

FALSTAFF STILL BESET BY MEN IN BUCKRAM



Falstaff and his Page. 2 Henry IV. Act I, Scene II. *I do here walk before thee like a sow that hath overwhelmed all her litter but one.*
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But Now He Finds Valiant Defenders Who Take All the Enemy's Seven Points on Their Targets, Thus

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By Frank Wadleigh Chandler,

Professor and Dean in the University of Cincinnati

OF all the comic characters of literature, Falstaff is the most vital. Compared with him, the folk of Aristophanes are mere grotesques, those of Plautus and Terence are conventional abstractions, and those of medieval fiction and drama are clowns or simpletons, devils or giants, farcically amusing but unreal. Falstaff, however, is what Hazlitt calls him—the most substantial comic character ever invented. He unites the qualities of Greek satyr, Roman parasite and bragging soldier, Rabelaisian buffoon, Spanish gracioso, and English jester. He is each of these and more than all. He is the quintessence of a thousand jolly wits, toppers, liars, thieves, gross gallants, and comic soldiers, rounded into one graceless, lovable, immortal rogue. A being so rarely compounded of elements so various could never have existed, yet he lives on Shakespeare's pages forever, and we recognize in the world of men about us reflections of certain facets of his many-sided nature. "I hold a perfect comedy to be the perfection of human composition," said Horace Walpole; "and I firmly believe that fifty 'Iliads' and 'Aeneids' could be written sooner than such a character as Falstaff."

Shakespeare was in his middle thirties when Falstaff sprang full grown from his fecund brain. In a popular chronicle play called "The Famous Victories of Henry V," the dramatist, searching for historical material, found certain scenes of rough comedy that seemed to promise well. These he proceeded to develop out of all resemblance to their original. In the first part of "Henry IV," composed presumably in 1597, Falstaff shows at his very best as a jovial rogue of rare spirit, ripe in years but youthful at heart, one of the wicked, no doubt, but so merry in his shifts as to disarm moral reprehension. His Gadshill robbery, which turns into a practical jest for Prince Hal's delight; his enacting with the Prince the scene when the King will rate Hal on the morrow for idling; his misconduct in raising his beggarly troop, and his pranks on Shrewsbury field are matters of the rarest mirth.

In the second part of "Henry IV," written within a year, the scenes of low life are grosser; and Falstaff and his companions are more depraved. Less genial in wit, he is also less successful. "Men of all sorts take a pride to gird at me," he complains; and when his Doll bids him patch up his body for Heaven, he sighs, "I am old, I am old." But if he be refused credit by tradesmen, threatened with a suit by Dame Quickly, and rated by the Lord Chief Justice, he is still a rascal of spirit. He limps with the gout, yet "A good wit will make use of anything;" and he "will turn diseases to commodity." He rejoices in the bribes of those who would escape military service; wheedles a thousand pounds out of Justice Shallow, and chances in battle to capture without a struggle "a furious knight." But the Prince, his boon comrade, the first part, sees little of him, and on coming to the throne, rises to his kingly dignity by turning away Falstaff and his crew.

In "Henry V," Falstaff's death is vividly described by Dame Quickly. His heart was killed by the King's rebuff. In dying his mind mercifully wandered from the cause of his grief, and "he made as fine an end as any Christian child" babbling of credit by tradesmen, threatened with a suit by Dame Quickly, and rated by the Lord Chief Justice, he is still a rascal of spirit. He limps with the gout, yet "A good wit will make use of anything;" and he "will turn diseases to commodity." He rejoices in the bribes of those who would escape military service; wheedles a thousand pounds out of Justice Shallow, and chances in battle to capture without a struggle "a furious knight." But the Prince, his boon comrade, the first part, sees little of him, and on coming to the throne, rises to his kingly dignity by turning away Falstaff and his crew.

It might be supposed that a character so little serious as Falstaff and so well-fed would escape the fate of becoming a bone of contention for the critics. Such, however, has not been the case. Falstaff, who was regarded chiefly as a merry liar, braggart, and buffoon until well into the eighteenth century, has found apologists to exalt him above reproach ever since the appearance, in 1777, of Maurice Morgann's "Essay on the Dramatic Character of Falstaff." Critics of repute have differed concerning him, not only in such minor matters as his malice and wit, but also in matters more essential. As to the minor dif-

ferences, Coleridge notes "the perpetual contrast of labor in Falstaff to produce wit, with the ease with which Prince Henry parries his shafts." Professor Raleigh, on the contrary, is impressed by the superiority of Falstaff's wit to that of the Prince. "It is the measure of the Prince's inferiority that to him Falstaff seems 'rather ludicrous than witty,' even while all the wit that passes current is being issued from Falstaff's mint, and stamped with the mark of his sovereignty." In similar fashion, Dr. Johnson speaks of Falstaff as "at once obsequious and malignant," whereas Hazlitt declares that he is "without malice or hypocrisy," and Brandes that "he seems unfailingly amiable whatever he may choose to do."

In matters of greater importance the critics have differed still more widely. Their contentions have centered about four questions: Is Falstaff a coward? Is he a conscious humorist? Is his rejection by the newly crowned King a blot on the play? And is his portrayal in "The Merry Wives of Windsor" a dreadful mistake?

With regard to the last question, Professor Raleigh laments that "Falstaff should have been brought low to figure as the butt of citizens and their romping wives." "The chambering and wantonness of amorous intrigue suits ill with his inimitable pride of spirit," says Raleigh, who assumes a pride in him rather difficult to detect, and forgets Falstaff's relations with Doll, Ursula, and Dame Quickly. "Worst of all, he is afraid of the fairies," being in this respect more timorous than Bottom the Weaver.

Dowden would exculpate Shakespeare from the charge of voluntarily degrading "his inimitable jester into the flouting-stock of a bourgeois fabliau," but only in view of the Queen's command. "That Shakespeare should throw himself with spirit into his task was a crime for which he earns our forgiveness by its successful issue." Professor Bradley, however, cannot forgive Shakespeare for "The Merry Wives." "It was no more possible for Shakespeare to show his Falstaff in love than to turn twice two into five," says Bradley; yet "he could represent this knight assailing for financial purposes the virtue of two matrons, and in the event baffled, duped, treated like dirty linen, beaten, burnt, pricked, mocked, insulted, and, worst of all, repentant and didactic. It is horrible!"

The Germans, bound to find a philosophic motive in Shakespeare's every move, have defended "The Merry Wives." Thus Gervinus holds that the poet purposely to show here that "honesty is a natural overmatch for studied cunning," and that self-seeking craft is likely to be "hoist with its own petard." "An egoist like Falstaff," says Gervinus, "can suffer no severer defeat than from the honesty which he believes not, and from the simplicity which he esteems not." Professor Saintsbury, on the other hand, reflects that "it seems to be lost labor and idle sentimentality to lament the decadence and defeat of Falstaff. Men are generally decadent and frequently defeated, when dealing with women in such circumstances; and Falstaff's overthrow does not make him fall very hard after all." As for M. Jusserrand, he regards Falstaff as even improved in "The Merry Wives." Falstaff, he writes, is here "at his very best, more needy, more unscrupulous, fatter, untidier, and more comical, too; as prompt at repartee, as in-exhaustible, and of a good humor, as communicative as ever." So the critics bow the compass on the Falstaff of "The Merry Wives," passing from reprobation to approbation.

With regard to the question of Falstaff's rejection by Henry V., his former jestmate, similar divergence of opinion may be obtained. Most critics regard this rejection as inevitable in the dramatist's design and in the nature of the relations between the two characters who are essentially different, although superficially alike in their common love of fun. Hal, according to Professor Schelling, deprived of woman's society in the court, seeks for light and sustenance beyond its precincts. "It was the love of freedom, the seat of adventure, an intellectual appreciation of the fascinations of Falstaff, not moral depravity, which drew such a nature temporarily into the vortex of a reckless life. Henry,



George Cruikshank's drawing of the fight at Gadshill—Prince Hal and his forces routing Falstaff's gang. 1 Henry IV, Act II, Scene 2.

like his creator, was possessed of 'an experiencing nature, his keenest delight was in reality, in life, and the fullness thereof.' But the Prince develops as Falstaff declines, and he grows increasingly aware of the corruption beneath the humors of his companion. When, on Shrewsbury field, he asks Falstaff for a pistol, and receives but a bottle and a pun—"There's that will sack a city"—the Prince understands, as never before, the limitations of Falstaff. Though he graces the rascal's lie with regard to Hotspur's death, henceforth he will repose no confidence in him. The King, too, furthers their divorce by attaching Falstaff to the sober-blooded Prince John. Accordingly, in the second part of "Henry IV," the former boon comrades engage in but one scene together, a scene that shows Falstaff overheard in slander by the Prince, who is already out of sorts with low life. "Well, thus we play the fools with the time, and the spirits of the wise sit in the clouds and mock us," Hal says; and presently to Poins he adds, "By this hand, thou think'st me as far in the devil's book as thou and Falstaff." "Let the end try the man." Other hints of the approaching separation of Hal and Falstaff have been given, as in the first part of "Henry IV.," when Falstaff in his role of the Prince exclaims, "Banish plump Jack and banish all the world!" whereupon Hal retorts, "I do, I will."

Coleridge approves the rejection of Falstaff and speaks of "the final contempt which such a character deserves and receives from the young King." Brandes thinks that "the scheme of the whole demands that there shall come a moment when the Prince . . . shall put on a serious countenance and brandish the thunderbolt of retribution." But Professor Bradley maintains that we resent Hal's conduct, and especially for two reasons. Without the warrant of further rogueries on the part of Falstaff, the new King orders him sent to prison. And, worse still, he preaches a sermon, rating the rogue as the misleader of his royal youth, whereas it was Hal who had sought Falstaff's society for entertainment. "It was not only ungenerous, it was dishonest!" cries Mr. Bradley. "It looks disagreeably like an attempt to buy the praise of the respectable at the cost of honor and truth."

Yet we might have expected such an attitude from the new-fledged King, who has exhibited already a touch of his father's cool policy in justifying his foregathering with the low because it will win him applause whenever he chooses to reform. That his feeling for Falstaff is an-



Cruikshank's drawing entitled, "Sir John Falstaff by his extraordinary powers of persuasion not only induces Mrs. Quickly to withdraw her action, but also to lend him more money!" 2 Henry IV, Act II, Scene 1.

to whom Falstaff owes a thousand pounds. Falstaff, according to this theory, suddenly rises superior to an unexpected situation, precisely as he has often done before. It must be borne in mind, however, that if his remark be one of humorous self-sufficiency, nevertheless he succumbs to his grief ere long, and dies broken hearted, unable, despite his buoyant wit, to weather the gale of royal disfavor.

In the explanation just cited, Rötischer would make Falstaff a conscious humorist to the last, whereas other critics would make him unconsciously humorous or pathetic. The question as to Falstaff's character in general has often been debated. Hazlitt notes his "absolute self-possession and mastery presence of mind," and the fact that he is a rogue "as much to amuse others as to gratify himself." Coleridge speaks of "the consciousness and intentionality of his wit, and thinks that he fastened himself on Hal "to prove how much his influence on an heir apparent would exceed that of a statesman."

Professor Courthope, on the contrary, finds Falstaff amusing chiefly because he is self-deceived. "His cowardice is absolutely transparent, yet he is content with



Cruikshank's drawing of Falstaff giving his account of the Gadshill fight.

If I fought not with fifty of them, I am a bunch of rascals—I took all their seven points on my target, thus.

but never top-loftily; and his calm, when not perturbed, as at Gadshill or Herne's Oak, is merely careless. His self-respect is conspicuous by its absence, or it is the ironic self-justification of the rogue only too common in letters and life.

As a corrective to the romantic canonization of Falstaff, Professor Eimer Edgar Stoll, in the most careful and learned of modern essays on the subject, has sought to demolish the sentimental structure of which Morgann laid the cornerstone. According to Professor Stoll, we are in danger of forgetting that Falstaff, to the Elizabethan audience, was unquestionably a coward, a miles gloriosus. He was not the highly complex character that the sentimentalists have later made him. He was only a personage designed to produce a comic effect in a stage entertainment. He should not be thought of, therefore, apart from his deeds on the stage, or apart from his place in a traditional gallery of theatrical types. He carries a bottle in his pistol case, just as the Sosia of Plautus eats and drinks upon the field. He hacks his sword and tickles his nose with spear grass to draw blood just as did other theatrical braggarts.

Therefore, says Professor Stoll, it is useless to see in Falstaff even in a stage play, a consistent character. He is both a coward and a boasting soldier, a type inherently inconsistent if measured by the rules of strict probability. "Cowards do not go to war, or, if driven to it, do not become Captains. Or, if even that is not beyond the compass of chance and their own contriving, the clever ones do not boast so extravagantly as to rob themselves of credence and engage themselves in undertakings which it is idle, therefore, to speculate about Falstaff's motives, or to explain, like Bulthaupt and Bradley, that Falstaff's humor exalts him above all fear. He goes to war only to furnish matter for comedy, the Prince gives him a charge to get him to the war, and the dozen Captains come sweating to fetch the laggard to his charge. Everything in these plays, therefore, is only a device of the dramatist and not an expression of character on the part of his dramatic personae."

It should be noted, however, that the criticism of any novel or play involves distinguishing between the artist's reasons for making his people do this or that and the motives which he has assigned to the people themselves. No character seems truly to live unless the motives apparently controlling his actions are fairly consistent and plausible. We know, as a matter of course, that back of these lies the artist's design, but to focus attention on that alone would be to reduce the appreciation of any work of art to the study of its maker's technic.

Though we owe to Professor Stoll and other critics of the naturalistic school a debt for warning us not to philosophize Falstaff out of relation to the intention of his creator or the comprehension of his audience, yet to affirm that "probably Shakespeare seldom conceived his characters apart from the plot," and that what they do and say upon the stage is only a matter of scenic expediency, is to forego appreciation of what is most distinctive of the genius of Shakespeare. It is even to misunderstand the nature of any art that seeks to interpret human life.

In looking at a statue or a painting, the mind of the observer passes instinctively from the surface of the work noted by the senses to depths of thought and emotion suggested as lying within. It is this inner heart of the aesthetic object that is conceived of as revealed in and determining the outer play of light, shade, color, form, and feature. In the same way, we instinctively pass, in observing the outward actions and speech of persons upon the stage, to his inward sentiment and character. The actor who would successfully assume a rôle must, therefore, conceive of the character that lies beneath its manifestations of word and deed, and the audience that sees and hears only such deeds and words will yet inevitably penetrate beneath these to the being from which they seem to proceed.

Now the chief distinction between great artists and small lies precisely in the ability of the great to suggest through outward means unified, consistent, and vital personalities beneath. And the greater the artist, the more fully will his lines, colors, surfaces, words, or gestures reveal a personality larger than any of these. In such power no dramatist has ever excelled Shakespeare. As Taine put it: "Every word pronounced by one of his characters enables us to see, besides the idea which it contains and the emotion which prompted it, the aggregate of the qualities and the entire character which produced it! Or, more picturesquely, 'The words which strike our ears are not the thousandth part of those we hear within; they are like sparks thrown off at intervals; the eyes catch rare flashes of flame; the mind alone perceives the vast conflagration of which they are the signs and the effect.'"

So, too, Maurice Morgann, despite his monomania for disproving all cowardice in Falstaff, was right when, a century before Taine, he wrote, "I affirm that those characters in Shakespeare which are seen only in part are yet capable of being unfolded and understood in the whole; every part being in fact relative and inferring all the rest." For most of us, then, Falstaff exists, not as a conventional mask of the theatre, but as a rounded, living personality, the richest, rarest, most concrete, yet universal of comic characters.

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An old print of Peep Woffington as Mrs. Ford and Shuter as Falstaff in "The Merry Wives of Windsor" (1756). From Augustin Daly's "Woffington"

amused liking rather than downright love, that even this feeling has waned, and that he resents the public attempt of Falstaff to compromise his kingly dignity, must be evident. Since Shakespeare meant the play to end happily, he must have expected our sympathies to be diverted from Falstaff ere his fall. But herein Shakespeare reckoned without his host, thinks Bradley. "In the Falstaff scenes he overshoot his mark. He created so extraordinary a being, and fixed him so firmly on his intellectual throne, that when he sought to dethrone him he could not. . . . We wish Henry a glorious reign and much joy of his crew of hypocritical politicians, lay and clerical; but our hearts go with Falstaff to the Fleet, or, if necessary, to Arthur's bosom or wheresoever he is."

Two interpretations have been offered for Falstaff's conduct when rebuffed by the King. According to the more usual, he regards the King's rebuke as but the working of policy intended for effect upon the populace. The King will send for him in private. The other interpretation, favored by the German Rötischer, sees in Falstaff's boast that he will be sent for in private but a dodge to impress Shallow

himself; and the witty euphuistic logic, the theatrical bombast, the enormous lies, under which he seeks to disguise his real nature, only serve to bring it into stronger relief. So we laugh at him, says Courthope, in that spirit of sudden self-glorification which the philosopher Hobbes thought essential to the comic. That Falstaff is self-deluded, and not the conscious humorist that the Germans have made him, is the contention also of the latest writer on the subject, Professor Stoll. "No one," says Stoll, with sad surprise, "so far as I know, has suggested that Falstaff undertakes to deceive, and yet without intending a jest falls into the preposterous exaggerations and contradictions of a sailor or fisherman spinning a yarn." We may retort that if no one has suggested this until now, it is in proof presumptive that Falstaff does not convey to the ordinary mind such an impression. His lies are so palpable and gross, like the father who begets them, that they appear to have been uttered partly for fun.

It may be admitted that sometimes when Falstaff is caught in a lie or a trick, as in "The Merry Wives," he is comic because abashed. Now and then, too, he is unwit-