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CAMBRIDGE OPERA HANDBOOKS

Giuseppe Verdi:

# *Falstaff*

JAMES A. HEPOKOSKI



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# Giuseppe Verdi

## *Falstaff*

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## CAMBRIDGE OPERA HANDBOOKS

### *General preface*

This is a series of studies of individual operas, written for the serious opera-goer or record-collector as well as the student or scholar. Each volume has three main concerns. The first is historical: to describe the genesis of the work, its sources or its relation to literary prototypes, the collaboration between librettist and composer, and the first performance and subsequent stage history. This history is itself a record of changing attitudes towards the work, and an index of general changes of taste. The second is analytical and is grounded in a very full synopsis which considers the opera as a structure of musical and dramatic effects. In most volumes there is also a musical analysis of a section of the score, showing how the music serves or makes the drama. The analysis, like the history, naturally raises questions of interpretation, and the third concern of each volume is to show how critical writing about an opera, like production and performance, can direct or distort appreciation of its structural elements. Some conflict of interpretation is an inevitable part of this account; editors of the handbooks reflect this — by citing classic statements, by commissioning new essays, by taking up their own critical position. A final section gives a select bibliography, a discography and guides to other sources.

### **Books published**

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*other volumes in preparation*

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# Contents

General preface	page v
List of illustrations	viii
Acknowledgments	ix
1 Synopsis	1
2 The forging of the libretto	19
3 The composition of the opera	35
4 Milan, Rome, and Paris: three versions of <i>Falstaff</i>	54
5 Musical technique and structure	85
Formal design	
Harmonic practice	
The structure of II.i	
6 The interpretation of <i>Falstaff</i> : Verdi's guidelines	110
7 A brief stage history	129
8 A guide to critical assessments and interpretations	138
The place of <i>Falstaff</i> in the Verdian <i>oeuvre</i> :	
the Wagner problem	
Falstaff as 'Typological Figure': three recent interpretations	
Epilogue	
A Shakespearean perspective: Verdi and Boito as translators	152
by Graham Bradshaw	
Bibliography	172
Discography	176
by Malcolm Walker	
Index	178

## *Illustrations*

Costume design for Falstaff by Adolph Hohenstein	<i>frontispiece</i>
Fig. 1 The first vocal score: part of the original II.ii ensemble	<i>pages</i> 57-65
Fig. 2 The first vocal score: original conclusion of III.i	70-4
Fig. 3 Adolph Hohenstein's original set for I.i and II.i (1892)	114
Fig. 4 Adolph Hohenstein's original set for I.ii (1892)	114
Fig. 5 Adolph Hohenstein's original set for II.ii (1892)	115
Fig. 6 Adolph Hohenstein's original set for III.i (1892)	115
Fig. 7 Adolph Hohenstein's original set for III.ii (1892)	116
Fig. 8 Costume design for Alice (Adolph Hohenstein, 1892)	118
Fig. 9 Costume design for Mistress Quickly (Adolph Hohenstein, 1892)	118
Fig. 10 Costume design for Ford (Adolph Hohenstein, 1892)	120
Fig. 11 Costume design for Falstaff (Adolph Hohenstein, 1892)	122
Fig. 12 Costume design for Falstaff, Act III (Adolph Hohenstein, 1892)	122



# 1 *Synopsis*

Few operas begin with such a rush of activity as that which launches Verdi's last opera, *Falstaff*. Gone are even the traces of the familiar overtures, preludes, *introduzioni*, and introductory choral tableaux of his previous works; all have been relinquished in favour of a sudden plunge into headlong activity. In *Falstaff* we have a mere seven bars of boisterous *fortissimo* music before we are swept up in rapid dialogue.

The action of the opera unfolds during a single day in early fifteenth-century Windsor. The first part of Act I takes place inside the Garter Inn, where we immediately encounter one of its standard fixtures, the witty Sir John Falstaff. Aging and corpulent, this knight is now concerned only with supporting the self-indulgence that produced his enormous girth in the first place. At curtain-rise Falstaff has just sealed two letters at his writing-desk – the beginning of another intrigue – and has settled down to drink his beloved sack, when an enraged Dr Cajus ('the renowned French physician' of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, although his occupation is never made explicit in the opera) bursts into the room to howl accusations at him.

The opening seven bars, jaggedly mirroring Cajus' fulminations, are justly famous for the momentum that they impart to both the scene and the whole opera. The very first sound – an explosive C major chord for full orchestra – trips the *commedia lirica* into immediate motion, largely because Verdi places it on the 'weak' second beat of the bar, after an initial beat of silence; the remainder of the three-bar phrase can be heard as an effort to regain one's balance, whereupon the *fortissimo* detonation (now on G) recurs to mix things up once again. The effect of all of this is to initiate an ongoing movement that comes to rest only at the conclusion of Act III.

Cajus proceeds to denounce the fat knight: Falstaff has beaten his servants, worn out his horses and broken into his house, and now the doctor demands an explanation. Throughout this thunderstorm of imputation Falstaff stretches out, unperturbed, in a large chair, surrounded

by his thieving henchmen, the red-nosed Bardolfo and the inflammatory Pistola, and calmly orders more sherry from the Host. His response to Cajus is an unruffled acknowledgment of guilt:

Ecco la mia risposta:  
Ho fatto ciò che hai detto . . . L'ho fatto apposta.

Here is my answer:  
I've done what you said . . . On purpose.

The amazed Cajus, clearly a man with connections, threatens to bring the matter to the royal council, but Falstaff closes the issue by assuring the doctor that this would only provoke their laughter.

Defeated on his first charge, Cajus turns to Bardolfo to hurl a second, as the full orchestra again sounds the *fortissimo* wrath figure with which the opera began. Bardolfo and Pistola, he claims, got him drunk yesterday and used the opportunity to pick his pocket. When Bardolfo, feigning offence, denies the charge, all eyes turn to Pistola, who not only pleads innocence but also challenges his accuser as a liar: this provokes a round of name-calling. Finally, Bardolfo manages to come up with an explanation for Cajus: the doctor merely drank himself senseless and dreamed that he had been robbed. 'I fatti son negati,' concludes Falstaff, 'Vattene in pace' ('The facts are denied; Go in peace'). Cajus storms out, proclaiming:

Giuro  
Che se mai mi ubbriaco ancora all'osteria  
Sarà fra gente onesta, sobria, civile e pia.

I swear  
That if I ever get drunk again at the inn  
It will be with people who are honest, sober, civil, and pious.

Pistola and Bardolfo mock the doctor's exit with a canonic 'Amen' in academic counterpoint (a nearly strict canon at the second – the joke, of course, lies in the thieves' exaggerated following of the rules), until Sir John turns on them with hostility for their inept cozenage. The two attendants receive his short lecture by beginning another 'Amen'. Falstaff cuts them short and proceeds to examine his weekly bill at the inn. As he reads '6 polli: 6 scellini' ('6 chickens: 6 shillings'), we hear the first instance of the widely spaced, unusual orchestral effects that appear throughout the score: here, French horns play a sustained open fifth, E–B, with an enormous gap of two and a half octaves between the notes. After Falstaff asks Bardolfo to search his pocketbook for money, the orchestral texture changes to arpeggiated figurations in the low violas,

and high, resonant intervals in the flute and piccolo help to suggest *Falstaff's unnatural relish for the thirst-provoking 'acciuga' ('anchovy') that he finds listed on the bill.*

When Falstaff learns that he possesses only two marks and a penny, he flies into a rage and blames his spendthrift lackeys, especially the hapless Bardolfo, whom he disparages in a sudden *arioso*:

So che se andiam, la notte, di taverna in taverna  
Quel tuo naso ardentissimo mi serve da lanterna;  
Ma quel risparmiu d'olio me lo consumi in vino.

I know that if we go from tavern to tavern at night  
Your blazing nose serves me as a lantern;  
But what I save in oil you consume for me in wine.

Bardolfo and Pistola are becoming too expensive, he insists, shouting yet another order for wine. Too expensive indeed — for he dares not slacken his own gluttony, as he explains in a passage that begins with an extraordinary piccolo—cello doubling:

Se Falstaff s'assottiglia  
Non è più lui, nessun più l'ama; in quest'addome  
C'è un migliaio di lingue che annunciano il mio nome.

... Quest'è il mio regno.  
Lo ingrandirò.

Were Falstaff to slim down  
He wouldn't be himself any longer; nobody would love him;  
In this abdomen there are a thousand tongues that announce  
my name.

... This is my kingdom.  
I shall enlarge it.

Everything to this point has been introductory. Falstaff now turns to the true plot of the comedy — his attempt to line his pocketbook by seducing the beautiful wives of the rich townsmen Ford and Page. The knight foolishly believes that Alice Ford even has a romantic interest in him, so much so that her sparkling desire seemed once to confide to him 'Io son di Sir John Falstaff' ('I am yours, Sir John Falstaff'). Meg Page also holds the key to her husband's wealth, he explains, and he hands his recently completed love-letters to his associates for a speedy delivery.

At that point the inconceivable occurs. Pistola refuses to be a pander; Bardolfo likewise declines to deliver the letter on the principle of honour. The outraged Falstaff calls for his page, gives him the letters, and, in one of the major solo pieces of the opera, wheels around to lecture his

men about this so-called 'honour'. The main portion of this very free monologue is in the form of a catechism:

Può l'onore riempirvi la pancia?  
 No. Può l'onore rimettervi uno stinco? Non può.  
 Né un piede? No. Né un dito? No. Né un capello? No.

Can this honour fill your belly?  
 No. Can this honour give you back a leg? No.  
 Nor a foot? No. Nor a finger? No. Nor a hair? No.

Honour is a mere word, mere air, he asserts, and he concludes by emphatically rejecting the very concept of it: 'e per me non ne voglio, no, no, no!' ('as for me, I don't want it, no, no, no!'). The scene closes rapidly as the knight discharges his men and drives them from the inn with a broom, as *fortissimo* woodwind and brass recall the catechistic section of the Honour Monologue at whirlwind tempo.

The scene changes to a garden outside Ford's cottage. A brief, bustling introduction ushers in the four women of the comedy: Alice Ford, her very marriageable daughter Nannetta, Meg Page, and Mistress Quickly – for the purposes of this opera merely a friend, no reference being made to her role in *The Merry Wives* as Dr Cajus' housekeeper and general go-between. Alice and Meg soon discover that they have both received love-letters from Sir John. They exchange the letters and read aloud: 'Fulgida Alice! amor t'offro, amor bramo' ('Radiant Alice! I offer you love, I long for love'). They discover at once that, except for the names, the letters are identical. In this early portion of the letter the recurrent pseudo-melancholy English-horn phrase evokes Sir John in wooing mood: a triplet sigh leads to a gentle descent and thence to a concluding note awkwardly beyond the lower limit of the instrument – the final tonic has to be supplied by a clarinet, which thus without warning alters the mood established by the English-horn timbre. Falstaff's message, however, becomes increasingly ardent. Verdi provides the concluding lines of the knight's doggerel with a particularly lustrous setting:

Facciamo il paio in un amor ridente  
 Di donna bella e d'uom appariscente,  
 E il viso tuo su me risplenderà  
 Come una stella sull'immensità.  
 In laughing love let's form a couple,  
 Beautiful lady and striking man,  
 And your face shall shine on me  
 As a star upon immensity.

Breaking into laughter that quickly changes to mischief, the wives

determine to be revenged on their plump suitor. In an unaccompanied quartet, 'Quell'otre! quel tino!' ('That wineskin! That barrel!'), the four women each discharge sixteen lines of insults at Falstaff – even the delicate Nannetta uncharacteristically insists that she would like to see 'quell'orco sudar' ('that ogre sweat'). Their quartet is succeeded by a quintet of men, likewise singing dissimilar texts simultaneously: the cashiered Bardolfo and Pistola are trying to inform Ford of Falstaff's plan to seduce his wife, while Dr Cajus, whom Ford intends to be Nannetta's future husband, and young Fenton, truly in love with Nannetta, are also present. As the confusion dies away, Pistola relishes the opportunity to tell Ford precisely what Falstaff is concocting. Bardolfo, for his part, delights in suggesting to Ford that he is already beginning to resemble a cuckold: 'Le corna!' ('Horns!'). 'Brutta parola!', shouts Ford ('Horrible word!'); he instantly resolves to keep a close watch on his wife and Falstaff.

Here occurs the first of the many mercurial shifts of mood – musical flicks of the wrist – that are among the most astonishing features of the opera. In the present instance the two plotting groups, men and women, catch sight of one another, each group believing itself to be unseen. Young Fenton now spots Nannetta Ford and lingers on stage as each group exits *sotto voce*. Within twelve rapid bars virtually everyone is whisked offstage, leaving only Fenton and Nannetta, whose love-meetings appear here and there throughout the work, precisely as Boito had suggested to Verdi in the early stages of their planning: 'from the beginning to the end of the comedy they will steal kisses from each other, hidden in corners, carefully, ardently, without being discovered, with short, fresh lines and brief, rapid, and clever dialogues' (*Carteggio Verdi-Boito* 1978: I, 145).

In this miniature duet, 'Labbra di foco' ('Lips of fire'), the young lovers have only a few moments in which to display the purity and innocence of their love, so much in contrast with the jaded propositioning of Falstaff and the growing jealousy of Ford. Very shortly after the *duettino* begins, it is interrupted by the sound of someone approaching. There is time only for an affectionate parting, a lingering on two lines (of Boccaccian origin: see Chapter 2) that suggest a mutual pledge of the perpetual self-renewal of their love:

Bocca baciata non perde ventura.  
Anzi rinnova come fa la luna.

A mouth once kissed loses not its future.  
Rather, it renews itself like the moon.

All at once the women are back to elaborate the details of their revenge; Alice designates Mistress Quickly as an ambassador to invite Falstaff to a liaison. Once the plot is laid and relished, the wives exit after a vocal fanfare to the words 'Che gioia!' ('What joy!'). Alone briefly again, Fenton and Nannetta sing a playfully varied repetition of their earlier love-music.

The men re-enter. Ford now explains that he has decided upon a visit to Falstaff under a false name – we later learn that this will be 'Signor Fontana' ('Master Brook') – to keep abreast of the knight's intentions. Bardolfo and Pistola, still smarting from their abrupt dismissal, agree to help him.

The remainder of the scene is reprise: a repetition of the polytextual men's quintet and women's quartet – now performed simultaneously, in different metres (2/2 and 6/8), leading to a new, lyrical melody for Fenton, sung against the remaining eight voices. After the men depart, the women excitedly bid each other farewell and affirm their intention of making Falstaff's belly swell to the point of bursting. Both the anticipated inflation and explosion receive graphic orchestral depiction: the former ('si gonfia') by brief, sequentially ascending lines in the woodwind, and the latter ('e poi crepa') by a raucous, rushing chromatic plunge in the bassoons and trombones. The act concludes with the wives' memory of the final two lines of their love-letters, with the words now modified to suggest that *they* have taken control of the situation ('But my face shall shine on *him*').

Act II Part i brings us back to the Garter Inn, where Falstaff is stretched out in his usual chair. Affecting contrition, Bardolfo and Pistola apologize to their master. Presumed amends having thus been made, Bardolfo introduces Mistress Quickly. Quickly curtsies in feigned respect, addresses Falstaff as 'Reverenza' ('Your Reverence'), and waits for him to order his two men out to insure privacy.

After another curtsy ('Reverenza') Quickly haltingly delivers her message: Alice Ford ('Ahimè! Povera donna!' – 'Alas! Poor woman!'), she claims, loves the knight and has bidden her to tell him that her husband is absent every day 'dalle due alle tre' ('from two until three o'clock'). Sir John is delighted, of course, and even more astonished when Quickly informs him that Meg Page (likewise a 'povera donna') has also sent her, but that her husband, unfortunately, rarely leaves the house. Falstaff gives Quickly a coin for her welcome information. She leaves after an even deeper curtsy, 'M'inchino' ('I bow'), to her 'Reverenza' music.

'Alice è mia!' ('Alice is mine!'), roars Falstaff, and the orchestra breaks into hearty, *fortissimo* laughter. In one of the many tiny solo pieces of the opera Falstaff now swaggeringly congratulates himself on his virile seductive powers: 'Va, vecchio John, va, va per la tua via' ('Go, old John, go, go your way'). No sooner do we hear again the exuberant orchestral laughter than Bardolfo returns to announce the arrival of a 'Mastro Fontana' – Ford in disguise. As 'Fontana' is being escorted inside the inn, Falstaff, riding high on his supposed invincibility, sings a fleeting memory of 'Va, vecchio John'. Ford enters – the string accompaniment with its hint of an ass's bray may well disclose his anxieties at the moment – bows, and, after the customary pleasantries, begins his story: 'In me vedete un uom' ch'ha un'abbondanza grande' ('In me you see a man of great abundance'). Learning of his visitor's wealth and generosity, Falstaff welcomes him with open arms: 'Caro signor Fontana!' ('Dear Master Brook!').

Realizing that Bardolfo and Pistola are overhearing all of this, Falstaff orders them out of the room. Ford then proceeds to display a sack of money (the jingle of the silver is suggested in the orchestra: triangle, arco and pizzicato strings, constant quaver motion with grace notes on virtually every half-beat) and offers to give it to Falstaff, providing that the latter can assist him in his unhappy pursuit of the married woman who has so far rejected all of his advances:

C'è a Windsor una dama, bella e leggiadra molto,  
Si chiama Alice; è moglie d'un certo Ford.

In Windsor there is a woman, very beautiful and graceful;  
Her name is Alice; she's the wife of a certain Ford.

Falstaff, amazed, begs this 'Master Brook' to continue. Ford relates his sorrowful tale with great passion, and expands particularly in a beautiful sequential phrase, 'Per lei sprecai tesori' ('For her I have squandered treasures'). All was in vain, he says; he has remained unnoticed, nervous, on her steps, singing a madrigal, 'L'amor, l'amor che non ci dà mai tregue' ('Love, love, that never gives us respite') – a melody that builds once again to the expansive sequential phrase, this time with even more powerfully directed harmonies.

Ford then comes to the point: Sir John is a gentleman, a warrior, and a man of the world, and he can spend all of 'Brook's' money ('Spendetele!') provided that he seduce Alice Ford – for it is only after she has succumbed to Falstaff's irresistible powers, he asserts, that he himself will have a chance to conquer her. All of this is expressed in a

few smooth phrases of roguish insinuation, with Ford's lines sensuously doubled by cello and bassoon:

Ma se voi l'espugnate, poi, posso anch'io sperar;  
Da fallo nasce fallo e allor . . . Che ve ne par?

But if you besiege and win, then I too can hope;  
One sin leads to another . . . What do you think?

Falstaff jumps at the bargain, accepts the money, and assures 'Fontana' that he will indeed possess Ford's wife. And then, to Ford's surprise and mounting fury, he recounts his invitation to meet her 'dalle due alle tre' and brazenly mocks the husband whom he believes he has not yet met. As Ford listens in wide-eyed humiliation, Falstaff's ridicule climaxes in the repeated phrase 'Te lo cornifico, netto! netto!' ('I'll put horns on his head, neatly! neatly!').

After Sir John leaves to groom himself for his rendezvous, Ford begins a powerful soliloquy — one of the strongest solo pieces in the opera:

È sogno? o realtà . . . Due rami enormi  
Crescon sulla mia testa.

Is this a dream? Or reality? Two enormous branches  
Are growing out of my head.

The psychological accompaniment exposes Ford's deepest fears: as we hear the sound of 'horns' (the pun 'corni — corna' works equally well in Italian) and the bass-line triplets of 'dalle due alle tre', the anticipated hour of his cuckolding, Ford begins to complain:

L'ora è fissata, tramato l'inganno;  
Sei gabbato e truffato!  
E poi diranno  
Che un marito geloso è un insensato!

The hour is fixed, the deception planned;  
You are tricked and duped!  
And then they will say  
That a jealous husband is a madman!

Ford expresses his fears of ridicule, sneers, and whistles (represented by the humiliating 'Te lo cornifico' idea in the accompaniment) and declares with scorn that his wife cannot be trusted. In a rage his thoughts turn to Falstaff. He raises himself to fever pitch with thoughts of how he will first couple the knight with his wife and then catch him. The soliloquy ends with steel-fisted resolution:

Vendicherò l'affronto!  
Laudata sempre sia  
Nel fondo del mio cor la gelosia.



I will avenge this affront!  
From the bottom of my heart  
May my jealousy be praised.

But, as is so common in *Falstaff*, the mood now shifts rapidly. The unsuspecting Sir John re-enters in new clothes – courting clothes – to invite Ford to accompany him for a short walk to Alice's house. As they leave, each pauses to permit the other to exit first – a mild bit of farce after Ford's intense monologue. Ultimately, they decide to go through the door at the same time ('*Passiamo insieme*'). The orchestra brings down the curtain by playing the exuberant laughter motive that had earlier framed Falstaff's 'Va, vecchio John'.

Meanwhile, in a room in Ford's house – Act II Part ii – Alice and Meg are gleefully setting the trap for Falstaff. The scene opens with a busy, staccato string introduction. Within a few moments Quickly enters, bursting with news about her visit to the Garter Inn. She requires little prodding to tell what happened:

Giunta all'Albergo della Giarrettiera  
Chiedo d'esser ammessa alla presenza  
Del Cavalier, segreta messaggera.

Once I had arrived at the Garter Inn,  
I asked to be admitted into the presence  
Of the knight – as a secret messenger.

Quickly's solo piece bears many of the qualities of Verdi's earlier operatic *racconti*, or narrative solos: she relates a story of past events in music flexible enough to capture the spirit of her tale but not to lapse into mere recitative. In fact, she holds the principal melodic flowering of her solo in reserve for the end of her story, when she assures the others that Falstaff actually believed her: 'Infin, per farla spiccia' ('Finally, to be brief').

Now realizing that Falstaff will arrive at any moment, the wives hurry to complete their preparations. Alice bids the servants to carry in the basket of laundry – an essential element of the plot. She notices, however, that Nannetta is not sharing in the mischievous mood; the latter explains that she is weeping because her father insists that she marry Dr Cajus. This is apparently the first that Alice has heard of this ridiculous complication, and she promises her daughter that she need fear no such marriage. Thus fortified in spirit, Nannetta joins the other three women in setting the traps to snare Falstaff: a chair here, a lute there, and an open folding screen placed between the laundry basket and the hearth.