On Vanitas
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Falstaff as Vanitas

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In *Henry IV Part I*, V.iv., Shakespeare presents us with a veritable quartet of the vanities. The scene is the Battle of Shrewsbury. On one part of the battlefield two young leaders meet for a showdown; the rebel Hotspur, challenging Prince Hal, dismisses him contemptuously: "I can no longer brook thy vanities." (V.iv.73)[1]. The vanities in question are Hal's idling, drinking, whoring and above all his friendship with Falstaff. A duel ensues, in which, against the odds, Hal kills Hotspur, whose dying words are a further reflection on the *vanitas*, no longer addressed to his adversary Hal, but regarding his own vain military and political aspirations: "No, Percy, thou art dust, / And food for –". This final verbal effort itself proves vain, being interrupted by death, until Hal obligingly completes Hotspur's conventional *vanitas* sentiment: "For worms, brave Percy. Fare thee well, great heart. Ill-weaved ambition, how much art thou shrunk!" (V.iv.84-87). This is

[1] William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, Part 1*, ed. David Scott Kastan, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2002.

a classic statement of the futility of human endeavor in the face of all-levelling death: *Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas*.

Simultaneously, on another part of the battlefield – and of the stage – a lesser duel takes place, as the cowardly Falstaff appears to engage the valiant Earl of Douglas. Falstaff goes through the same motions as Percy, falling down "*as if he were dead*" (Quarto and Folio stage direction) at the very moment Hal kills Hotspur. Falstaff also earns an affectionate *vanitas* epitaph from Hal, in this case a meditation on the deceased himself as the embodiment of human vanity:

> What, old acquaintance! Could not all this flesh
> Keep in a little life? Poor Jack, farewell.
> I could have better spared a better man.
> O, I should have a heavy miss of thee
> If I were much in love with vanity. (V.iv.101-5)

The semantic changes rung on the word 'vanity' in this double episode range from the excessive vainness of Falstaff to the multiple vices of Hal to the futility of human ambition as illustrated by Hotspur. All is vanity: these different meanings converge on the battlefield, which turns virtue into vice and courage into foolishness. At the end of the scene Falstaff, *solus*, is comically resurrected, thereby making a mockery of the solemn actions and somber discourses of the others. His performance of death is a way of overcoming it. Falstaff, the very epitome of vanity, avoids becoming a Hotspur-like *vanitas* picture: "But to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be no counterfeit but the true and perfect image of life indeed" (V.iv.116-18). This is the fat man's masterpiece: by creating a perfect replica ("counterfeit") of a *vanitas* composition, he denies futility and becomes instead the image of life and of human resourcefulness. In this sense, he elects himself as the counter-image of the fallen Sir Walter Blunt, whose corpse he encounters earlier in the battle:

> Soft, who are you? Sir Walter Blunt.
> There's honor for you. Here's no vanity. (V.iii.32-33)

Falstaff's cynical comment is ambivalent: Blunt is an emblem of supposed honour, having died in battle, but also of vanity, having lost his life and his worldly prowess: "Here's no vanity", in the sense that death has put an end to his aspirations. Far better, from Falstaff's perspective, to lose one's honour and keep one's vanity, which at least is a testament to survival. To Falstaff, *vanitas* is synonymous with *vivacitas*.

Falstaff's endeavours to cheat death and defend the vanities gains added piquancy from its historiographical and dramaturgical contexts: on the field of battle and within a history play. Playing dead in a historically significant battle, and fooling Hal in the tetralogy that end with his apotheosis, is a double outrage. Falstaff is happy to sacrifice not only personal honour and dignity but also national pride and patriotic ideology in order to save his vain self. The presence within the second tetralogy of the theme of the vanity of human wishes was first signaled by Samuel Johnson, supreme connoisseur both of Shakespeare and of vanity[2]. Johnson's *Dictionary*, in glossing the adjective 'vain' as "Fruitless; ineffectual" (along with other definitions such as "Empty; unreal; shadowy", and "Idle; worthless; unimportant") quotes, by way of illustration, the conclusion to Richard II's long and elegiac "Let's talk of graves" meditation: "Let no man speak again / To alter this, for counsel is but vain" (*Richard II*, III.ii.213-14)[3].

Together with Hamlet, Falstaff is Shakespeare's main exponent of the *vanitas* theme, to the extent that he not only embodies the vanities but discourses knowledgeably on them, as well as being the object of others' discourse. To paraphrase the fat man, he is not only vain in himself, but the cause that vanity is in others, especially Hal. He is, moreover, fully aware of the fact that the *vanitas* is, among other things, a pictorial genre, as his discourse on "the true and perfect image" suggests. In III.iii, Shakespeare attributes to him his only allusion to the *memento mori* image as a variation on the *vanitas* theme:

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2 On Johnson, Shakespeare and *vanitas*, see Robert DeMaria's essay in this volume.

3 Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), digital edition: https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/vain/ (accessed on 1 November 2019). The punctuation and line numbers are taken from William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. Charles R. Forker, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2002.

> BARDOLL
> Why, Sir John, my face does you no harm.
> FALSTAFF
> No, I'll be sworn, I make as good use of it as many a man doth of a death's head or a *memento mori*. I never see thy face but I think upon hell-fire and Dives that lived in purple: for there he is in his robes, burning, burning. If thou wert any way given to virtue, I would swear by thy face. My oath should be "By this fire, that's God's angel". (III.iii.28-30)

Bardoll's face is a *vanitas* picture because it is as red and enflamed as hell, alerting beholders to their possible fate. Falstaff, with his allusion to the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31) situates it within a religious iconographic tradition, reminding us that before becoming an artistic genre the *vanitas* was a Biblical lesson. But, as Bardoll points out, much the same can be said of Falstaff's own body, whose hyperbolic proportions are a monument of – and to – flesh, and thus a potential emblem of human frailty:

> BARDOLL
> Why, you are so fat, Sir John, that you must be out of all compass, out of all reasonable compass, Sir John. (III.iii.21-23)

In this sense Falstaff is an incarnation of Matthew 26.41: the flesh is weak (and the greater the flesh, the greater the weakness). At the same time, he would be a fit early modern subject for a Franz Hals *vanitas* portrait of a fat man, such as his picture of the merchant Willem van Heythuijsen (1634). And yet the fleshy knight resists any such reduction to moral allegory.

Falstaff's paradox of the life-affirming *vanitas* underlines the complexity of the theme in Shakespeare. It is both a visual and a discursive phenomenon, in which, however, the visual (for example, the knight's conspicuous body) may contradict and undo the accompanying verbal discourse. Shakespeare appropriates the *vanitas* as a pictorial genre, but resituates the latter within a cultural and moral tradition – not least biblical – that makes it part of a broader dialectic. Hamlet holding Yorick's skull is not merely a trite icon of human caducity but the pretext for the Prince's meditation

on the ephemerality of performance itself, and also on its greater reality with respect to the illusory solidity that flesh is heir to.

Vanitas in Shakespearean drama is a Brechtian *gestus*, "[an] attitude, expressible in words or actions"[4]. It is a moral, philosophical and existential attitude or complex of attitudes, a perspective or weave of perspectives on life and death, that translate on stage into a rich dialectic of contrasting positions and actions. As this special issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare* goes to show, it is an ever-present theme that lends itself to a myriad of interpretations and historical contextualizations. All is vanity, but it would be especially vain to try to reduce or synthesize such a fruitful multiplicity of approaches to so multifarious a topic. This journal issue is therefore offered as a choral meditation on the rival claims of futility and vitality, or of mortality and resistance: "Tush, man,", in the words of Falstaff's moral lesson to Hal, "mortal men, mortal men" (IV.ii.66); and yet it is the fat knight himself who does more than any other Shakespearean character to keep mortality at bay.

4 Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. John Willett, London, Methuen, 1964, p. 42.