6 Henry IV, Part One

"IF I DO GROW GREAT, I'LL GROW LESS" Falstaff

Henry IV, Part One, like the comedies with which I have grouped it in this study, contains two clearly demarcated worlds, which we can follow tradition and call the worlds of the tavern and of the court. In this particular play, however, the process I have been consistently trying to identify and explain, the process by which the second world functions for the protagonist as part of a strategy for living with maintained or increased stature in the primary world, emerges into the open. Despite the enormous critical disagreements as to precisely what Hal does in the play, as to precisely what benefit he derives from his habitation in Eastcheap, critics do agree that Hal uses the tavern to work his advantage. Hal says so himself: in his famous soliloquy, about which more later, he declares that the tavern world only seems a world of holiday leisure, that in fact the tavern constitutes for the Prince himself a world of "everyday" work, the work of fabricating a public image that will consolidate his eventual political control of the kingdom. In short, in 1 Henry IV we must perceive, because the protagonist himself perceives, that the distinction between first and second world dissolves when taken beyond a certain point; in the second world of Eastcheap, as in Arden, Belmont, and elsewhere, the protagonists do not enter and discover an autonomous world of play, ritual, and timelessness, but they assert in a new location their own freedom from work, law, and time—*their* autonomy—in order to secure their stature in the abandoned primary world.

Perhaps I am getting ahead of myself. Critics agree that the second world functions for Hal in relation to his position in the primary world, but not that the second world as a whole functions in relation to the primary world, that the second world develops from the initial contents of the drama. Many see the second world as a separate, autonomous world of holiday retreat, which the
Prince enters and uses, in contradiction with the ethos of timelessness and charity that predominates in the tavern. This view, in effect, identifies the tavern as “Falstaff’s world”, and postulates an absolute opposition between Falstaff and the Prince. Falstaff, some argue, represents the spirit of good-fellowship or, at worst, anarchy and irresponsibility, qualities that the Prince, representative of hierarchy, authority, and responsibility, associates with but learns to dominate and (in 2 Henry IV) to control. This argument puts forward two major misalignments: (1) it identifies Falstaff’s character with his environment and (2) it creates a false antithesis between Hal’s and Falstaff’s motives within the tavern environment. To take and dispose of the first fallacy first: the charity and anarchy that Falstaff so heartily espouses characterize Falstaff but not the tavern itself, in that his charity comes out of others’ pockets. In Falstaff’s pockets we find only bills for his unpaid debts—and he tries to win compensation when even his bills are stolen (III. iii. 52ff.). In fact the tavern, as we see again and again from the point of view of the ostlers, carriers, vintner, drawers, and hostess, very much exists within an everyday world of time, work, and responsibility. By living there, Falstaff creates a continuous tension between the needs of his own ego, which he projects outward onto his environment, and the needs of the environment, which inevitably requires payment for services rendered.

I might add that the Prince, in so far as he “hast paid all” Falstaff’s “part” (I. ii. 51–2), keeps this tension in solution: he allows Falstaff to continue to use and to impose himself on the everyday world of the tavern. By allowing this, by clearing the way for Falstaff’s ego, Hal maintains a continuity between his behaviour and Falstaff’s. Both Falstaff and Hal “use” rather than inhabit the tavern: the sentimental interpretation of 1 Henry IV, according to which the tavern represents the ways of merry olde England, now threatened by the Lancastrian (or Tudor?) modern political state, although discredited, exists vestigially in the interpretations that oppose Falstaff’s carefree “life” in the tavern to Hal’s calculated “use” of the tavern. Falstaff, too, retreats to the tavern and uses it; Falstaff, unlike a Francis, goes to and dwells in the tavern by conscious choice, and, as with the Prince, in contradistinction to the privileges and responsibilities implicit in his rank or title.