

# FALSTAFF

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A REVOLUTION is slowly taking place in Shakespearean criticism. Brilliant critical essays, considered infallible for three or four generations, are being examined anew; the principles of a whole school of criticism are now suspect. Romantic criticism is giving ground slowly but surely before the onslaughts of those whom we may call, for want of better names, the bibliographical and historical critics. The Romantic approach, which began in the last quarter of the 18th century, is personal, sensitive, and subtle; the critic is the "measure of all things". It shows the return to the emotions, to the intuitions of a sensitive reader, and to the emphasis on the individual that characterized the whole Romantic movement. Divorced from the stage and its traditions, Romantic critics judged a play as literature to be read, not to be seen and heard; a revelation to be pondered over, not a quickly moving story in action, to be grasped by a very mixed public with the speaking of the lines. A wave of German philosophy broke over our best 19th-century critics, leaving a deposit of idealism on their critical outlook. Often, too, one feels in reading these critics that each is trying to find a more recondite significance, a more deeply hidden meaning or "truth" in a speech than has been found by his predecessor; that each is putting more of himself into the play. One is reminded of the definition, credited to Anatole France, that "criticism is the journey of a soul amid masterpieces". Now, the bibliographical and historical critics are frankly skeptical of this complete trust in the sensitiveness of the critic. For the former it is not enough to feel that a word is corrupt in a text; one must not pass judgment without a knowledge of Elizabethan handwriting. For the historical critic the traditions of the Elizabethan stage, and the ephemeral interests of the Elizabethan public in any particular decade, are very important; to him the writers of the Restoration are often a safer guide to Shakespeare's meaning than, let us say, Lamb or Coleridge, for the latter were cut off from the Elizabethan period by the growth of sentimentalism, humanitarianism, and all those complex forces that we group under the term *Romanticism*. This does not mean, of course, that these contemporary critics are trying to turn criticism into an exact

science: they readily admit that in the last analysis criticism is an art, not a science, and that the greatest research scholar is not necessarily the finest critic. They are trying to give criticism a securer foundation on which to erect its graceful structures: if we wish to know what Shakespeare meant, we must know the world of ideas and stagecraft in which Shakespeare lived and worked. Perhaps this quarrel between Romantic and historical critics can be made clear by a study of Falstaff.

## I

The father of all Romantic critics of Falstaff is Maurice Morgann, who published *An Essay on the Present Character of Sir John Falstaff* in 1777. Morgann admits that his views of Falstaff run contrary to those currently held. He makes much of the difference between what we derive through our *understanding* and the *impression* "which the *whole* character of Falstaff is calculated to make on the minds of an unprejudiced audience": by this he seems to mean that the understanding is analytic and disjunctive, whereas the other faculty is synthetic and unifying; perhaps we have here an adumbration of the difference between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, of which the German romanticists were later to make much. Morgann continues:

The Understanding seems for the most part to take cognizance of *actions* only, and from these to infer *motives and character*: but the sense we have been speaking of proceeds in a contrary course; and determines of *actions* from certain *first principles of character*, which seem wholly out of the reach of the Understanding. We cannot indeed do otherwise than admit that there must be distinct principles of character in every distinct individual: the manifest variety even in the minds of infants will oblige us to this. But what *are* these first principles of character? Not the objects, I am persuaded, of the Understanding.

Having endowed the reader—for Morgann never considers the auditor—with a sixth sense, and having asserted the peculiarity of every individual, Morgann comes closer to his main object: to show that Falstaff was not a coward. Realizing that Falstaff's conduct during the robbery at Gadshill, which Shakespeare placed early in the play, is hard to reconcile with his thesis, Morgann leaves the discussion of this incident until these "first principles of character" have shown the reader the truth about Falstaff. Then follows a study of all the forces

that played on the young Falstaff to make him what he was when the action of the play took place. One example will suffice: since Falstaff was a knight by birth and had been trained from youth in the army, naturally he could not be a coward; it was only his good nature and sociability that led him into his rather free tavern life. Morgann certainly had forgotten Sir Andrew Aguecheek when he found that all knights were brave. It is worthy of note that Morgann was impatient of the contemporary stage version of Falstaff, since it did not meet his theory. Further to prove Falstaff's valor, Morgann summons a cloud of witnesses—Mrs. Quickly, Doll Tearsheet, and Justice Shallow. Throughout, Morgann emphasizes insignificant speeches and action, rather than those incidents that would normally impress an audience.

From the earliest of the Romantic critics let us pass to one of the latest. A. C. Bradley's *The Rejection of Falstaff* (1909) is a brilliant, subtle essay by one of the best critics fostered in the 19th century. Far from being a coward, Falstaff has with the passing of nearly a century and a half become a philosopher; he is a humourist of genius. He stands for freedom, and superiority to everything serious. So his soliloquy on honour at Shrewsbury and his general conduct on that battlefield were not the fruits of cowardice, but are proof of Falstaff's ability to rise above such childishly serious matters as civil war and the safety of the realm. Nor did Falstaff lie—as after the Gadshill robbery—with the hope of being believed and of saving his own reputation, but with the sole aim of amusing his auditors. It should be no cause for wonder, if we first grant this interpretation, that we are disturbed profoundly by Prince Hal and Shakespeare when they jointly reject Falstaff after the death of Henry IV.

## II

Such an interpretation of the character of Falstaff seems to ignore the technique of drama—at least of Elizabethan drama.<sup>1</sup> Whatever may be the dramatist's intent to-day, certainly Shakespeare wrote with his eye on the stage and not on the printing press. He wrote dedications to *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, but he left his plays to the thoughtfulness of his friends after his death. Now drama must make its effect clearly and unmistakably. Elizabethan drama was very primitive in the matter of exposition: witness the number

1. In the discussion that follows I have been greatly influenced—all students of Shakespeare must be—by the writings of Prof. E. K. Stoll.

of times that First Gentleman tells, for the benefit of the audience, Second Gentleman what the latter already knows. *Henry IV* provides an excellent example of Shakespeare's care that the audience should not form a false impression: only on such grounds can we understand and excuse the soliloquy in which Prince Hal assures himself and the audience that in consenting to a robbery and consorting with such gay dogs he is only playing a passing part; otherwise, we should be forced to conclude that Hal was a cad of the first water. Now if Shakespeare had meant the audience to know that Falstaff was not a coward, he would have given some clear indication that the opinions expressed by Prince Hal and Poins were not true estimates of the knight's character; likewise, he would surely have given some indication that Falstaff did not expect to be believed when he told his monstrous lies. Again, since he made this whole business of the Gadshill robbery so prominent in the early part of the play, he must have done so with a purpose—namely, to let us see what sort of fellow Falstaff was—and consequently, Morgann's refusal to discuss this telling scene until after he has discussed his so-called first principles of character is simply approaching drama from the wrong end.

These critics make another serious mistake. When they proceed to tell us what Falstaff was like as a young man, and discuss what forces of heredity and environment moulded his character, they confuse drama with life. Except as a dramatist may give an occasional hint of earlier days, usually to make a passing impression, a character has no existence before the first line of Act I and no existence after the last line of the last Act. To theorize about earlier days or to wax angry over what happens to Falstaff after the rejection—or even to make a defence of the new King Henry on the ground that he gave hopes of better treatment to come—is beside the point. Elizabethan drama was never built on so-called realism, and critics who confuse Falstaff, a character in a play, with a hypothetical Falstaff in real life are little better than the friend of the writer, who, carried away by the trembling way in which a man was raising a small glass to his lips, cried out, to the consternation alike of actor and audience, "Don't spill it, you old fool". Indeed, one might say with a little exaggeration that characters in a play are technically closer to puppets than to men and women of flesh and blood. It is wise to distinguish between dramatic illusion and delusion.

This confusion of *dramatis personae* with real people, combined with what Mr. G. B. Shaw has called bardolatry,

has led to other false conclusions. Because we think of these creations as men and women, we seek to find consistent characterization and judge them by the laws of psychology. Now, an Elizabethan dramatist did not hesitate to sacrifice consistent characterization to a dramatic effect. Critics have tried to explain away the fact that Falstaff is at times very nimble witted and at other times very naive; for example, he has announced his intention of reforming, yet when the Prince suggests quietly the stealing of a purse, this man of wit walks into a trap that must have been clear to the dullest yokel in the audience. Why should we try to reconcile the two strains? Shakespeare, the master puppet showman, was merely pulling a different string in order to amuse the audience. We see the same thing every day in the comic strips: Wimpy and Henry are sometimes delightfully clever, and at other times just as delightfully obtuse.

It is time to note another fallacy. We have suggested that many critics have searched out minor evidence to support their theory of the courageous or philosophic Falstaff. If these critics would re-read the evidence of the bravery of Falstaff offered by Mistress Quickly (Pt. II, II, i), with an eye for smutty *double ententes*, they will see that Quickly's evidence has other values than they have thought. If they will re-read the scene in which Peto says,

I met and overtook a dozen captains,  
Bare-headed, sweating, knocking at the taverns,  
And asking every one for Sir John Falstaff,

keeping in mind the scene that has just preceded this interruption, they will understand why the Elizabethan audience very probably laughed loudly at the incongruity of this remark. Dramatic contrast, whether comic or tragic, is never far away from a Shakespearean scene. In literary criticism, as in theological wrangling, much can be made of isolated texts; but a just interpretation takes the sense of the whole play, and the import of the great scenes, not insignificant or humorous tags, as its evidence.

### III

Morgann complained against the stage interpretation of Falstaff, adding that there was nothing in the text to warrant it. Here we see the weakness of much Romantic criticism, to which reference was made in the introduction: lack of contact

with a living stage tradition. A modern play, because it will be read by thousands who will never see it, has very full stage directions and often an introduction. Shakespeare did not need to give his play any such aids to understanding, because he was writing for a theatrical company of which he was a member. He was undoubtedly present at rehearsals, and so could tell which interpretation was just. That such were the conditions under which Shakespeare wrote, is unfortunate for us; we have, however, certain guides to a correct interpretation: (a) the meaning of the play when approached, as we have suggested in the previous section, as a stage document; (b) other plays of the period; and (c) stage traditions.

Elizabethan drama inherited from Latin comedy the stock character of the boastful soldier ("miles gloriosus"). The boastful soldier made his first English appearance in *Ralph Roister Doister*, a play written between 1534-41: from then on, he ran a steady course until well into the 17th century. Shakespeare used him in slight degree in *Love's Labour's Lost* (Don Armado), *All's Well That Ends Well* (Parolles), and, as we hope to show, in *Henry IV* and *Merry Wives of Windsor*; but perhaps the best known, because so true, type is Jonson's Bobadil in *Every Man in His Humour*. Boasting is a prominent trait of this character, but cowardice is naturally a close second; it is always fun to have a man boast to the top of his bent and then expose him to his face. If he has boasted of his prowess in love or with women, he must become the butt of the fairer sex; this shows that Falstaff of *The Merry Wives* is the same man as the Falstaff of *Henry IV*. If he has boasted that he will trounce a certain person, who is always renowned for his bravery, the latter person will immediately step forth to take up the challenge, and the boaster must eat his own words or save himself by his wit. Even in real life all of us have met people whose stories seemed so far fetched that we wondered how the narrators expected our credence; yet we know that these people would have been shocked at our disbelief. If such is the case in real life, is there any limit to the audacity of a story or a boast in an Elizabethan play, provided the dramatist can make it richly humorous? The prison walls of realism are slowly shutting in upon us, so that we cannot accept exaggeration on the stage, but it is surely absurd to project our standards back three hundred years, and then begin to explain away all Falstaff's gorgeous lies as only make-believe. No Elizabethan, brought up on the tradition of the boastful soldier and revelling in good, broad humour, would have done that.

The boastful soldier was always a coward on the battle field. His favourite weapon was not a pistol, but a rusty sword or a bottle of wine. At Shrewsbury, Falstaff is true to form. And if in a moment of national danger he can behave so conformably to the tradition, and if Prince Hal can be annoyed at his mistimed folly, need we look in Falstaff's remarks on honour for a deep philosophy that drives away the serious? In the light of the convention of the boastful soldier we can well afford to re-read this scene; if we have the imagination of a producer, we shall see not a philosophical Falstaff, but a Falstaff whose knees are knocking together and whose teeth are chattering, as he utters richly humorous phrases that are strikingly in contrast with the actions of the real soldiers of the drama.

The boastful soldier was not only a boaster and coward, but he was also a glutton and a great lover of wine—provided another person paid the reckoning. Falstaff runs true to form: his bills for food and drink were monstrous, and Prince Hal, as we are specifically told, always paid the shot when he was present, or else the doting Quickly cancelled the debt. (One must admit that it was pleasanter to pay the bills of Falstaff than of other boastful soldiers, for he rewarded one's generosity with rare wit.) Falstaff had, however, one means of acquiring money that was not always typical of the boastful soldier: his misuse of the right to impress soldiers for the army was very profitable to him. The explanation of this additional is simple: there were recruiting scandals in England at this time, and Shakespeare did not miss his opportunity of adding to the fun by topical allusions. Another curious point may be noticed here, for it shows how evidence can be sadly misinterpreted. Falstaff says that he has led his ragamuffins where they have been peppered, and that not three of his hundred and fifty are alive. Even so astute a critic as Bradley found in this remark proof that Falstaff was not a coward, for he had led his men into danger. It is curious then that Falstaff, the gallant captain at the head of his troop, was not killed, like most of his men, but lived to tell the tale. But we have even clearer proof of the real import of the remark: the same jest occurs in half a dozen contemporary writers, always with a satiric implication that captains led their men to the place of danger and then remained behind.

If our interpretation of Falstaff is correct, how the leading comic actor of Shakespeare's company must have revelled in the rôle! Nor is such a suggestion unsupported by later stage tradition. We have seen that Morgann bears witness to such

an interpretation on the stage of his own day. One hundred years earlier Dryden, a practising dramatist as well as critic, said Falstaff was "old, fat, merry, cowardly, drunken, amorous, vain, and lying"; and again that he was "a liar, a coward, a Glutton, and Buffon, because all these qualities may agree in the same man". From this same period other witness could be produced, and for us the Restoration is a very important period. Theatrical traditions have a long life, and we know that when the theatre re-opened after the Commonwealth, there were people connected with it who had also been connected with the Elizabethan stage and so could pass on a living tradition from the earlier theatre. Hence, if we find that on the Restoration stage Falstaff was a coward, glutton, and buffon—or in a word, the boastful soldier—we may be fairly sure that the interpretation was Elizabethan in origin.

#### IV

We must now examine this question from another point of view. What was the background against which Shakespeare wrote his historical plays? Had he any political ideas, and if so, did these affect the structure of the plays? Two ideas lay behind the great outburst of historical plays in the 1590's. The most obvious was the result of the victory over the Spanish Armada; naturally Englishmen wanted to know about their past, and about this splendid breed of heroes known as Englishmen. There was, however, a deeper significance. There were Elizabethans who could remember tales from their grandfathers of the horrors of civil war in the 15th century, when the succession to the throne had also been uncertain. Certain characteristics of the Elizabethan state would repel us to-day, but Elizabethans preferred a strong central government to the danger that chaos might come again. In his historical plays Shakespeare shows himself a conservative: there are rich humour and seeming carelessness, but behind these, if we seek, we can find that Shakespeare was aware of the need of order and stability in the state.

To be understood fully, *Henry IV* must not be judged alone. In reality we have a tetralogy: *Richard II*, *Henry IV Parts I and II*, and *Henry V*. In the first play we see what happens to a king who is not worthy of his position, and to his unhappy country; yet Shakespeare leaves no doubt in our minds that it is sacrilege to kill God's anointed. In *Henry IV*



we see a king who suffers for his crime of regicide; Henry is not sure of his nobles, or of his own son, and he is always presented as prematurely old. There is, however, hope for the country: if Henry IV has a suitable successor, the royal house will be established and the country will be secure. In *Henry IV* we see the future sovereign proving his worth, and in *Henry V* we see him as the ideal hero-king.

*Henry IV*, then, shows us the ideal Prince of Wales. He is a lover of all life that is natural, even a gluttonous, boastful parasite; he prefers tavern life in such witty company—and who would not?—to the royal court with its flattery and political machinations. At the right moment, however, this seeming scape-grace can rise to the occasion: he can throw aside this life of fun for the battlefield when duty calls. But what of Falstaff? In reality, Shakespeare has used the old device of two foils to show in clearer light his central figure. On one side is Hotspur. He has valour, but he lacks humour and judgment; he has only vaulting ambition and testiness, the latter of which causes trouble in the rebel counsels. On the other side is Falstaff: he has humour and wit in abundance, but he lacks seriousness, which, if our reading of the play is correct, was held in higher esteem by Shakespeare than by Bradley. At the crucial moment he cannot change: to the delight of theatre-goers, he remained a coward at Shrewsbury, he misused his right of impressing soldiers most damnably, and he was still the same, and for him the world was still the same, as he stood by the side of the road waiting for Henry V to come by. But the world had changed; Henry V knew it had, and Shakespeare and his Elizabethan audiences knew it had, so Shakespeare could make Henry V reject his old boon companion, and Elizabethan audiences could, the writer is sure, accept such an ending. All Elizabethans knew that the serious world of affairs must go on, and some of them knew that they had not been watching real people of the 15th century, but that the matchless magician and puppet-master had been amusing them once again, and was now putting his puppets away until another day.

## V

We have tried to show that Falstaff was born of the tradition of the boastful soldier. Some reader may demur, and ask why, if he is only another boastful soldier, do we hear of him and not of all the others of the same period. The answer is

simple: just as Shakespeare could take an old blood-and-thunder melodrama and turn it into *Hamlet*, the greatest tragedy in English or, perhaps, in any language, he could take an old comic type and breathe freshness and life into it. Nothing is really lost if we return to the attitude of an Elizabethan theatre-goer. All the wit is there, all the matchless fooling. Indeed, when we enter into the true spirit of the character, we have the riotous fun of seeing a little lie grow into a monstrous lie, only to be exploded at the right moment. Where an ordinary boastful soldier would have wilted, temporarily at least, under the exposure, Falstaff is usually able to turn the tables by his sheer wit.

It is difficult for some of us to recover the Elizabethan point of view. As we have already said, sentimentalism and humanitarianism have come between us and the Elizabethan world. Then, too, we have become more socially conscious, and some of us find it hard to see Falstaff as anything but a social menace; perhaps this feeling is more common on this side of the Atlantic. Even though a person cannot cross the gulf of more than three hundred years, he can surely enjoy some crumbs from the richest feast of humour ever set before the English-speaking world. Such a person must not, however, proceed on his partial and false understanding of the play to read the mind of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was truly for all time, but he was also, as we have tried to show, very much of his own age too.