

## Towards modernism; transition, treachery and theatricality in William Empson's readings of Shakespeare

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**Abstract:** Leading British modernist writers, seeking and constructing mythic models of literary history to authorise their double-acts of critical construction and creative rebellion, had difficulties with Shakespeare. Eliot notoriously valorised, above his plays, the epics of Virgil and Dante; Wyndham Lewis played off Shakespearean against Machiavellian nihilism; Joyce generated for him a mythical and Oedipal biography. In this context Empson's treatment of Shakespearean poetic drama stands out – for brilliant ingenuity, theatrical awareness, and relative subsequent neglect. This paper shall address Empson's responses to three Shakespearean cases of problematic transition. Concerning *Hamlet*; why does the protagonist return, from England, so changed? Is the change superficial or real? Does Hamlet's soliloquy, before departure, clarify or confuse the issue? Concerning Falstaff; how do developments, or continuities, in the role illuminate the links and the gaps between the plays of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*? Concerning Cleopatra; how do images of fertility and of destruction, how do practices of patience and caprice, map on to her options and actions in face of death? For Empson, indeed, encounters with death focus, supremely, options for self-assertion – hence, for both critical distinctions and inclusive richness.

**Keywords:** William Empson, William Shakespeare, treachery, theatricality

William Empson should be, if you care about periodisation, one of the great English modernist critics; always supposing there has been any English modernism, or that Empson's work can be constrained within the genre of criticism. For me as for many readers, and like Shakespeare, he is not of an age but for all time. In his own time he was a student, at Winchester and (initially reading Mathematics) in the Cambridge of the late 1920s; famous or notorious for his early books, he became a much-travelled lecturer spending interwar and wartime years in Japan and China; certainly

a great poet, he was less obviously any sort of successful academic. He was a Yorkshire gentleman (and son of Yorkshire gentry), at once republican and oddly royalist. Terry Eagleton, in his recent book *Critical Revolutionaries*, suggests he was the cleverest critic England has ever produced; I doubt if any subsequent English critic would debate or doubt this (Eagleton 2022, 142). He was also perhaps the finest English writer of literary criticism since Coleridge and Hazlitt.

In this paper I shall concentrate on Empson's Shakespeare. Some of the plays are discussed in his early masterpieces *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and *Some Versions of Pastoral*, though none at length. *The Structure of Complex Words*, his own favourite book, contains extended essays on *Othello* and *King Lear*. Important later work is collected in the posthumously-published *Essays on Shakespeare*. Amongst the major critics of Empson's lifetime – such as T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, and Raymond Williams, all discussed in Eagleton's book – Empson is unusual in offering extended close readings of Shakespearean plays. Here I shall limit myself to a discussion of Empson's treatment of three roles in four or five plays – Hamlet in *Hamlet*, Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and Falstaff, on stage in *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV* and off-stage in *Henry V*.

I shall focus upon Empson's comments on the endings of these plays and the deaths of these dramatic characters. Empson, I shall suggest, emphasises, in the endings, suddenness, as against careful transition and sustained causality; in the characters, amorality and treachery, coupled with a penchant for keeping options open and seizing opportunities for action; in the deployment of characters in action, stagy theatricality, coupled with what he regularly sees, and to a large extent praises, as 'princeliness'. For Empson, the characters I shall consider match, one way and another, the specifications of 'pastoral' outlaws. They stand at once inside and outside the political and social scenes and actions whose tensions and contradictions they embody, envision, and set in motion. In doing so, they enact their own richness of value, and risk its loss; inactive passivity would, for them, amount to culpable (even if necessary) waste. Their complex status approximates to that of the heroes, and the scapegoats, arguably characteristic of primitive myth, and discerned, in such contexts, by Empson's 'modernist' contemporaries. This further line of argument, however, will require development elsewhere. I shall begin, here, with Hamlet.

## Hamlet

After a major soliloquy, 'How all occasions do inform against me' (Shakespeare 2016, *Hamlet* 4.1.31-65)<sup>1</sup>, in Act 4, Hamlet leaves the stage for three scenes. Returning in Act 5 scene 1 he seems preoccupied less with revenge, more with human mortality. He chats expansively with the Gravedigger-Clown. He improvises verse. Taken by surprise by Ophelia's funeral cortege he wrestles with Laertes in her open grave. A moment later we see him explaining to Horatio his melodramatic adventures away from Denmark. He still projects the death of his usurping uncle King Claudius; yet he no longer mentions any obligation to his dead father's Ghost. He is witty, menacing, obscurely and rather charmingly troubled; 'thou wouldest not think how ill all's here about my heart: but it is no matter' (*Hamlet* 5.2.183-85). He excuses his earlier scuffle with Laertes on the dubious grounds of madness while proving, if not sanity then certainly princeliness, by accepting without query or cavil the risk of a duel. By its end, four bodies lie on stage, dead.

What sort of an ending is this? what sort of transition, into these final stage appearances of Hamlet, might explain it? Is there indeed (as Hamlet has himself averred) a Providence shaping such an end? Hamlet, an audience is reminded, has shown little compunction over his own improvisatory shaping of the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. On this issue of Hamlet's own behaviour Empson makes a point with more general application:

Hamlet is exasperated by being put into a situation so unwelcome to him, so that when he does act he plunges into his role with wilful violence (Empson 1986, 15).

When Horatio mentions the pair of false friends, Hamlet becomes boisterously self-pitying... Horatio says only "Why, what a King is this!" – and Hamlet takes this as an agreement about 'conscience' and the rightness of killing Claudius – ...this is perhaps what Hamlet thinks he [Horatio] meant, but I have always assumed ...that he meant "What a king you have become". (Empson 1986, 115-16).

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1 Greenblatt, S., Cohen, W., Gossett, S., Howard, J.E., Maus, K.E., McMullan, G. (eds). *The Norton Shakespeare*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York and London, 2016. Subsequent Shakespearean references are cited by titles, Acts, scenes and lines as set out here.

Several points converge here. One is familiar; a vengeful Hamlet risks assimilation to Claudius his villainous oppressor. Half-concealed within this point lies another; Hamlet knows this and suppresses this – he accepts, from Horatio, and responds in his own voice to, an ambiguity which he does not explicitly acknowledge. More generally, his apparent new calmness is still continuous with his past characteristic discontinuities of mood and behaviour. All this in him, is, as Empson emphasizes, distinctively princely. He speaks; he acts; he does not explain, or offers pseudo-explanations for whose degree of acceptability he seems unconcerned. (Empson’s refusal to condemn such serenity, or high-handedness, is notable.) Hamlet is a verbal virtuoso whose morality is a matter of sprezzatura. He keeps his options open all while seemingly relying upon chance or necessity. Such open options, such unresolved clashes of moral ambiguities within complex utterances, are, for Empson, precisely what the play is about. Each character, Hamlet above all, internalises and reflects upon others tensions which are thus at once enhanced and focussed. Hamlet, casting himself as both prince and outsider, occupies the perilous but privileged position of the Empsonian pastoral outlaw and hero; recapitulating within his consciousness the tensions of his society and its discourses, he also takes upon himself the burden of action.

In this channelling of Empson’s Hamlet I have used several Empsonian keywords and phrases; ambiguity, pastoral, complex words, clashes of morality. One big word, within his *Hamlet* essay, remains – a word connected with something central to Empson’s thought and to Shakespeare’s medium; Hamlet’s role and his play are, for Empson, occasions for and displays of theatricality, sometimes unwelcome, always inescapable. Fortinbras’ epitaph virtually spells this out:

...Let four captains  
 Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,  
 For he was likely, had he been put on,  
 To have proved most royal. (*Hamlet* 5.2.373-76)

Like all actors (Empson writes) ‘Hamlet dies craving to be justified in popular opinion...’ and ‘...the hero is dependent for his glory on the approval of the crowd’; in such comments as these Hamlet the actor fades into and back out of the mythic hero (1969, 68). It is likely that Shakespeare’s play reworked earlier dramas, probably well known to his audiences. From this fact Empson develops the thought that the title role is one of a man finding himself in a play against his own will, acting

up to and acting against this role – going along with it, going against it, doing one while seeming (to others and/or to himself) to be doing the other; letting the play down and playing it up; letting himself down and thereby realising himself triumphantly. Here again the figure of Hamlet is being construed at once in terms of a 'pastoral' outsider and of a dramatic role committed, beyond conscious desire or intention, to certain patterns and necessities for action. Empson writes:

The character says "Why do you assume I am theatrical? I particularly hate such behaviour. I cannot help my situation. What do you *mean* by theatrical? (1986, 84)

Empson's treatment traces Hamlet's behaviour, both helplessly and artfully theatrical, throughout the central scenes of the play, showing how the role is at once, committed but only obliquely related to what Empson, here as elsewhere, valorises under the category of 'story-line' – in the case of *Hamlet* the sequential yet repetitive story-line associated with dramas of revenge. In this connection a passage of Empson's essay is crucial, and irresistible. Hamlet's soliloquy in Act 4 appears in only one of the play's early texts (the second Quarto), and is frequently cut in performance. Empson writes:

What is reckless about the speech is that it makes Hamlet say, while (presumably) surrounded by guards leading him to death, "I have cause and will and strength and means/To do't", destroying a sheer school of Hamlet Theories with each noun; the effect is so exasperating that more than one critic, after solving all his [sic] Hamlet Problem neatly except for this, has simply demanded the right to throw it away. Nobody is as annoying as all that except on purpose... these Hamlet Theories had already been propounded, in discussions among the spectators...there was a more immediate effect in making Hamlet magnificent. He finds his immediate position not even worth reflecting on...His complete impotence at the moment...seems to him "only a theatrical appearance" ...Here as elsewhere he gives a curious effect, also not unknown among his critics, of losing all interest in what has happened in the story; but it is more impressive in him than in them (Empson 1986, 98).

Story-lines, for Empson, rest upon human relationships which trigger, for each dramatic character, an immense range of conceivable intentions towards imaginable actions. Any one actual action thus carries with it the weight and richness of other excluded possibilities. Any action therefore involves loss,

waste, and potential tragedy. The protagonist, being complex, appreciates all this; weighs it; suffers it.

...the waste even in a fortunate life, the isolation even of a life rich in intimacy, cannot but be felt deeply, and is the central feeling of tragedy. And anything of value must accept this because it must not prostitute itself; its strength is to be prepared to waste itself, if it does not get its opportunity (Empson 1966, 12).

This superb utterance, found near the start of *Some Versions of Pastoral*, is, I think, Empson's closest approach to what he might lightly mock as a Theory of Tragedy. One notable implication is that Tragedies are by no means a unique or even a privileged site for tragedy; another, that tragedy is compatible with other genres and structures of feeling. Both of these notions are relevant to the tragic historical comedy which is *Antony and Cleopatra*.

### **Antony and Cleopatra**

In discussing Empson's reading of *Antony and Cleopatra* it is again worthwhile to begin with the ending of the play and with the problem which it has traditionally been felt to present. When and why does Cleopatra opt for suicide?

Antony, dying, urges her to find acceptable terms from Caesar for survival; typically, as he dies, she is arguing with him about this. The scene closes with her voicing a will for 'resolution, and the briefest end' (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.15.95). The end, far from brief, is delayed through what is by far the play's longest (and final) scene. Within her supposedly safe 'monument' Roman officers find it easy to capture her. To Proculeius she declares 'I would die' (*Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2.69). Dolabella she verbally seduces into betrayal of Caesar's plans for her – survival amidst the theatricalised mockery of a Roman triumph amidst theatricalised mockery. To Caesar, when he condescends to meet her, she offers apparent surrender of her person and property – but seems to be betrayed by her treasurer Seleucus, who reveals to Caesar the immense resources Cleopatra has left undeclared, presumably in the interests of an independent future.

Who, in these exchanges, is kidding whom? How theatrical, how mocking, are Cleopatra's responses to Caesar? Is she planning for survival, or parodying Caesar's assumption that survival must be her deepest desire? Is Seleucus treacherous or, as Plutarch suggests, faithful to her wishes? The death-dealing asp is brought by a Countryman, or Clown, whose services must have been engaged

in advance, whom the Roman officers, apparently unsuspecting, allow through their guard. These problems have been discussed endlessly by both dramatic critics and historians (inclined to see traditional stories of Cleopatra's suicide as products of Roman imperial propaganda); one of the most remarkable achievements of Shakespeare's staging is to leave such issues vibrantly unresolved.

Empson wrote no essay on the play, but his page on it – in a chapter focussed on Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* – could be expanded into several essays (Empson 1966, 187-88). He takes as his cue an exchange, shortly after Cleopatra's death, between her maid Charmian, herself dying, and a Roman Guard who enters in apparent dismay at the sight of the Queen's death:

**First Guard** Is this well done?

**Charmian** It is well done and fitting for a princess

Descended of so many royal kings. (*Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2.69)

Empson ruminates on the tonality of the Guard's question; for such a sharp phrasing to be appropriate, he writes,

The other person must have thought the act good, not merely allowable, and yet must be capable of being made to see that it is wrong by a mere appeal. So there must be a powerful and obvious clash of two modes of judgment.

He goes on, in words too succinct to paraphrase;

...by choosing this death [Cleopatra] destroys her children only to avoid a hurt to her pride...the soldier feels she has broken her word to Caesar...Shakespeare's play makes us suspect her of planning to betray Antony, and some of her tantrums can only have seemed comic, vulgar, and wicked – only by a magnificent forcing of the sympathies of the audience is she made a tragic figure in the last act...it is because of this that the answer of Charmian seems to call back and justify Cleopatra's whole life; all her acts were indeed like this one; all therefore fitting for a princess (Empson 1996, 188).

As with Hamlet, Empson here identifies, in a tragic protagonist, princeliness, magnificence, betrayal, and a willingness to inflict and to suffer violence; as with

Hamlet, he emphasises moodiness, or ‘tantrums’. But what he cares about most is ‘a powerful and obvious clash of two modes of judgment’. Cleopatra – let’s say – judges like a Queen; like an Egyptian (rather than a Roman?); like someone supposedly defeated but enacting victory (unlike Caesar, ostensibly victorious but sounding like a policeman or a preacher). Better, Cleopatra is, and talks, like all of these. She sees through and above and around all such conflicting values. She enacts each of them in turn – her option for suicide is, as she says, typically Roman. She is here, there, and everywhere at once – much in little, like one of Empson’s ‘pastoral’ protagonists and heroic-villainous outcasts.

In all this – my transition here serves not Empson’s but my own line of thought – she resembles death; she resembles her own fine speech about death

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‘Tis paltry to be Caesar...  
 ...And it is great  
 To do that thing that ends all other things,  
 That sleeps, and never palates more the dug,  
 The beggar’s nurse, and Caesar’s. (*Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2.3, 4-5, 7-8)

She depicts Caesar, in this mood, as ‘Fortune’s knave’, ‘not being Fortune’. Antony has summed her up as one ‘whom everything becomes’; for Empson, Cleopatra becomes everything – perhaps an ambiguity too pat for him to have bothered to spell out (*Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2.3, 1.1.50). Such a Cleopatra is something more, though nothing less, than a queen. She is a figure of myth – perhaps the goddess Isis. She confronts and embodies the instability of Fortune. Her embrace of the asp is a staging of all this; Empson writes ‘She assumes that the asp’s nature is to enjoy doing harm’ – like her, then – ‘so she pities it as a dupe because it is being used to do some good’ – as, not least for Antony and his memory, she does in her death – and ‘the stupid malice and the mutual mockery...are felt to express some profound truth about the world’ (Empson 1969, 121).

What truth? If Empson had wanted his writing, just here, to bear the weight of an answer to this question he might have seemed clearer or cleverer, as a critic; as a writer, I think, he would have been risking banality. Here I have in mind the terms implicit in my initial presentation of Empson, a man sustaining countervailing and often exclusive pressures – extreme cleverness, with a poet’s



delicacy of ear. For the rest of us banality is not so much a risk as an inevitability. I will suggest that the 'profound truth' relates to the passage quoted earlier, from *Some Versions of Pastoral*, about the balancing risks of waste (within a life of great 'richness', whatever its 'moral' quality) and inaction. Was Cleopatra, in her grand treacherous shifts of mood and allegiance, wasting herself? What were her options?

### Treachery

At this point it is worthwhile to consider further, in relation to both *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Hamlet*, the issue of treachery. Here, moving beyond anything explicit in Empson's discussions of either play, I hope to suggest a context for some important emphases within his treatment of *1* and *2 Henry IV*. It should be clear that Empson, within the general protocols of 'ambiguity' and lexical 'complexity', which frame his writings, above all, on poetry, is, when discussing drama, fascinated by dramatic protagonists who, untrammelled by conventional morality, act decisively, violently, and above all theatrically, at points of crisis. Such points include their own confrontations with death; they also arise where political power is up for grabs.

Now actors, notoriously unreliable, at least have a profession to pursue; people with the responsibilities of rulers who behave like actors invite general disapproval (they are, in Empsonian terms, pastoral outcasts). They certainly don't make reliable friends. They may invoke abstract justifications for their unreliability – 'divine right', Machiavellian maxims, or both at once. Either way, they will be led in practice, as Empson emphasizes, by a pressure towards action, coupled with (as I would call it) an anxiety about its placing and its timing – all this is what I take Empson to mean by his valorisation of 'story-line'. Insofar as timing and placing involve relationships, between protagonists and others, the sustainability of such relationships should, to a protagonist, matter a good deal. Take Cleopatra, then; has she been helped by her reputation for, or her actual practice of, 'treachery'?

*Antony and Cleopatra* depicts Antony, Caesar and Cleopatra as prime agents within a recurrently three-sided structuring of power – they are also the play's three leading, and hence competitive, stage roles. The official Roman 'triumvirate' is rather fragile; Lepidus doesn't justify his position and could usefully be replaced, in a reconstituted triad, by Pompey. Another triadic form appears

in the attachment to both Caesar and Cleopatra of a pair of confidantes (Antony, notably, has just one, Enobarbus.) Triads seemingly involve mutual support; but the play's action gets under way at the point when they come to be treated as invitations for rivalry and for simplification. For Caesar, clearly, even two power-sharers are one too many; hence he finds it in his interest to use Cleopatra to betray Antony. (Arguably, in the end, Antony betrays himself so as to save Cleopatra from, at least, this culminating betrayal.) On Caesar's behalf one might urge that an ostentatious couple, within a threesome, are provoking and unbearable; that is, Caesar assumes treachery against himself and gets his retaliation in first. Such a line of thought, then – to return to the case on which Empson does focus – applies also to Cleopatra. If Antony, committed to her interests on his journey to Rome, finds such commitment compatible with marriage to Caesar's sister, Cleopatra will do well for herself to find a friend in Caesar. Her ships, at Actium, abandon battle. She allows favours to Caesar's ambassador. Melodramatically forgiven by Antony, she relapses into ironic pessimism, skilful inactivity, and a false report of suicide which provokes, in Antony, the real thing. Not every production of the play, and not every Cleopatra, read her role thus; Empson, I am sure, did. Her own suicide, on such a reading, amounts, still, to a theatrical and probably unnecessary act of violence; she could have hoped to extract from Caesar terms of survival better than those communicated by Dolabella. Still, she makes the breakdown of her alliance system a matter of ultimate profit, rather than finding in it – that Empsonian negative – a sense of ultimate waste.

Hamlet's is the reverse case. He might have found allies; surely Polonius and Laertes stood to benefit from being a new king's in-laws? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would surely have lapped up the idea of turning into double agents. It is easy to see how far from such frames of thought Hamlet's own consciousness is made to stand. The only friend Hamlet wants, Horatio, is over-determined towards the role of inactive observer – by his philosophy, his lack of social position, and, not least, his caring love for Hamlet. Arguably he is, though a survivor, another victim of Hamlet's unreliability as a friend, laden with an impossible task of explication (like all critics of *Hamlet*) for all that, in the play and its protagonist, remains inexplicable. Hamlet's supposed hesitancy, conversely, reserves for him a monopoly of action, and of the choices of timing and placing which it requires; if he disappoints and betrays others, he lives (and dies) with an unceasing sense of responsibility to the balance, between his own wastes and his own opportunities, between self-fulfilment and self-betrayal.

## Falstaff

Hamlet might have accepted idleness, and Claudius's assurances, at an ambiguous and corrupt court; Cleopatra could have become Caesar's mistress. What are the easy options for the leading men at the court of Shakespeare's Henry IV? Empson insists that Henry was a usurping king; what positive value could lie in active allegiance to him? How could rebellion against him count as anything other than a waste of energy and virtue? Could skilful or ironic inactivity count as a virtue?

These options can be identified in the roles of Prince Hal, Hotspur, and Falstaff across Shakespeare's two *Henry IV* plays. Similar issues are posed in relation to the Young Man of Shakespeare's Sonnets – the 'summer flower' that 'is to itself most sweet' yet risks 'base infection' (*Sonnet 94*, 9, 11); and a similar challenge is posed by the Duke, in *Measure for Measure*, to Angelo –

...Thyself and thy belongings  
Are not thine own so proper as to waste  
Upon thy virtues, they on thee.  
...For if our virtues  
Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike  
As if we had them not. (*Measure for Measure* 1.1.29-32, 33-35)

Empson discusses both the Sonnet and the play in a chapter of *Some Versions of Pastoral*; another focus of the chapter is the relationship, in the *Henry IV* plays, between Prince Hal and Falstaff (Empson 1966, 75-96). I shall now consider Empson's treatment of the role of Falstaff, on which he wrote at greater length in one of the *Essays on Shakespeare* (1986, 29-78).

Falstaff has never been reckoned as the protagonist of either of the two History plays which stage the reign of Henry IV. Nor, of course, is their titular King these plays' protagonist – rather his son, Prince Hal, who becomes King Henry V in the second play's final Act. Empson has a good deal to say in different contexts about Hal and, as with Hamlet, his princely qualities, not all of them admirable, as many other critics have emphasized. Yet Empson's major essay on the plays is entitled, appropriately and simply, 'Falstaff'. How, then, are Empson's sympathies allocated? This crucial issue, for many readers

and audiences, is one on which Empson's writing is reticent. He focusses less on any 'balance' of judgment or sympathy between the two men, more upon the relationship between them.

He has much good to say of the Prince; thus -

Henry V has a very inspiriting kind of merit, and I think Shakespeare meant us to love him, though in an open-eyed manner; but the idea that Shakespeare presents him as an ideal king seems to me to show a certain lack of moral delicacy (Empson 1986, 37) -

Or again, in the earlier and shorter treatment in *Some Versions of Pastoral* -

The prince is the go-between who can talk their own language to each...he is absorbed into the world of Hotspur as parasitically as into that of Falstaff, and as finally destroys his host there (Empson 1966, 41)

- or, in a letter to E.M.W. Tillyard -

...since a good king worked by magic as a symbol and divine recognition of a good condition in a country he didn't really have to be a good king at all...a king is half outside morality altogether because he is doing a magical job irrelevant to morality... (Empson in: Haffenden 2006, 137)

Falstaff matters for Empson, to some extent, because of his function in the emergence of such a king. He gives him social breadth. He makes him, unlike his Norman and French-speaking ancestors, a true Englishman. Refusing to take his legitimacy seriously, he provokes in him, by imitation, the development of rhetorical and manipulative skills necessary to the son of a usurper seeking a peaceful succession. In this spirit he reminds Hal of the toll taken from the common people in civil wars, as he spells out to him his own rationale as a recruiting officer:

Food for powder, food for powder; they'll fill a pit as well as better; tush, man, mortal men, mortal men. (*1 Henry IV* 4.2.59-61)

Here Empson remarks:

*Mortal* conveys both "all men are in the same boat, all equal before God" and "all you want is slaughter"...[thus making] the squabbles of ambitious and usurping persons... contemptible. (Empson 1966, 91)

His next comment here may stand for a general shift, in the balance and in the intensity of his treatment of the plays, from Hal to Falstaff; 'on the other hand, Falstaff's love for the prince is certainly meant as a gap in his armour' (Empson 1966, 91). For him, Falstaff is crucially vulnerable, in terms of the general principles of public monarchic relationships – 'the obvious moral reflection, obvious not only to the more moralising part of the audience but to all of it, that this kind of man [Hal] made a very unreliable friend' (Empson 1986, 42).

Thus one approaches Empson's presentation of the familiar crux at the end of Shakespeare's second historical Falstaff play; was the rejection, by Prince Hal turned King Henry, of Falstaff necessary, was it, to Falstaff, predictable? Is an audience invited to take Falstaff's political and human expectations seriously, or to care about his rejection?

Empson's extended essay on Falstaff stages an encounter with J.Dover Wilson on this matter; he takes Wilson, with conscious exaggeration, as a representative of hard-hearted critics for whom the only problem posed by the rejection is the fact that it has been found problematic. Dover Wilson had postulated textual revision by Shakespeare; at Agincourt Falstaff was once to have appeared on stage making vulgar jokes which would assist the play's popularity. Nobody now believes this, and few did in Empson's time; Empson used the notion to work up a powerful sense of a Falstaff who did indeed belong in *Henry V* but only as a man dying of a broken heart – while (says Nym rather splendidly) 'The King is a good king, but it must be as it may. He passes some humours and careers' (*Henry V* 2.1.117-18).

Nym's comment stands as an indication that Henry's rejection need not be glamorised – no more than Falstaff's death. It seems likely to me that Empson, for all his parade of judicious amorality, does to some extent glamorise Henry, and, perhaps in compensation, works up complex modes of sympathetic understanding for Falstaff. If so, why? I would return here to Empson's suggestions concerning lives that are rich and fortunate in respect of intimacy; suggestions, equally, about the

importance of action; suggestions about the importance of being prepared to seize opportunities, to make opportunity serve oneself and one's sense of the available richness of life – to seize opportunity even, and precisely, at the risk of waste.

Empson's Henry, and plausibly Shakespeare's Henry, has had his life enriched, in ways already suggested, and ways still to be suggested, through his relationship with Falstaff; his accession to Kingship is, for him, an opportunity; it is a time for action. He risks loss – if not loss of all he has acquired (parasitically, indeed, as Empson suggests) from Falstaff, then certainly a loss of the relational context in which such learning, such a process of education, took place; and he takes this risk and endures, in the eyes of audiences and in the opinion of Falstaff's former friends, whatever such loss may cost him. Falstaff, for his part, is left with the richness – for what, devoid of any outlet in action, such richness may be worth. Henry doesn't seem to regard his own loss as in any way tragic; and it doesn't become Falstaff, in his final words, to acknowledge any sense of tragedy in his own position. Empson writes:

As for what are almost his last words, "Master Shallow, I owe you a thousand pound" ...they are certainly a last boast...Shakespeare did not want to send the old boy off the stage whining and appearing broken...but I suspect the last boast of Falstaff was only just enough to get him off the stage (Empson 1986, 70).

Falstaff, then, is betrayed, and Henry is another Empsonian quasi-mythic protagonist who chooses his moment to abandon his supposed allies and friends. The structuration of the plays' principal roles anticipates, up to a point, that for which I have argued in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Given Hotspur's rebellion, Hal could have sat events out until his father's regime was overthrown or vindicated. Comparable options are open to Falstaff. He counts as enough of a political force to muster troops and sit in on royal counsels. He might seek to undermine the prince's loyalty to his father (this is clearly one way in which the play-acting in the first play's tavern scene could have been developed). Or he might claim a reward, with the King and court, for Hal's actual loyalty – and this is not far from what actually takes place, insofar as he is allocated credit, outrageously, by the Prince for his supposed part in the killing of Hotspur.

Here, again, I am moving beyond any Empsonian analysis of the plays' dramatic narrative. I have argued that Empson is appropriately attentive to the relationship

of Hal and Falstaff, and to Falstaff's impact on the Prince. What, I think, he does not say, but might within the terms of his own treatments have suggested, is that the two roles are in important ways parallel to one another. Both knowingly withdraw from a corrupt Court. Both claim to embody a wide range of social and national feeling. Both, when it comes to a crisis, are shown seizing a moment for positive and decisive action. Both are, thus, Empsonian pastoral roles, outsiders who see and learn and embody tensions and opportunity smaker). Empson writes:

...(Falstaff) was dangerously strong, indeed almost a rebel leader...The King and the dramatist both had to get through a public event...(Falstaff) could become "protector" of the young King; once you admit that he is both an aristocrat and a mob leader he is a familiar very dangerous type (1986, 67-68).

Empson's comments here might usefully have been more specific in terms of time and place; for Falstaff is shown to seize opportunity, just when it might have seemed terminally wasted, no less than Hal or any other Shakespearean prince. Two scenes before Henry's coronation, Falstaff is found drunk, comfortable and comatose, sponging on the hospitality of Justice Shallow in a Gloucestershire orchard; his inertia, which may indeed foreshadow sickness and impending death, embodies also, in his own terms, an achieved richness, verging on complacency. From this he is aroused by Pistol – theatrical, as ever, to the point of insanity – with the news of the old King's death; and opportunity knocks –

I am Fortune's steward...Come, Pistol, utter more to me, and withal devise something to do thyself good...I know the young King is sick for me. Let us take any man's horses: the laws of England are at my commandment. Blessed are they that have been my friends...  
(2 *Henry IV* 5.3.119-125)

Blessed – one may well feel here – so long as they do not include the new King himself. Again, as with Caesar, Henry may be understood better as someone who gets his retaliation in first; one false friend provokes treachery in another.

In rejecting Falstaff, Henry guarantees his death, as Empson, above, implies and subsequently spells out; and his presentation of that death exhibits ambiguities as rich as any of those he elicits from other texts. He takes it as given that

The hero is expected to kill his tutor, in fact it proves that the hero had a real magical skill to produce such a hero (Empson 1986, 36) -

and he presses comparisons not only (as drawn in *Henry V* by Fluellen) with Alexander who killed his friend but with Socrates (tutor of Plato and all Western philosophers) who, as in Mistress Quickly's story of Falstaff's death, died by a coldness moving, gradually, upwards, from legs, to knees, and onwards... Thus, like Socrates,

Falstaff... was a wise teacher killed by a false accusation of corrupting young men (Empson 1986, 52)

Very strikingly, upon the issues of Falstaff's rejection and death, Empson is found - by a careful reader - making a positive and rather direct acknowledgment of an idea from an earlier and major critic:

The real case against Hal, in the reasonable view of A.C. Bradley, is that he was dishonest in not warning Falstaff beforehand that he would have to reject him after coronation, and still more in pretending on that occasion that Falstaff had misled him (Empson 1986, 69).

As Empson comments, such advance warning would belong within a very different kind of relationship; but to say this is to see Shakespeare's insistence not only on the public aspects of the two roles, but also upon the inherent value of a violently shocking theatrical event;

Shakespeare wanted, and arranged, to end his play with this rather unnerving bang.... a rather peculiar dramatic effect, imposing considerable strain, as most critics have felt whether they accepted it or not. (Empson 1986, 69)

No gentle transition, then, would do. And

...the apparently coarse treatment may involve profound or at least magical thinking. There seems room for the suggestion of J.I.M.



Stewart, that Henry was felt to require before he arrived at Agincourt the *mana* which came from sacrificing the representative of a real divinity, or a tutor of heroes. (Empson 1986, 70)

Here Empson appears rather clearly as a writer of his time, fascinated by the speculations of recent anthropologists about the roots of ancient tragedy; here, if anywhere in Empson, a taste for myth and a sense for modernism coincide. It may be useful, then, in conclusion to cite Fredric Jameson's view of Hamlet, drawn from the rather different conceptual framework of Sartrean existentialism:

...we can see why "power", the succession, meant lapsing into *being*; becoming only that, once and for all, and for good, losing the satisfaction of multiple possibilities. (Jameson 2019, 92-93)

Where Jameson sees 'lapse into being' Empson, I suggest, precedes him with his categories of 'value', 'opportunity', and 'waste'. Moreover, where Jameson identifies loss, Empson would arguably perceive sacrifice. Paul Fry's excellent monograph on Empson is subtitled 'Prophet Against Sacrifice', in keeping with the robust polemics of the post-war Empson against what he took to be a neo-Christian obsession with the supposed virtues of unworldly renunciation and a covert identification, within doctrines of the Crucifixion and Atonement, with stances of sadism, or masochism, or both (Fry 1991). Empson might have accepted that such identification, if in any way operative, was involved also in some of the 'mythical' beliefs – about tragedy and scapegoats, about treachery and theatricality – which, in his great pre-war masterpieces, he traced within poetic ambiguities and pastoral literature, and which, I have suggested, he was concerned to identify in Shakespeare's plays. His Shakespearean writing (I mean the adjective in several senses) offers an uneasy but fruitful tension between such polemic and such acceptance.

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