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In his song "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" (1966), Bob Dylan sings, "Well, Shakespeare he's in the alley/With his pointed shoes and his bells" (Dylan 228). Dylan's image of an out-of-his-time Shakespeare relegated to some alley always remains strangely compelling because of its incongruity. Curiously, this odd image is seemingly brought to life in Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), a modern retelling of the Henriad, when the bum Bad George appears late in the film, wearing shoes that are, in fact, adorned "with bells." This alley-figure arrives fittingly near the culmination of the film, which attempts to move Shakespeare into the streets.

Shortly after the success of *Drugstore Cowboy*, Gus Van Sant looked to create his next film from two screenplays he already had—one the story of hustlers and the other an updated adaptation of *Henry IV.*[1] Van Sant's film is a remake of Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight* (1965), an ambitious film taken from the *Henry* plays which tells the story of Falstaff. Thus, *Idaho* transforms *Chimes*, which reformats Shakespeare's version of Holinshead's history. Van Sant's inspirations also include *Silas Marner*, *The Satyricon*, and Dickens (Loud 35), but his greatest inspiration is clearly and admittedly Welles's film, to which he is paying homage as much as he is reviving Shakespeare (Johnson 101). *Chimes* was Van Sant's introduction to the story, and he started his screenplay upon seeing the picture (Simon, "Urban" 61).

Finding the tale of King Henry and Falstaff "a natural street story" (Ansen 68), Van Sant began fashioning a story in modern Portland, as he found a "gritty quality" in the *Henry IV* plays (Fuller xxv). (He, in fact, originally planned to cast the film with actual street hustlers [Ansen 68]). To bring the concepts in *Chimes* to the modern Northwest, Van Sant reworked dialogue and utilized basic plot. The result is "Van Sanitized" Shakespeare. The film's design, described as "Denny's Meets Shakespeare," is an intriguing mix of elements that includes costumes which evoke Elizabethan dress as well as more recent fashion and decor (Loud 36). (Bad George's footwear—and, indeed, his entire "Michael Jacksonian" outfit—seem to suggest a court fool). The script similarly shows elements of both modern street slang and Shakespearean dialogue. Gus Van Sant takes traditional scenes and speeches and adapts them, creating lines that echo the Bard while also conjuring images of the street scene of hustlers. For example, Shakespeare's "Unless hours were cups of sack...and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping-houses . . . ," in a speech by Hal (*1 Henry IV* 1.2. 6-9), becomes "Why, you wouldn't even look at a clock, unless hours were lines of coke, [or] dials looked like the signs of gay bars . . ." (Ansen 68). The attempt to make the film fit the modern Portland scene required changing the tone of the language as well. Hal's question, "How long is 't ago, Jack, since thou sawest thine own knee?" (*1 Henry IV* 2.4. 324), thus becomes Scott's question, "How long has it been, Bob, since you could see your own dick?" (Van Sant, 1990 41). Even with such alterations, the film shows

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the influence of Shakespeare. Unlike the Welles predecessor, which cites writing credits for Welles, Holinshead, and Shakespeare, Van Sant's movie is presented as his own; Van Sant is the writer, with a credit announcing "additional dialogue by William Shakespeare."

The story has moved to modern Portland and the scene to that of street hustlers. Prince Hal becomes Scott Favor, young son of Portland's mayor (King Henry IV), who is currently in disfavor with his father, for he spends his time with hustlers and drug addicts. The older Bob Pigeon, Scott's former lover, mentor, and "true father" (or so Scott proclaims), steps into the role of Falstaff, speaking Van Sanitized versions of Falstaff's speeches, with varying degrees of alteration. Budd and company represent Shallow and company who frequent the Boar's Head tavern (in the plays and *Chimes*). Jane Lightwork, who owns the old hotel where the characters spend their time (the film's equivalent to the Boar's Head), takes the part held by Mistress Quickly, although her name also alludes to Jane Nightwork, an old friend whom Shallow mentions to Falstaff in *2 Henry IV* (3.2.204) (and in the beginning of *Chimes* as the two recall how old they have become).

More complicated, however, is the role of Mike Waters, a narcoleptic hustler who becomes Scott's companion and lover during the film. A literal reading of the film names Mike as Poins, Hal's friend and fellow prankster, but this parallel is mostly one of convenience. Mike often is fit into such a third-wheel character role as that of Ned Poins in attempts to explain the film's resettings of the plays and *Chimes*, but such readings are literal, and Van Sant has not created a literal transfer of the story. (The Poins suggestion for Mike also seems to fit because of prior interpretations of Hal and Poins as lovers [Jorgens 115, Pilkington 151].) Mike, however, does not take either the role of the oft-suggested Poins (Willson 34) or the role of Hotspur (Simon, "Urban" 61, Wiseman 232). The Poins role (if it has to be assigned) more closely could be placed on fellow hustler Gary; the latter tension in the film between Mike and Scott causes the Hotspur speculation, but this parallel is more accurately found in Scott's (mentioned but unseen) cousin, offered as a model of good behavior.

Mike is, in fact, a second avatar of Falstaff in this restructured Henriad. Bob Pigeon is the traditional Falstaff, recognizable by his girth, his age, and his wit, but Mike also takes the role of the knight in Van Sant's film. Van Sant explains that, when he first saw *Chimes* (and was thus inspired to offer his version of the story), he saw the chance to tell the story of Prince Hal "slumming on the streets with his sidekick. The young Henry seemed to be Scott and the sidekick seemed to be Mike" (Fuller xxv). Some references are made that suggest connections between Bob and Mike, the conventional and unconventional Falstaffs. When Mike first appears, he wears a mechanic's shirt with a label that names him "Bob."[2] The connection between the two characters is emphasized and underscored by this immediate link.

Idaho is both at the center and the margins of this film, and Idaho is a commonality for these two characters. It is part of Bob's history: He tells Budd, "It seems my friends know that I've just returned from Boise." This state is also Mike's past, present, and future. He is there when the film starts and finishes, and he visits it during the course of the film as he searches for his mother. It is Mike who says he wants to see Bob, not Bob's former lover, Scott. In the plays, Hal is pulled into the prank on Falstaff by Poins; in *Idaho*, Mike is pulled into the prank by Scott, rather than the reverse. Mike is hesitant to pull a prank on Bob, suggesting and establishing an empathy for him.

Mike's presence is important in this version of the Henriad. He is the younger Falstaff, who, before the events of the plays, cavorted with Hal as a brother. This character is never actually seen; by the time of the plays, Falstaff has grown old, and Hal has begun to pull away. The reader/viewer meets allusions to past adventures, but, as Pauline Kael notes in her review of *Chimes*, "we never really see the friendship of Prince Hal and Falstaff," and "we must take it for granted" (299). Falstaff represents "both youth and age"; the knight "conceives of himself as young and old simultaneously" (Buchman 43). Mike and Bob together comprise both of these facets of the character. Bob fulfills the traditional role for Falstaff, while Mike represents the unseen but assumed Falstaff and his relationship with

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the prince before the action of the plays begin. With Scott and Mike, viewers can watch the pair's brotherhood unfold.

With this pseudo-brotherhood in place, Van Sant's film subsequently re-examines and places in new context the Hal-Falstaff relationship. Bob Pigeon, the so-called "traditional" Falstaff, is both Scott's "true father" and his former lover. Mike, the roustabout companion Falstaff, is certainly more a brother than a father for Scott, yet again the relationship is displaced by the degrees of the pair's intimacy. Mike is both lover and companion to Scott, and the two share adventures travelling together. Bob was an earlier lover, but time has separated the pair; as the older man, Bob is presented as the (former) father figure for Scott—a mentor who is no longer kept, and, supposedly, no longer needed. At once, Mike is both young Falstaff enjoying good times with his friend, as shown in various scenes between Mike and Scott, and older Falstaff (a Falstaff now of both youth and age), feeling his age and sensing the inevitable end, as shown in his early distrust for Scott (Mike asks Scott if Scott makes money with Mike's unconscious body when he has passed out in a narcoleptic attack). Mike and Bob seem to possess intriguing connections throughout the film, and these mixed reactions from Mike (wanting to be with Scott yet showing an uneasy distrust for him at the same time) suggest that he and Bob share similar feelings as they encounter and deal with the mayor's favored son. Again, a literal reading is that, while Bob is surrogate father, Mike is surrogate brother, but in *Idaho*'s context of mixed/confused identities and pasts, Mike also shows elements of the older facet of the character.

The father-son dynamic is present in a slightly altered state with Mike and Scott. Mike falls in love with Scott, while Scott and Bob (the father-figure) were also once lovers, so he replaces the father-lover. Earlier in his life, Scott rejected his natural father (and his only living parent) to follow his surrogate parent and "true father," Bob Pigeon. As he is turning from this parent, he finds support in Mike (although, admittedly, Mike is another surrogate family member to be betrayed). Scott accompanies and supports Mike as Mike searches in vain for his mother, whom he only remembers in grainy memories. Mike reveals that the father he supposedly lost was actually a surrogate and a fake; this fact echoes Scott's own surrogate fathers and the breaks he makes with them. When Scott deserts Mike and Bob (and the rest of the gang), they are left to find their homes and family with each other as a band of outcasts, not the choice they desired. Scott finds in his brother-figure Mike and his father-figure Bob a form of stability and a support. Mike the hustler and Bob the chiseler both offer Scott comfort and happiness; they, in turn, also find the possibilities of these strengths in Scott, yet he turns them away.

The father/brother dynamic is underscored by Van Sant as he presents Mike's search for a family (specifically his mother—a character type notably absent from the Henry plays). While visiting his brother, Mike reveals that he knows the truth: his brother is his father, continuing the questions of families and home that persist throughout the film (also underscoring the notion of a dual father/brother existence in and with the Falstaff role(s)). Mike's search for a home remains unsuccessful. After being left by Scott, Mike joins with Bob and company, attempting to find his family in this band of hustlers. With Bob's death, however, he is left once again alone on the road, searching for a home.

Van Sant's film further muddles Falstaff's identity by transgendering it with another Shakespearean character, Doll Tearsheet, "the prostitute with a heart of gold" who is in love with Falstaff. In Van Sant's re-creation, she is replaced and compounded with the relationship of Scott and Mike (the younger Falstaff). Mike the hustler is in love with Scott the privileged (although the latter is also a hustler); thus, the parallel for Doll's role is present, but it is complicated by Mike's two-fold affection for Scott. While Falstaff cannot (or so he suggests) consummate his affections for Doll, Mike and Scott may, in fact, consummate theirs. (The potential consummation is off-screen, but it may be "one of Mike's stupefied reveries" [Greenberg 24].) While the parallel relationship is established, lines are also confused; both Mike and Scott are hustlers, so either could represent Doll; as Mike takes the Falstaff part, Scott could represent the prostitute, yet Scott's aversion to loving anyone who does not pay him parallels Falstaff's holding back from a relationship with Doll. Mike, like

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Doll, is in love with someone who claims he cannot love back. Falstaff loves Doll, but treats her in a paternalistic manner, allowing him to share affection without passion. Scott may care for Mike, but he tries to avoid a relationship, saying he only has sex for money. Scott's protection of Mike when Mike passes out suggests a paternalistic, protective care.

The pair may consummate their feelings, but the consummation is followed shortly by Scott leaving Mike for a woman, so Scott suggests a fickleness in his approaches to love. Throughout the film, established hierarchies of need and self-sufficiency (even in the case of an uncaring Falstaff) are unsettled and overturned to reveal that people are dependent on one another for companionship and love regardless of status. No level of status (prince, old knight, or hustler; man or woman; young or old) is inviolable or immune to the need to be part of someone else's life.

In this film, the Falstaffs are not slumming knights but are, in fact, characters of the slums and streets. Instead of a man of slightly higher class supposedly lowering himself (as Falstaff appears to), Bob and Mike are street hustlers from the beginning. Van Sant has explained that he used Shakespeare to suggest the "timeless" nature of the story, showing that the events "have always happened, everywhere" (Fuller xliii). While the story transcends time in this sense, it is important to remember and note how the modern setting and transformation affect its structure. Scott's rejection of the pair in the film is seemingly more cruel and less necessary than Hal's rejection of his mentor in the plays. Arguments might be made that a king needs to erase those elements of his past that might sully his image and hinder his ability to govern, but the same arguments cannot be offered for the son of a mayor. Scott does not inherit the mayoralty of Portland upon his father's death (Rafferty 101), and being the son of a politician does not even guarantee political success. Politicians in modern America cannot and do not create new, bright lives by ignoring elements of their past. Indiscretions are sought and unearthed by feverish press members seeking stories, so that political figures cannot avoid confrontations with their past actions.

Scott hopes to embark on a new life with his actions, yet within the expected narrative that the film promotes he cannot sincerely expect to be successful. He believes that he must shed these friends to be successful in politics, and this past, then, is exactly what would be first brought out of his past to haunt him. Scott's rejection of both Mike and Bob, then, seems less clearly motivated and more stridently heartless (for he knows what he is doing is delaying, and not dealing with, an issue).

The rejected characters, then, are typically marginalized people in society. Bob and Mike are both part of the world of hustlers, and they are both betrayed when Scott chooses to "sellout to straight society and its corruption" (Willson 35). Van Sant challenges issues and questions of status and place as he draws his protagonists from the margins. Scott takes the life of a heterosexual male when he chooses to climb in society, but the end of the film, showing the harsh effects of Scott's actions upon Bob and the others rather than the positive impact felt by Scott, and following Mike and not Scott, shows that Van Sant is questioning the norm, asking viewers to judge whether money and prestige (and, in Scott's case, a heterosexual life) are worth the cost they bring to lives, friendships, and families. Instead of following the Hal-figure into his future (presumed) political greatness, the viewer continues to watch the discarded representatives of the Tavern folk. The Falstaff-figures may be dropped by Scott, but the director shows that his interests lie with these characters. They remain the focus, while Scott, who wants to legitimize himself by erasing them from his memory, is forgotten by the camera. The audience, then, is left with the memory of these characters who are usually forgotten.

The double-barrelled Falstaffs in *My Own Private Idaho* reveal the wide-ranging effects of Scott's rejection. Instead of "just" breaking the heart of one man, Scott rejects more immediate people, almost literally killing Bob, and more symbolically killing Mike (whose death is represented finally with his collapse into a narcoleptic seizure). The dual focus of the film on these Falstaffs (including their dual deaths) reminds viewers that these characters, despite their alley origins, are to be remembered and even memorialized. The two spirits of Falstaff serve to pull the audience in, asking viewers to recognize the wrongs

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performed on them, and then calling on them to sympathize and empathize. With two characters representing the central being, the audience can see Falstaff through the ages. The two Falstaff figures reunite/unite near the end of the film; Mike has been rejected already; Bob is about to be. Together, they are on the streets when they are greeted by the Dylanesque figure, Bad George. As a pair, and as one, they meet Shakespeare in this alley.

My Own Private Idaho re-examines the familiar history from the Henriad by placing it in the streets. Gus Van Sant, then, is able to (re)evaluate the texts in a new light. As comparisons are drawn between traditional settings and this radical one, viewers are left with the indelible impression of street hustlers speaking pseudo-Shakespeare while attempting to find their ways from the margins to the center.

Gus Van Sant's picture is an intertextual mosaic blending the obvious Shakespeare with popular culture references ranging from songs on the soundtrack to a *Simpsons* episode. This merging of canonical literature and popular entertainment is most striking in its relocation of the Bard's "minions of the moon" to the alleyways of Portland.[3] Characters, like the Shakespeare that Bob Dylan depicts, are in the streets. Van Sant's efforts to show the universal and timeless pain caused by the Scott Favors of the world center on a pair of street hustlers, one young and one old. With Bob Pigeon and Mike Waters left behind in the alley, Van Sant calls for viewers to follow them and to remember these oft-marginalized characters. Instead of heading off to see the glorious king, we remain with those people from the streets, following the modern versions of Shakespeare's fictional characters. Just as Shakespeare is in the alley, so too are Falstaff, Bob, and Mike.

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Notes

[1] Van Sant did struggle to find producers for this film, for he found they were more often than not scared by its connections to Shakespeare ("Gus" 5). Since he had failed to sell this Shakespearean variation in the past, when he found he could make the film he wanted he took the opportunity to combine his two storylines into one ("Gus" 2).

[2] While this point seems trivial, Van Sant is a director with an eye for minute detail; this trait is exhibited by his use of Falstaff beer later in the film.

[3] "Minions of the Moon" was Van Sant's first choice for a title; he changed to the final title after hearing the B-52s song "Private Idaho" (Loud 35).

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