaff's crossing or failure to cross the threshold between male and female genders, or between the old festive order, to which he belongs, and the new bourgeois-subjectivist order, to which the play belongs, there can be no doubt that he succeeds in this most literal of theatrical "liminal" experiences, the crossing of the threshold between the tiring-house and the stage, between the promise of an appearance and its realisation. Such a moment asks to be seen perhaps not so much as "empty," but as a moment of "pure" theatricality, pure play.

If play is rooted in the infant's need to make a transition from the subjective to an objective world, from a world in which there is only the subject and the unquestioned availability of the mother, and specifically the mother's breast, to a "real" world of objects and unsatisfied desires,[5] then perhaps the kind of play that consists of dressing-up, and the essential contribution of dressing-up to theatrical play, can be better understood. There are practical reasons why the child will dress up specifically in the mother's clothes, but this does not determine the underlying sense in which dressing-up, rather than having anything to do with disguise in the sense of taking on a new identity, has to do rather with that blurring of the boundaries of identity, of the identifiable "self," which belongs to a reversion to the infantile world in which mother and self, world and subject, were felt as one.[6] The culmination of the game of dressing-up lies in the moment when the children "make an entrance" for their parents' amusement, and bring them into the game to approve of its playful experimentation.

What I am suggesting here is the way in which dressing-up (as a woman, as a mother, as a matriarch) is a paradigm of "play," and specifically of the kinds of enactment of altered and restored identities, of wish-fulfillment stories, that belong to drama. I have already suggested (without much explanation) that we should think of the festive world of traditional play and drama as belonging to the "female," and it is in terms of the psychology of children's play that we can see this less as a question of opposed gender categories, and more as reversion to that pre-gendered, undifferentiated world of mothers and their children.[7] Male

cross-dressing, then, may perhaps be seen not as a psycho-sexual signal of the male relationship to the female (working by appropriation or by denigration), but as a continuing manifestation of the desire for play and display, for the pretence that underlies the nature of performance, and for the make-believe that still contributes to our adult (sexual) identities. Faced with the appearance of Falstaff as a woman, and for his need in that moment *only* to appear, it may be that we should consider not only the implications of his dressing-up for questions of gender representation, but also the implications of his change of gender for questions that go to the roots of play, performance and theatricality.

Notes

An earlier version of this essay was given to the Women's Studies Group conference on Liminality at Birkbeck College, University of London, June 1989. I am grateful especially to Yvonne Noble and Carolyn Williams for their comments.

1. Thomas Nashe's reference to the character first introduced by Robert Copland may suggest some unseemly stage-business for Falstaff: "What can be made of Summer's last will and testament? Such another thing as Gillian of Brainsford's will, where she bequeathed a score of farts amongst her friends" (in *The Unfortunate Traveller and Other Works*, edited by J.B. Steane (New York: Penguin, 1972) 149.

2. "Fat people, women as well as men, appear to be less fertile than others from the fact that the secretion when in process of concoction turns to fat with those who are too well-nourished" (*De generatione animalium* I.18, 726a, in *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 5, trans. Arthur Platt (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1958).

3. *The Dyer's Hand* (London: Faber, 1975) 196.

4. Patricia Parker's claim that the malapropisms in this scene render Mistress Quickly "subversive of the entire system of instruction" (*Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property*, London and New York, 1987, 29) seems to me over-stated; as do the nonetheless interesting claims she makes in the same chapter for including Falstaff within the category of literary "fat ladies" (20-22).

5. See especially, D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" in *Playing and Reality* (New York: Penguin, 1974), where one remark seems particularly suggestive as far as Falstaff and cross-dressing are concerned:

> At this point my subject widens out into that of play, and of artistic creativity and appreciation, and of religious feeling, and of dreaming, and also of fetishism, lying and stealing . . . (6)

6. Quentin Crisp writes of childhood:

> All the games I played with these little girls were really one game. We dressed up in their mother's or even grandmother's clothes, which we found in box rooms and attics, and trailed about the house and garden describing in piercing voices the splendour of the

> lives that in our imagination we were leading. . . . I cannot say whether my mother led me into this lifelong exotic swoon because it was secretly her own ideal or whether, finding me already there, she sustained me in it as a way of keeping me quiet. Undoubtedly she allowed me to feel that it was a taste we shared. (*The Naked Civil Servant*, London: Fontana, 1977, 14f.)

7. From another perspective, Jacques Derrida writes: "The festival is the moment of pure continuity, of in-difference between the time of desire and the time of pleasure" (*Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976, 263).