

## CHIMES AT MIDNIGHT (FALSTAFF) (1965)

Orson Welles

### OVERVIEW

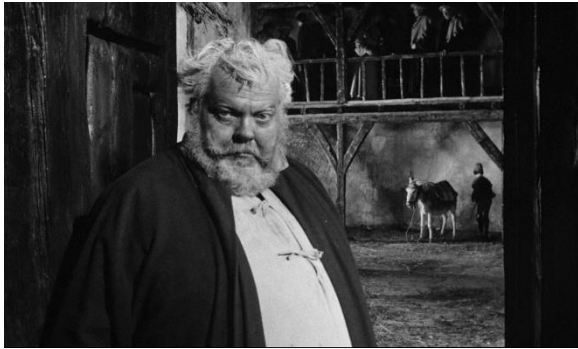
**Auteur** Orson Welles is one of the most important and influential filmmakers in American film history. After making a name for himself in theatre and radio, Welles signed with RKO Pictures to write and direct two motion pictures, a deal that was unprecedented at the time in terms of the creative control Welles enjoyed. His directorial debut, *Citizen Kane*, would go on to become arguably the greatest film ever made thanks to its innovative techniques and unconventional narrative style. He quickly became a household name releasing a total of twelve movies that include critically-acclaimed films like *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Touch of Evil* (1958), and *Chimes at Midnight* (1965). He won the Academy Award, with Herman J. Mankiewicz, for Best Original Screenplay for *Citizen Kane*, and *Othello* (1951) won the prestigious Palme d'Or at the 1952 Cannes Film Festival. Orson Welles died in 1985.

**Film** *Chimes at Midnight*, also known as *Falstaff*, chronicles the Percy rebellion (early 15<sup>th</sup> century) following King Henry IV's coronation and Prince Hal's friendship with Sir John Falstaff. Although contemporary critical reception was lukewarm, the film has been regarded as one of Orson Welles' greatest movies. Welles himself considered *Chimes at Midnight* as his best achievement. "*Chimes* is a sombre comedy, the story of the betrayal of friendship," he noted, pointing out the core project of the movie, Falstaff. "I will play him as a tragic figure. His humour and wit were aroused merely by the fact that he wanted to please the prince. Falstaff, however, had the potential of greatness in him." One of Welles' many Shakespeare adaptations, the film received two awards at the Cannes Film Festival when it was premiered in 1966.

**Background** *Chimes at Midnight* was first conceived in 1939 as a stage play called *Five Kings*, which combined eight Shakespeare plays. After another stage production of the same play in 1960, Orson Welles decided to adapt it for the screen and secured funding from a Spanish producer, Emiliano Piedra, by lying to him that he was going to film *Treasure Island*. Shot in Spain between 1964 and 1965, the movie's script is a combination of five different Shakespeare plays—*Henry IV, Part 1* and *Henry IV, Part 2*, *Richard II*, *Henry V*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*—all of which feature the indomitable comic Shakespearean character, Sir John Falstaff. Welles cut, edited and rearranged certain parts of these plays to create his take on the "Henriad" and the character Falstaff. However, owing to the film's distribution and technical issues, not many people have seen the movie. In fact, Charles Heston, who played the Mexican prosecutor in *Touch of Evil*, once contacted Orson Welles about wanting to make a movie about Falstaff and asking Welles if he'd like to play the part, sending Welles into a fit of laughter. "He was kinda depressed by [the fact that Heston didn't know Welles had already made the film]," says the film critic John McPride. Therefore, the only technically-sound copy that is widely-available was released as late as 2016 by the Janus Films and distributed by the Criterion Collection.

### CINEMATIC NARRATION

One of the most impressive technical achievements of *Chimes at Midnight* is its gorgeous battle scene. Despite being short on extras for the sequence, Orson Welles and Edmond Richard used long takes and then cut them into short scenes to give the illusion of a crowded battlefield. In order to reflect the true meaning of war, Welles and Richard used hand-held camera to follow the fighting from up close, sometimes accelerating and at times slowing the action to achieve the desired effect. Perhaps, in one of the most important and perhaps political statement, Welles made the war appear ugly and grotesque rather than something romantic or glorious. Soldiers being stuck in mud, breathless and exhausted, created a potent image of horror. Welles scholar James Naremore notes that "the underlying eroticism of the chivalric code ... is exposed in all its cruel perversity." The movie also makes great use of interior space as a framing device, drawing the focus and attention of the audience towards a specific character or set of characters. Its high-contrast black-and-white photography is meant to capture the look of Middle Ages. When asked by McPride if Welles wished he made movie in colour, Welles said he would have refused to shoot it in colour even if he had the chance.



*Images 1-2-3-4: Deep-focus mise-en-scènes*



*Images 5-6-7-8: High contrast-low angle photography*



*Images 9-10-11-12: Framing the characters by use of doors to give the feeling of distance*

#### MAIN CHARACTERS

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| <b>Sir John Falstaff</b>     | Prince Hal's closest companion, a shabby and larger-than-life knight. |
| <b>King Henry IV</b>         | He usurps the crown and is now trying to suppress the rebellion.      |
| <b>Prince Hal</b>            | Spends his time in taverns drinking rather than in court.             |
| <b>Henry "Hotspur" Percy</b> | The cousin of Henry IV, in an open rebellion against the King.        |
| <b>Ned Poins</b>             | Prince Hal's closest companion.                                       |
| <b>Earl of Worcester</b>     | A cunning and calculating man who joins Percy in rebellion.           |

#### SYNOPSIS

After the death of Richard II, Henry Bolingbroke usurps the throne and deposes the true heir Mortimer before he can challenge his reign. While the rebels, led by Henry "Hotspur" Percy, plot to move against Henry IV as soon as they leave the court, his son, Prince Hal, spends his time in a tavern, keeping low company and drinking wine. With his friend and father-figure Falstaff, Hal and his friends ambush a group of pilgrims, steal their money and enjoy the riches. In the meantime, Hotspur starts preparing for war to claim the throne despite not having secured enough support from other royal houses. After being scolded by his father, Prince Hal swears that he will redeem his name on account of Percy. Falstaff travels around the country to enlist men for the war. Two armies meet in Shrewsbury and the rebels are defeated. Prince Hal kills Hotspur in one-on-one combat. Throughout the war, Falstaff feigns death to avoid fighting and then takes credit for Hotspur's killing. When Henry IV falls sick, Prince Hal promises that he will forsake his old ways and his father hands him the crown. Falstaff hears of his friend's coronation and goes to the castle to congratulate him. Hal, now King Henry V, pretends he doesn't know Falstaff and banishes him from the court. Falstaff leaves the castle and dies immediately afterwards.

## PLOT

*Coronation* During his coronation, Henry IV admits the cousins of Edmund Mortimer, who is believed to be the true heir. The King rejects their requests that Mortimer be brought to the country and dismisses them from the court. The cousins, led by hot-tempered Hotspur, vow to act.



*Falstaff* Prince Hal hangs out at the Boar's Head Tavern, drinking and rollicking with his friends. Together with Falstaff, he ambushes a group of pilgrims and steals their money. After the robbery, Hal and his friend disguise themselves as thieves and rob Falstaff. Back at the tavern, Hal interrogates Falstaff, who lies about been robbed by forty rogues. They all laugh when Hal reveals that it was he.



*Rebellious Hotspur*

Unable to receive the support he expected of the other royal houses, Hotspur becomes frustrated and angry. He tells his wife that he has to go to war to earn his crown. Henry IV is told that a great power comprising the English and Scots now support Hotspur.



*The king's envy*

Hearing of the news that Hotspur has managed to amass a great force, Henry IV laments that his son brings him nothing but dishonour. He wishes that Hotspur was his son and Hal was Northumberland's son, which both saddens and angers him. He asks where Prince Hal is and orders his men to find him.



*Deceit* Falstaff travels around the country to collect men for the King's army, but receives bribes to release men from the oath. Earl of Worcester parleys with Henry IV, who offers him a deal. If the rebellion withdraws, they will be forgiven. Earl of Worcester tells his companion not to tell Hotspur about the offer and instead lies to Hotspur that the king called them rebels and traitors.



*The War* Prince Hal, after being scolded by his father over his indulgent life, promises to redeem himself in the approaching war. The two armies clash and the king's forces win. Falstaff feigns death to avoid fighting. Prince Hal kills Hotspur in one-on-one combat. Falstaff claims he has killed Hotspur and Prince Hal allows him to take credit.



*Army and Military technology* On his way to war, Falstaff is tasked to recruit able men for the king's army, stopping at small towns and picking soldiers. He collects bribes from those who don't want to go to war. Falstaff, himself, doesn't join the battle while infantry and cavalry fight one another using historically-accurate swords and lances. The Battle of Shrewsbury was the first war in which the English archers fought each other in England, using longbows to great effect, and Orson Welles made a point to reflect that on the screen.



*Prince's redemption* Prince Hal realizes he is wasting precious time by hanging out with Falstaff. He returns to the castle and finds his father lying sick in bed. Assuming the king is dead, Hal wears the crown. When his father wakes up and asks Hal why he's done so, Hal says he only wore it because he wanted to see if the crown would give him bad thoughts. Now content, the king places the crown back on his son's head and dies.





*Friendship ends*      Hearing of his friend's coronation, Falstaff runs to the castle to celebrate and congratulate; however, the newly-crowned Henry V pretends he doesn't know Falstaff and banishes him from the court. Falstaff leaves in despair and soon dies.



## CHARACTERS

**Sir John Falstaff** Orson Welles puts Falstaff and his companionship with Prince Hal at the centre of his movie. While the old, fat, and pompous knight offers comedic relief, he also provides the audience with deep commentary on court politics, honour and chivalry. He hides his shortcomings behind his wholesome façade. He drinks all the time, steals money for sustenance, and entertains everyone around him including himself. He is a coward but with an asterisk: He rejects the code of chivalry because he honours life, not death.

**Entertainer** Falstaff, in his core being, is an entertainer. Even when he lies about fighting off a dozen rogue thieves, he knows that nobody believes him. Yet he keeps on for it's the performance that brings joy to Falstaff himself and his companions more than the money. When he realizes that he was hoodwinked by Hal, Falstaff, instead of brooding, turns this into a merry gathering. "What, shall we be merry? Shall we have a play extempore?" he asks, beaming. Together, they enact a scene between the king and the prince while the whole tavern watches and laughs. That's what Falstaff does: He is an actor, through and through. He entertains, and everyone loves him for it. When Falstaff tells Hal that his friendship has spoiled him because he used to be virtuous, everyone including Hal laughs at Falstaff because everybody, including Falstaff, knows this is just an act—entertainment.

**Self-involved** His moral code has taught Falstaff that his comfort is more important than his valour, which he sees as a distraction. "The better part of valour is discretion," Falstaff says, defending his feigning death on the battlefield. The king's soldiers fight for the monarch's life while Falstaff fights for Falstaff's life. During an impromptu play that he and Prince Hal stage in the tavern, Falstaff begs Prince Hal to stay in character despite the fact that they are being interrupted by the sheriff's men. "Play out the play, play out the play," says Falstaff in exasperation, disregarding the panic in the tavern. "I have much to say on behalf of that Falstaff." This is his schtick: Falstaff wants to be Falstaff all the time. He wants to talk about himself. He's full of himself.

**Principled** Falstaff's reluctance to join the war could be construed as cowardly, or his refusal to part with his life along with other men in the service of the king could be seen as treason; however, Falstaff is not bound by the code of chivalry that govern these men. "What is honor?" he asks Prince Hal before the battle begins. "Honor hath no skill in surgery. Honour is a mere scutcheon. And so ends my catechism." This is his scripture. For Falstaff, there is nothing more honourable than wanting to stay alive and keep drinking wine. His code of honour, if any, is to stay alive and enjoy life. "If I had a thousand sons, the first humane principle I would teach them would be," says Falstaff after the war is won, "to forswear thin potations and to addict themselves to sack!" His principles do not fit the period or meet the expectations of a knight. That doesn't mean Falstaff has not built a code for himself.

**Prince Hal** While wasting away his days in a tavern, hanging out with thieves and debauchers, the king's son is always aware that his days are numbered. He knows that, one day, he has to grow out of his youth. Therefore, in a way, he exploits those tavern dwellers for his own amusement and entertainment until such time as he becomes the king. He ruthlessly plays along even though he knows that he will forsake his supposed friend, Falstaff, when his time comes.

**Arrogant** For Prince Hal, his tavern spell is temporary in such a way that none of these people matter to him. Nothing he does within the borders of the tavern count. Stealing is just a fun activity for him instead of an "illegal" act. He first rejects Poins' offer to rob pilgrims; however, when Poins tells Hal that "I have a jest [involving Falstaff]. A jest I cannot execute alone," the prince suddenly changes course and attends the robbery for the sake of messing with Falstaff. He's immune to law and admonishment as long as he stays in the tavern because he doesn't consider that type of life as real. *The tavern* doesn't count, and therefore his friendships with these people are transient, existing only in a vacuum that has no real-life consequences. "And herein will I imitate the sun," he says, while trying to justify his constant presence in the tavern, "who doth permit the base, contagious clouds to smother up his beauty from the world."

**Ruthless** This is a man who announces: "I know you all, and will a while uphold the unyoked humor of your idleness. I'll so offend to make offense a skill." Therefore, it shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone, including Falstaff, that he does what he does. He even tells everyone how exactly he is going to act when he becomes king. During their impromptu play, Falstaff plays the prince and

Hal plays the king. Falstaff says, smiling: "Banish not [Falstaff] thy Harry's company. Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world." Then comes Prince Hal's reply as king: "I do!" He pauses and adds: "I will." Even Falstaff, despite this being a play, experiences a moment of confusion and fear due to the seriousness with which Prince delivers that line. Hal knows from the very beginning that he is never going to keep Falstaff or the other "base, contagious clouds" beside him when he has power.

**King Henry IV** Two things matter to King Henry IV: Holding onto his crown and making sure his son finds the right path. He's effectively cunning in usurping the throne and keeping the crown against the rebellion. On the son front, though, he regrets siring a prince who spends most of his time in a tavern. Henry IV doesn't see the prince as a person and only accepts him when he conforms to his role as a king.

**Cunning** His usurpation of the crown from the true heir is not enough, and he knows that. During his coronation, he admits Mortimer's cousins and tries to squash their rebellion before it begins. He refuses to deal with the Welsh to release Mortimer, which would only mean him relinquishing the crown. He knows that he will have to deal with a rebellion when he says, "Worcester, get thee gone for I do see danger and disobedience in thine eye." He understands the villainess of the Earl of Worcester and offers peace terms during the parlay with him, trying to win the war without a battle. Even though he defeats the rebellion, he knows there is going to be another and another. He orders Worcester's death to send a message, but stops at killing the others to keep them in line.

**Fair** Despite winning the war and squashing the rebellion, King Henry IV shows mercy to all those who rebelled against his reign except for Percy of Worcester. Since he's aware that this is not the first rebellion he's going to have to face, Henry IV chooses to govern by compassion and mercy rather than oppression and fear. He knows that a usurper can be usurped. He shows that he can be fair and bring justice to the land. Before the war, he offers Worcester the chance to lay down his arms and receive the offer of his grace. "Both he and they and you, every man shall be my friend again, and I'll be his," Henry IV says. "We offer fair."

**Distant** Until the moment Prince Hal forsakes his old ways and joins his father in kingly matters, Henry IV acts as a cold and distant father. He prefers Hotspur to Hal even though the former is in open rebellion against the kingdom. "Yea, there thou mak'st me sad and mak'st me sin in envy that my Lord Northumberland should be the father to so blest a son," the king says when he hears that Hotspur has managed to gather a strong force. He doesn't see his son as someone who may have different likes and dislikes. In his mind, a son has a specific function that comes with a compulsory subscription to code of chivalry. Only when Hal displays that he can be that type of man, Henry breaks down and shows love towards his son.

**Henry "Hotspur" Percy** Hotspur is the hot-headed son of Lord Northumberland, both of whom recognizes Mortimer as the true king. For that, he rebels against the newly-crowned Henry IV. He is a prideful and ambitious man. This is what makes him "Hotspur." This is also what ends him.

**Hot-headed** The moment Henry IV dismisses his father and himself from the court, Percy is sent into a rage. Even the malicious, cold and calculating Earl of Worcester tries to rein his temper in. "I'll talk to you when you are better tempered to attend," he says, but Percy plows on: "I am whipped and scourged with rods, nettled and stung with pismires when I hear of this vile politician, Bolingbroke." Nothing can quench his thirst for power and blood other than war, which he eventually gets. When learning that his army might be in a disadvantaged position against the king's forces, Hotspur doesn't heed his cousin's warning about to wait until further support arrives. "O gentlemen, the time of life is short," he says proudly. "To spend that shortness basely were too long if life did ride upon a dial's point, still ending at the arrival of an hour."

**Ambitious** Percy's wife doesn't understand his rush to go to war. She wants him to tell her the truth, or she will break his finger. Percy is almost amused at his wife's anger. "Love? I love thee not! I care not for thee, Kate," he says as he prepares to leave. "This is no world to play with marmets and to tilt with lips. We must have bloody noses and cracked crowns." Percy wants the war. Percy wants power. And he wants it *now*. He cannot wait to receive what is his by right. After losing the one-on-one combat with Prince Hal, Hotspur highlights his ambition in the form of his own eulogy: "I better brook the loss of brittle life than these proud titles thou hast won of me. They wound my thoughts

worse than thy sword my flesh.”

## THEMES

**1. Power** In *Chimes at Midnight*, the transfer of power through royal succession is shown broken. Henry IV usurps the crown by denying the true heir, Edmund Mortimer. Therefore, his reign is mostly about fighting against plots, rebellions and assassinations since his power is considered illegitimate. During the Tudor period, one available outlet outside the usual framework of hereditary monarchy is war. The victors claim the throne and power. Hotspur Percy and his accomplices choose war against the illegitimate reign of Henry IV for the purpose of claiming power back for themselves. Ironically, this war is partly responsible for the coronation of Prince Hal as he comes out victorious in his battle with Hotspur and ultimately succeeds his father as the legitimate king of the realm.

**2. Friendship** One of the most important themes of the film is the unlikely friendship between Falstaff and Prince Hal. It is also, due to the hierarchical gap between two men, skewed towards Prince Hal. Both parties have a different understanding of this relationship. While Falstaff sees Prince Hal as a true companion, the latter uses Falstaff almost as a pawn in his own training as a man. Prince Hal's friendship is therefore opportunistic. He tells Falstaff that he is the sun while Falstaff belongs to the “base, contagious clouds.” He tells Poins: “What a disgrace is it to me to remember thy name or to know thy face tomorrow.” And yet he stays with Falstaff, Poins and the rest of the tavern company till they don't suit him anymore. This friendship, on a more symbolic level, represents a deep breach in society: the court representing power and the tavern representing the governed are two separate social spaces that can never interact.

**3. Fatherhood** There is a triangular relationship between the three important characters in the movie that defines and characterizes fatherhood: Falstaff is a better father than a friend; Henry IV is a better king than a father; and Hal is a better warrior than a son/friend. All these relationships revolve around fatherhood and paternal figures in a man's life. Falstaff represents fatherly compassion and mentorship while Henry IV can only offer his son hereditary power and monarchical advice. However, each of these men lacks one crucial aspect that requires another man to fill in the gap. Hal seeks out a man like Falstaff because his father cannot provide him with the love, care and guidance Falstaff offers. On the other hand, Hal cannot stay friends with Falstaff because his real father is the one that can bestow upon him the power he needs.

**3. War** Orson Welles portrays war not as a romantic pastime but a bloody and murky affair among men who cannot be differentiated on a battlefield. The way he shoots the battle scenes makes it impossible to tell friend from foe, which is the point. Death is ugly and muddy, certainly not honourable nor venerable. Falstaff puts the code of chivalry in context for everyone before the war begins: “What is honour? A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday.” Robert Bell agrees: “Yet the film presents no countervailing zeal for heroic self-sacrifice ... Chivalric heroism is a straw man, Falstaff the only vital spirit and viable alternative.” Falstaff, standing pat amongst men who are fighting to kill, is the life-affirming counterpoint to war.

**4. Society** The movie goes back and forth between the court and the tavern, each representing a different social level in the Middle Ages. The tavern scenes are almost always full of entertainment with patrons laughing, drinking, and enjoying themselves in the company of others. The camera is always on the move, following the joy whenever it goes. “The court represents the real world of politics and war, while the tavern is a Brueghel-like scene of play and fun,” Robert Bell writes, pointing out the dichotomy between these two important social spaces. One can see the castle, and therefore the court, looking from the tavern, but one cannot see the tavern from anywhere within the castle. The invisible line between the two is consecrated by the new king himself after banishing Falstaff (read: the tavern) from the court. The two are like the Pauli exclusion principle in physics: “Two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time.” The final frame of the movie showing Falstaff's casket outside the tavern leading away from the castle is a poignant reminder of the incompatibility of the two.

If the tavern is a stand in for Falstaff's jovial personality and compassionate father-figure, the court does the same for Henry IV: it is cold and distant. Characters who belong to the castle are brought to the screen in extreme black-and-white contrast photography. The tavern is inundated with energy, impromptu stage plays and even nefarious plans that somehow look like harmless games, while the

court offers a view of the real world of conspiracy, intrigue and dormant feelings of cold men. “We view King Henry in long shots, from low angles and pronounced distances,” writes Robert Bell. Henry IV either stands before a mirror or walks slowly as he delivers his speeches. There is stagnancy in the way he conducts himself, the complete opposite of how Falstaff and his buoyant personality is shown around the tavern. Prince Hal, equidistance from the two, eventually chooses the court wherein lies his authority. Power in the tavern is transient, whereas the court *is* built on it.

**7. Gender** *Chimes at Midnight* is a film about, of and by men. When women appear on screen, they are either a prostitute, a mistress, or a nagging wife who doesn’t understand the ways of men. The fact that the tavern is the only place where we see women, albeit always in a role of serving men, is an accurate portrayal of Middle Ages where women never held positions of power. There is not a woman present in the court. The only time we see a female interacting with any kind of power or royal personage is when Hotspur’s wife, Kate, tries to prevent Hotspur from leaving home. Even then, she’s always in the background or getting chided while Hotspur deals with courtly business.



**8. Death** *Chimes at Midnight* offers two kinds of deaths: one that takes place in battle, which is messy and bloody, and one that takes place in bed, which is likened to a peaceful sleep that “hath divorced so many English kings”. When death comes for a soldier, it robs him of his life; however, when death arrives at in a king’s bedroom, it merely sends him to sleep for another king to be coronated. This symbolic dichotomy reveals the different types of deaths the society conceptualizes: For monarchy, death brings the next in line, while for a soldier death takes him away, nameless.

**9. Values** Valour, honor, chivalry and loyalty are the values that both the aristocracy and the common people are expected to uphold. The prince, as the elite member of monarchy, needs to conduct himself in a manner befitting his status by being a just ruler and a courageous commander. For the soldier, honor and loyalty manifest themselves as self-sacrifice in the face of death. Falstaff, as someone who is a knight and also a common man mingling with other commoners, refuses to comply with these long-established expectations, prioritizing his own life over vague definitions. His noncompliance is such that he creates his own rulebook to live by. “Honor is a mere scutcheon [shield]. And so ends my catechism,” he says, pitting his values against those of the society of which he is a member.