

Remembering Falstaff

by David P. Gontar (April 2015)??

To the vulgar, Falstaff will be forever just vulgar.

– H. C. Goddard

Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile.

– Duke of Albany

I. Falstaff Dismembered

In *The Life of King Henry the Fifth* there is no appearance by Falstaff. After all, he's been irrevocably barred from the royal presence. Yet he is expressly remembered. (II, i, 112-122; II, iii, 5-41; IV, vii, 38-49) Why? He's not a part of the tale of King Henry's invasion of France, which occurs after Sir John has died, the victim of Hal's egregious betrayal. Yet Shakespeare goes out of his way to see that he's not forgotten, and that the grim slaughters at Harfleur and Agincourt take place in Jack Falstaff's ample shadow. Becoming acquainted with Shakespeare's dedicated memorializing of this plus-sized literary hero may help us to better understand Sir John's character and meaning in the canon.

Shortly before the French surrender (IV, vii, 84), Captains Fluellen and Gower are debating Henry's place in military history. The talk turns to a comparison with Alexander the Great. Fluellen notes that Alexander "kill[ed] his best friend, Cleitus," leading Gower to distinguish the two leaders: "Our King is not like him in that. He never killed any of his friends." (IV, vii, 38-39) Fluellen will not go along with this bit of hero worship and obfuscation.

FLUELLEN

It is not well done, mark you now, to take the

tales out of my mouth ere it is made an end

and finished. I speak but in the figures and comparisons of

it. As Alexander killed his friend Cleitus, being in his

ales and his cups, so also Harry Monmouth, being in

his right wits and with his good judgments, turned away

the fat knight with the great-belly

doublet – he was full of jests and knaveries and mocks –

I have forgot his name.

GOWER

Sir John Falstaff.

FLUELLEN

That is he. I'll tell you, there is some good men in Monmouth.

(IV, vii, 40-50)

That is, it is not correct to say, as does Gower does, that Henry has never killed any of his friends, because by cruelly banishing his devoted host Jack Falstaff and breaking his heart, Henry is responsible for that death, just as much as Alexander was responsible for the death of Cleitus. Fluellen's closing words are therefore heavy with sarcasm. Good men don't do ill deeds. Henry's lethal rejection of his boon companion and mentor is plainly common knowledge in the ranks.

What, then, are we to make of the fact that Fluellen at this moment fumbles for Falstaff's name? He has forgotten, and as Gower reminds him, so we, the audience, are reminded by Shakespeare. As the ghost of King Hamlet admonishes the prince in the words, "Remember me," (I, v, 91) so "Remember Falstaff," is the message to us. Of course, the fat knight was full of faults, "jest, knaveries and mocks," but those human imperfections in the final analysis cannot for Fluellen justify King Henry's traducing of the man who was his true friend and benefactor. Nor can those faults warrant our dismissal of Falstaff as a character unworthy of our notice or admiration. Whatever he was—and is—it is more than the sum of his misdeeds, and that "more" is what Shakespeare encourages us to preserve.

A contrary view of Falstaff is presented in a recent article, A "Completely Good Man is Hard to Find: Welles' Defective Falstaff" by Carl C. Curtis (*New English Review*, February, 2015). While Mr. Curtis' ostensible target is film-maker Orson Welles, he has a lot to say about Falstaff along the way. The overriding issue, of course, and the one which concerns us, is not whether any particular artist has given us a full or less-than-full portrait of Falstaff, but whether taken on the whole Falstaff is anything more than a trivial scofflaw. Welles seems to have felt that Falstaff is a "completely good man," whatever that may have meant. Though he never comes to terms with what Welles did mean by that locution, for Curtis the answer is plainly negative: Falstaff is a knave and nothing more. "In my view Shakespeare's Falstaff is not—not even 'almost'—a good man." He possesses not a single redemptive virtue. He is "hardly good for anything except snapping up everything he fancies." Such harsh judgments naturally raise a problem, for they create an uncomfortable discrepancy between a total and irredeemable degenerate and the high esteem and genuine affection with which he has been received by the public for four hundred years. Indeed, if it is so evident that Falstaff is, in his own words, "one of the wicked," (Part One, I, ii, 94) why is it necessary to try to prove it? To argue the point implies that the accepted view of Falstaff is that of a comic hero and icon of humanity. That seems to be the attitude of Shakespeare himself; at least Curtis does nothing to show otherwise. And it would seem difficult to reverse that positive evaluation by simple enumeration of well-known vices which the accused would be the first to admit. At least one might credit him with candor if nothing else. In short, in seeking to defame and dismember Falstaff, Curtis shoulders an enormous burden of proof he cannot and does not carry. It is a dubious mission.

It may be observed in passing that over the past several years Shakespeare's *Henriad* in general and the figures of Hal and Falstaff in particular have been regularly vetted in these pages on a monthly basis. One would think that before leaping into print to proclaim Falstaff's utter baseness, Mr. Curtis would have perused those many articles, taken their arguments into account, and explained to the readers of *New English Review* why the appreciation of Falstaff set forth therein may have been unsatisfactory. Yet of these discussions dedicated to the identical issue Curtis is mute. Well, either he read that material or he did not. In either case, a grave omission confronts us. The scholar's first responsibility is to study the literature and make the reader understand in what way a new contribution is being made to the ongoing conversation. That duty is violated by Mr. Curtis, with predictable consequences. Ironically, though he accuses Falstaff of being selfish and self-centered, Curtis, in complacently ignoring nearly forty pertinent essays which precede him in this very journal, exhibits an inexplicable intellectual solipsism. Not only are the pages of *New English Review* overlooked, Mr. Curtis somehow manages to overlook the legions of

learned defenses of Falstaff, preferring to focus his attack on this sympathetic character in the midst of a film review of Welles' *Chimes at Midnight*. Having created his portly straw man, Curtis proceeds to demolish it, as though by trashing Welles' cinematic encomium he had exorcised the spirit of Jack Falstaff. Following King Harry's vindictive lead, many have banished Falstaff, but luckily for us he is immortal and will not desert us.

Let's indulge in a comparison. In *Twelfth Night*, the steward Malvolio hates Feste the jester. Does that hate have a rational foundation? Feste is a brilliant but melancholy fool who cobbles together an uncertain living by song and riddling wit. The ineffable sadness of life is the foundation of his comic art. He is not a regimented servant, but in all he does, like a naughty child, he colors outside the lines. For example, he outrages Malvolio by loud partying late at night. He goes AWOL and teases the lady of the house. Very well, admit all his faults. Is Malvolio justified in his hatred? It's a rhetorical question. Readers and theatre-goers have always treasured Feste and laughed at Malvolio. Why? Because seeking to make a career of imposing rules on one's fellows is to turn oneself into a rigid and sadistic automaton and others into asses-bearing-burdens. We laugh with Feste and at Malvolio. That is the crucial difference. Suppose Falstaff applied for the job of jester at the home of Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. Though he might alleviate her sorrow by making her laugh, do you think that Malvolio would recommend him for the job? Falstaff? A known thief and drinker? Why, that would be to add another Sir Toby Belch to an already troubled household! Out of the question, m'lady. Such fellows as Feste, Toby and Falstaff are rogues, scoundrels and scalawags, with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. Imagine that. If Malvolio were successful in this hypothetical scenario, he would deprive Falstaff of the position and consign the Lady Olivia to a routine of unrelieved misery. Isn't the guy who makes us laugh of any value? If not, why be grateful to Shakespeare for his comedies? When Biron goes to the hospital to bring a few moments of mirth and joy to the patients with his shtick, is he not performing a service? (See, *Love's Labour's Lost*, V, ii, 844-857)

In Act Two of *King Henry IV*, Part One, after the Gadshill robbery in which Hal and Pointz in disguise relieve Falstaff of the money he has stolen from the stagecoach passengers, Falstaff is confronted by them with the facts: he was not waylaid by fifty men with whom he did battle, as he boasted, but only two: Ned and Hal. Why did he run away instead of defending his ill-gotten gains?

POINTZ

Come, let's hear, Jack; what trick hast thou now?

SIR JOHN

By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye.

Why, hear you, my masters: was it for me to kill the

heir-apparent? should I turn upon the true prince?

why, thou knowest I am as valiant as Hercules: but

beware instinct; the lion will not touch the true

prince. Instinct is a great matter; I was now a

coward on instinct. I shall think the better of

myself and thee during my life; I for a valiant

lion, and thou for a true prince. But, by the Lord,

lads, I am glad you have the money. Hostess, clap

to the doors: watch to-night, pray to-morrow.

Gallants, lads, boys, hearts of gold, all the titles

of good fellowship come to you! What, shall we be

merry? shall we have a play extempore?

(II, v, 269-283)

Falstaff has been duped by Pointz and Hal and shown to be not forward but cowardly. How does Falstaff respond? With a lie, but a pleasant and transparent one: as he recognized Hal and Pointz he retreated rather than wound them with his sword. His virtue was instinctive. Is he angry at having been exposed in his greed and cowardice? No. He attempts to place a flattering and noble construction on his flight which is so amiable and generous that it almost might be

believed. He is polite, affectionate and respectful of Hal's nobility. Good fellowship is invoked amid general merriment. He then he calls for a play. It will not be one in which the Boar's-Head principals will be in the audience; it will be one in which Hal and Sir John impersonate each other and Hal's father the king. What we have in this play is actually a form of amateur psychotherapy in which Jack tries to help Hal to work through some of his problems. Is this villainy? Falstaff has been tricked and humiliated but his response is gentlemanly, witty and entertaining. He's committed a crime in taking purses on the highway, but it was a collective project. After all, the robbery was not his idea but originated with Pointz. The Prince of Wales is apprised of the deed but does nothing to stop it. Why not alert the sheriff or chief justice? In fact, Hal commits armed robbery himself in stealing the money from Falstaff. It's all a pleasant lark, and Hal will eventually return the money to its owners. Notice that Falstaff does not attempt to deny his flight, but to explain it away humorously. And who knows, perhaps unconsciously he did recognize Hal and Pointz in their disguises after all. That remains a tantalizing possibility. This, then, is Shakespeare's Falstaff, a felon, but a good and jovial associate who loves the Prince of Wales and acts at all times in the spirit of bonhomie. There is not a drop of resentment, hostility or antagonism in his capacious body. Yet this is the fellow Curtis believes should be "hanged." Malvolio would agree.

He too was deceived, you see. Maria tricked him into believing that Lady Olivia was in love with him. As a result, he changes his behavior and seeks to romance his employer, the countess, imagining that he (a commoner) will marry her and become "Count Malvolio." Instead, she has him locked up as a lunatic. How does he react when Maria's device is revealed and Malvolio's snobbery and inappropriate ambition are plain for all to see? His anger is boundless. "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you," says he, not excluding his lady love, Olivia. (V, i, 374) That is the difference between Malvolio and Falstaff. Malvolio is a moral microbe, a nano-ego puffed up by fantasy. At the root of his ambition is his wish to dominate and control those beneath him. Though he is contemptible, Shakespeare allows us to at least render him human by our laughter at his mechanical actions and pretensions. He is ever shrinking in our estimation. Falstaff, on the other hand, is encompassing and grand, a symbol of humanity in its basic needs and wish for gratification. Nothing human is alien to him. His *avoirdupois* then, is a symbol of his spiritual generosity. When he implores Hal, "Banish not him thy Harry's company, Banish plump Jack and banish all the world," (II, v, 484-485), Falstaff is not exhibiting ordinary egotism, as Curtis meanly charges. On the contrary, Falstaff is a comic giant and exemplar of our species, and has the good sense to know it. He is archetypal and universal, and each of us must recognize something of himself in him, his vices and (one hopes) his virtues as well. He teaches us not only to relish life but also to

question the status quo and the reigning ideologies of the day. If Curtis were correct and Falstaff were a cheap egotist or megalomaniac, how is it that after four centuries he stands in the literary limelight as precisely the universal man he claims to be? History has spoken: Falstaff is acquitted. Hal ignores Falstaff's plea and as a consequence loses his own soul. For that is what Falstaff is, Hal's very soul, and when it is jettisoned, he becomes a self-important husk, a silhouette of his father Bolingbroke, spouting high-sounding words to cover an inner emptiness.

We see the theme of Falstaff's cowardice again in the battle of Shrewsbury, where he feigns death in order to protect himself. But as we are taking the measure of a man's character it is appropriate to set his actions *in situ*. Has he a compelling reason to sacrifice his life to help resist Hotspur and the northern rebels? Falstaff is characterized as having been in his youth page to Thomas Mowbray, the mortal enemy of Bolingbroke in *Richard II*. He is keenly aware that the claim to the throne made by Hal's father is unsound. Bolingbroke stole the kingdom from Richard, and this is well known. To put it simply, the reigning English monarch is worse than a common thief. Why, then, should Falstaff put himself in mortal jeopardy to quell the northern rebels? These civil broils are not about protecting England from its foes, or even extending the kingdom farther afield. Recall, then, the Gadshill incident once more. When Hal declines to participate in the planned robbery, he is met with Falstaff's sharp admonishment:

FALSTAFF

There's neither honesty, manhood, nor good

fellowship in thee, nor thou camest not of the blood

royal, if thou darest not stand for ten shillings.

(Part One, I, ii, 136-139)

Falstaff's meaning is plain. How can you put on airs, Hal, and refuse to have a bit of fun holding up the stage coach for a few pounds, when your father had the nerve to seize the entire realm from Richard? You couldn't possibly be Bolingbroke's son. If you were really his descendant you'd find it quite easy to engage in a petty theft. The truth must be that you aren't really an ally to us of the Boar's-Head Tavern, and are too cowardly to fight a few paunchy burghers for their money.

Consider the larger implications of this comment. Hal is caught uncomfortably between two father figures, Bolingbroke and Falstaff. The latter is not shy about reminding the Prince of Wales that it would be sheer hypocrisy to fight on behalf of his father, a monstrous thief, and turn up his nose when it comes to helping the poor Boar's-Head patrons obtain a bit of badly needed cash. In a subtle way, Falstaff is teaching Hal an important lesson: if you are willing to benefit from a major theft, you can hardly scruple to refuse a minor one, or criticize those who must steal to survive. Falstaff here raises a significant ethical question that Hal would rather sidestep: what is acceptable conduct when one is being succored by the biggest crook in Britain? What is nobility after all? In using our vast powers to put down the northern lords, are we righteously resisting evil insurgents, or in fact doing nothing more than cementing our grip on the power of the state? Close reading, then, shows that Falstaff serves as Hal's mentor. This is, of course, no surprise. Even a text as elementary and unsearching as *The Essential Shakespeare Handbook* has no problem stating that "Prince Harry is [Falstaff's] pupil, not only in rabble-rousing, but also in understanding human nature." (*Essential Shakespeare Handbook*, by Leslie-Dunton-Downer and Alan Riding, DK Publishing, Inc., 2004, p. 124) Consider the dictum we heard Falstaff utter in the preceding chapter: "it was alway[s] yet the trick of our English nation, if they have a good thing to make it too common." (*Supra*, 517) Does a mere criminal express himself in the vein of a philosopher? Doesn't Falstaff anticipate his 21st century critics by noting that all such persons make him "too common"?

As eminent Shakespeare scholar Harold C. Goddard quipped in his magisterial *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, "To the vulgar Falstaff will be forever just vulgar." (Goddard, Vol. 1, 179) We have to look between the lines and beneath the surface to see who and what he actually is. In this respect, as we will see, he resembles his spiritual forebear, the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. Plato in his *Symposium* has Alcibiades comment on the need to listen closely if we wish to fathom a profound teaching and take the measure of our teacher.

Well, gentlemen, I propose to begin my eulogy of Socrates with a simile. I expect he'll think I'm making fun of him, but, as it happens, I'm using this particular simile not because it's funny, but because it's true. What he reminds me of more than anything is one of those little silenai that you see on the statuary's stalls; you know the ones I mean – they're modeled with pipes or flutes in their hands, and when you open them down the middle there are little figures of the gods inside. (*Symposium*, 215b)

Little figures of the gods . . . inside the man who was prosecuted and executed by the

Athenians for corrupting the youth. What an irony. The medieval philosophers had an important maxim: When you meet a contradiction, make a distinction. Harold Goddard, faced with a libertine and wastrel who is at the same time one of the most outstanding and memorable sages of literature, resisted the temptation to condemn Falstaff. Instead he made a distinction. "The truth," he wrote, "is that there are two Falstaffs . . . , the Immoral Falstaff and the Immortal Falstaff, and the dissension about the man comes from a failure to recognize that fact. That the two could inhabit one body would not be believed if Shakespeare had not proved they could. That may be one reason he made it so huge." (Goddard, 176)

What, then, is Falstaff the Immortal? He is Life. He is Wit. He is Comradeship. Again we find Goddard echoing Plato. Falstaff is "Imagination conquering matter, spirit subduing the flesh." (Goddard, 178)

What wonder that this contradictory being – as deminatured as a satyr or a mermaid, who is forever repeating within himself the original miracle of creation, has taken on the proportions of a mythological figure. *He seems at times more like a god than a man.* His very solidity is solar, his rotundity cosmic. To estimate the refining power we must know the grossness of what is to be refined. To be astounded by what lifts we must know the weight of what is to be lifted. Falstaff is levitation overcoming gravitation. At his wittiest and most ariel, he is Ariel tossing the terrestrial globe in the air as if it were a ball. And yet – as we must never forget – he is also that fat old sinner fast asleep and snoring behind the arras. The sins, in fact, are the very things that make the miracle astonishing, as the chains and ropes do a Houdini's escape. (Goddard, 178, emphasis added)

What a curious fellow this Falstaff is! One writer finds nothing in him but a cad or cur (Curtis), yet another discovers in his person the apotheosis of mankind. The latter view is alive and well today in those Shakespeareans who detect in Falstaff a representation or appearance of Bacchus himself, the Lord of Misrule. (See, e.g., *Shakespeare After All*, Marjorie Garber, 317, 325ff.) Can we measure a god by our petty bourgeois standards? Falstaff, like so many other Shakespearean characters, is an inkblot test. What we see in him tells us more about ourselves than it does about Shakespeare and his characters.

Long before Mr. Carl Curtis thought to edify us by showing that there is nothing in Falstaff but a scoundrel, the battle was already fought and lost by Falstaff's detractors. The year was 1951, when these words of Harold Goddard were first published by the University of Chicago

Press. As it is better to show the best rather than attempt an imperfect summary we quote at length.

Dover Wilson (following Professor R. A. Law) would have us take *Henry IV* as a morality play wherein a madcap prince grows up into an ideal king. Falstaff is the devil who tempts the Prince to Riot. Hotspur and especially the Lord Chief Justice are the good angels representing Chivalry and Justice or the Rule of Law. It is a struggle between Vanity and Government for the possession of the Royal Prodigal. [Note: the identical contention was also made by Martin Lings in *Shakespeare's Window Into the Soul*, Inner Traditions, 1984, 2006. See also, David Gontar, "An Islamic Reading of *King Henry IV*," in *Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays*, New English Review Press, 2013, pp. 355ff.]

The scheme is superbly simple and as moral as a Sunday-school lesson. But it calmly leaves the Immortal Falstaff quite out of account! If Falstaff were indeed just the immoral creature that in part he admittedly is, Wilson's parable would be more plausible, though even the words he picks to characterize Falstaff are singularly unfortunate. "Vanity" by derivation means emptiness or absence of substance, and "riot" quarrelsomeness. Imagine calling even the Immortal Falstaff empty or lacking in substance – or quarrelsome! He had his vices but they were not these. For either vanity or riot there is not a single good word to be said. To equate Falstaff with them is to assert that not a single good word can be said of him – a preposterous proposition. Wit, humour, laughter, good-fellowship, insatiable zest for life: are these vanity or does Falstaff not embody them? That is the dilemma in which Mr. Wilson puts himself. And as for the Lord Chief Justice, he is indeed an admirable man; a more incorruptible one in high position is not to be found in Shakespeare. But if the poet had intended to assign him any such crucial role as Mr. Wilson thinks, he certainly would have presented him more fully and would have hesitated to let Falstaff make him look so foolish. For the Chief Justice's sense of justice was better developed than his sense of humor. And even justice is not all.

Henry IV does have a certain resemblance to a morality play. The two, however, between whom the younger Henry stands and who are in a sense contending for the possession of his soul are not Falstaff and the Chief Justice, but Falstaff and the King. It is between Falstaff and the Father . . . that Henry finds himself.

Now in the abstract this is indeed Youth between Revelry and Responsibility. But the

abstract has nothing to do with it. Where Henry really stands is between this particular companion, Falstaff, and this particular father and king, Henry IV. Of these two, which was the better man?

Concede the utmost – that is, take Falstaff at his worst. He was a drunkard, a glutton, a profligate, a thief, even a liar, if you insist, but withal a fundamentally honest man. He had two sides like a coin, but he was not a counterfeit. And Henry? He was a King, a man of ‘honour,’ of brains and ability, of good intentions, but withal a ‘vile politician’ and respectable hypocrite. He was a counterfeit. Which, if it comes to the choice, is the better influence on a young man? Shakespeare, for one, gives no evidence of having an iota of doubt.

But even if Falstaff at his worst comes off better than Henry, how about Falstaff at his best? In that case, what we have is Youth standing between Imagination and Authority, between Freedom and Force, between Play and War. My insistence that Falstaff is a double man, and that the abstract has nothing to do with it, will acquit me of implying that this is the whole of the story. But it is a highly suggestive part of it.

The opposite of war is not ‘peace’ in the debased sense in which we are in the habit of using the latter word. Peace ought to mean far more, but what it has come to mean on our lips is just the absence of war. The opposite of war is creative activity, play in its loftier implications. All through these dramas the finer Falstaff symbolizes the opposite of force. When anything military enters his presence, it instantly looks ridiculous and begins to shrink. Many methods have been proposed for getting rid of war. Falstaff’s is one of the simplest: laugh it out of existence. For war is almost as foolish as it is criminal. ‘Laugh it out of existence’? If only we could. Which is the equivalent of saying: if only more of us were like Falstaff! These plays should be required reading in all military academies. Even the ‘cannon-fodder’ scenes of Falstaff with his recruits have their serious implications and anticipate our present convictions on the uneugenic nature of war.

How far did Shakespeare sympathize with Falstaff’s attitude in this matter? No one is entitled to say. But much further, I am inclined to think, than he would have had his audience suspect or than the world since his time has been willing to admit. For consider the conditions under which Falstaff finds himself: Henry has dethroned and murdered the rightful king of England. The Percys have helped him to obtain the crown, but a mutual sense of guilt engenders distrust between the two parties, and the Percy’s decide to dethrone the dethroner. Falstaff is summoned to take part in his defense.

'Life is given but once.' Why should Falstaff risk his life on earth, which he is enjoying as not one man in a hundred million does, to support or to oppose the cause of either of two equally selfish and equally damnable seekers after power and glory? What good would the sacrifice of his life accomplish comparable to the boon that he confers daily and hourly on the world, to say nothing of himself, by merely being? This is no case of tyranny on one side and democracy on the other, with liberty or slavery of a world at stake. This is strictly dynastic quarrel. When two gangs of gunmen begin shooting it out on the streets of a great city, the discreet citizen will step behind a post or into a doorway. The analogy may not be an exact one, but it enables us to understand Falstaff's point of view. And there is plenty of Shakespearean warrant for it.

'See the coast clear'd, and then we will depart,' says the Mayor of London when caught, in *Henry VI*, between similar warring factions,

'Good God! These nobles should such stomachs bear;

I myself fight not once in forty year.'

(Goddard, 185-187)

The problem with Curtis' polemic, then, is not so much that he offers nothing new, contenting himself with a laundry list of Falstaff's flaws, but that in ignoring the refutation of such simple-mindedness he sets literary history back an entire century. More is required to turn a saint into a fiend than to recite an inventory of his human shortcomings, shortcomings well known to all students of early modern literature. What Goddard is driving at is that through Falstaff Shakespeare makes us reflect. If, as Bolingbroke on his deathbed tells his wayward, vacillating son, the best strategy to pursue when one has no valid right to the crown is to "busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels," (Part Two, IV, iii, 342-343), it is important that those conscripted into those adventitious broils be prompted to reflect on their moral quality. The fact that so few English perished at Agincourt hardly means the invasion of France had any purpose other than making Hal look heroic so he could fend off those who recognized his monarchy was a fraud. For the French that field of blood was a vicious abattoir. And in the midst of that senseless decimation of the French defenders, it is telling, is it not, that while he babbles about the loveliness of "lenity," (*Henry V*, III, vi, 113) Harry approves the hanging for pilferage of Falstaff's aide-de-camp Bardolph, with whom the Prince of Wales partied in Eastcheap? (*Henry V*, III, vi, 99-114) What a sport! He'd have hung Falstaff personally if the poor man had survived his banishment long enough to be

drafted. Of course, that would certainly not trouble Mr. Curtis, who assures us that Falstaff is "guilty of crimes for which he justly would have been hanged." Frankly, what is Curtis' essay, after all, but the lynching of Falstaff in effigy? This is precisely the kind of mindset that led to Socrates, that corruptor of the youth, being forced to drink the hemlock. It's not hard to know how Curtis would have voted on that Athenian jury.

It is true, as Prof. Kenji Yoshino notes in his even-handed article, "The Choice of Four Fathers: Henry IV, Falstaff, the Lord Chief Justice and the King of France in the *Henriad*," Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities, Vol. 22, Iss. 2, article 8, that once the war starts, Falstaff accepts money from more affluent conscripts while drafting into his platoon the poor, ragged and impoverished, and that most of these men die at Shrewsbury. One needs to consider, however, that it was common and acceptable in bygone centuries for men to use money to buy out their military obligations. Falstaff had no choice but to participate in Henry's campaign to retain his phony kingship, a campaign that put thousands of lives at risk and caused many deaths and injuries. To his credit, Falstaff does not flee but takes his men into the thick of the battle where most of them perish. Would it have been preferable to sacrifice the lives of those better placed in society, stout yeomen with families and children who depended on them? Our purpose here is not to extenuate Falstaff's misdeeds, but to place them in historical and dramatic context. Falstaff is seen with his troops by the lords in Bolingbroke's service at the commencement of the engagement and allowed to go forward. Such are the chances of war. The fact is that in his opposition to an unjust war Falstaff is placed in a dilemma. Such situations should be carefully analysed, not exploited to demonize the hapless souls on whom those terrible risks and burdens fall.

Our business is to think. And Falstaff makes us think. That's why he's dangerous. He makes us question dominant ideologies and political passions. That makes him inexpedient. Just as Socrates raises questions such as, What is Justice? What is Piety? What is Friendship?, so Falstaff asks "What is Honor"? (*King Henry IV*, V, i, 134) In fact, Plato does explore this very principle in the *Politeia*. We all remember Brutus and his friends in *Julius Caesar*. Were they not "honourable" men? (*Julius Caesar*, III, ii, 13-47; 74-128) Let Falstaff fall with Caesar! When Hal banishes Falstaff in a very real sense he banishes thought itself. When we are treated to that "little touch of Harry in the night," (*King Henry V*, IV, 0, 47) we hear in the anguished doubts and protests of common soldiers Bates and Williams an echo of Falstaff's critique of "honor." Falstaff's question is every man's question.

II. Remembering Falstaff

Another way of assessing Shakespeare's view of Falstaff, the one he would have us absorb, is

to approach this character not via the vexing histories but through comedy, particularly, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Here Falstaff is portrayed as a dedicated adulterer and seducer of other men's wives. It is an entertaining bedroom farce and wonderfully funny. At the end of the pratfalls, after he is apprehended and punished by pinching for his wanton misbehavior, he finds himself surrounded by those he has wronged. Trapped in his sins, with no way out, Sir John does the decent thing: he confesses his wrongs.

SIR JOHN

Well, I am your theme; you have the start of

me. I am dejected. I am not able to answer the Welsh

flannel. Ignorance itself is a plummet o'er me. Use

me as you will.

(V, v, 59-161)

Page, one of the wronged husbands, responds.

PAGE

Yet be cheerful, knight. Thou shalt eat a posset

tonight at my house, where I will desire thee to

laugh at my wife that now laughs at thee.

(V, v, 168-170)

Mistress Page adds:

Good husband, let us every one go home,

and laugh this sport o'er a country fire,

Sir John and all.

(V, v, 233-235)

To which Page warmly responds,

Let it be so, Sir John.

(V, v, 235)

The rascal is forgiven. It would be much harder, would it not, to forgive a sexual rogue like Tarquin in *The Rape of Lucrece*? Or a sleazy philanderer like King Edward IV in *King Henry VI*, Part Three, Act 3, Sc. ii? What makes the difference? What is it about Sir John that makes us able to forgive him? Whatever that quality may be, it must be an important point in his favor, precisely the redeeming factor Curtis denies is present. Call it innocence. Call it childish insouciance, or a congenital inability to refrain from temptation, what you will. Sir John's trespasses never outrage us but instead amuse. He candidly tells us he would give up his escapades if he could, but like so many of us, he cannot summon the resolve. Shall we join those who were the first to cast stones at him? Shakespeare is not of their party. His Falstaff is like a kid. Look at him in the throng with Bardolph, Shallow, Pistol and the Page, standing on tiptoe to catch a glimpse of his dear pal, newly crowned in London. Falstaff has ridden all night in excitement to see him. How many of us have spent an entire night galloping on horseback? Does he expect to benefit from having the King of England as his personal friend? Of course. But at that moment such thoughts are far away, and what we behold is the thrill and joy he feels to see Hal on his mount riding proudly through the streets of London. How many of us in his position would have similar feelings? But in Falstaff they are unrestrained, exuberant, effervescent, beyond adult control. He waves, he shouts, at Hal's moment of glory. Then the axe falls: From that very man on horseback he hears the dreadful words, "I know thee not, old man." It is a lie. Yet Falstaff is banished. Crestfallen, he tries to regroup, to snatch at the bare possibility that he will be sent for privately. It never happens. What is exhibited by this wonderful man? Vulnerability. Loving as he does, he is exposed to emotional injury, and when it comes Falstaff has no defenses. His heart is cut in twain, and so he dies soon thereafter. Hal, perched atop his white charger, is as callous and cold as Falstaff is open, warm, and enthusiastic. Although he's forgiven by Page in *The Merry Wives* for seducing his wife, Hal in *Henry IV* seems unable to forgive Falstaff – for what: the unspeakable crime of loving him? It is hard to think of a tale so ironically sad.

* * * *

Instead of peering down one's nose at Falstaff for his human frailty and independence, we might wish to gain perspective by appraising his foibles in the light of his dramatic

forebears. It is agreed by just about everyone that he is not a wholly unprecedented or novel character but is compounded by Shakespeare of matter quarried from earlier historical and literary individuals. He is complex. It may be illuminating to trace the features of Falstaff back to some of his predecessors. Though there is no firm and universal consensus as to who they are, at least four will be considered here: (1) Sir John Oldcastle, (2) Sir John Fastolfe, (3) Gargantua and (4) Socrates. Professor Harold Bloom would also nominate King David of ancient Israel and Chaucer's Wife of Bath as Falstaffian ancestors. We will leave those tantalizing leads to the industrious reader.

1. Sir John Oldcastle (c. 1370 – 1417)

It cannot be overemphasized that the original name of Shakespeare's character in *King Henry IV* was not "John Falstaff" but "Sir John Oldcastle," a personality drawn from the contemporaneous historical period. This fact is of far more than nominal importance. For the character could hardly have been called "John Oldcastle" unless he bore sufficient resemblances to the historical figure of that name to be credible. Indeed, in their authoritative edition of *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, (2005) Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells in their version *King Henry IV* do not use the name "Falstaff" at all but revert to the original moniker, "Sir John Oldcastle" They write:

The earliest title page [of *The First Part of Henry IV*] advertised the play's portrayal of "the humourous conceits of Sir John Falstaff"; but when it was first acted, probably around 1596 or 1597, the character bore the name of his historical counterpart, the Protestant martyr Sir John Oldcastle. Shakespeare changed his surname as the result of protests from Oldcastles descendants . . . Our edition restores Sir John's original surname for the first time in printed texts . . . A play called *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, entered in the Stationers Register in 1594, was published anonymously . . . in 1598. This text . . . also features Oldcastle as a reprobate. (Taylor & Wells, 481)

No explanation is hazarded by Taylor and Wells as to how and why the character of a Protestant martyr (that is, a dedicated Christian) was willy-nilly (no pun intended) transformed into a wine-bibbing libertine. We can only wonder. Yet one particular scenario commends itself. It is likely that at some time in the late 16th century (probably around 1590) the author of the plays and poems we find today in the quartos and folios was commissioned by the post-Armada Crown to write a comprehensive patriotic history of England, glorifying the reign of Elizabeth, buttressing her right to govern, and rousing the nation in light of continuing

Continental threats and uncertainties. When “our bending author” (*King Henry V*, V, 0, 2) came to present the life of England’s most puissant champion, King Henry the Fifth, it was useful to portray him as someone not “born great” but to a degree made so by dint of effort, ingenuity and instruction. The commonly understood historical fact was that Hal (Harry, Henry) was good friends at all pertinent times with Sir John Oldcastle, a noted soldier who accompanied him in several campaigns. Oldcastle at some point came under the spell of John Wyclif (c. 1330 – 1384) and became an impassioned Lollard, that is, a member of a group of early Christian enthusiasts who in many ways anticipated later religious reformers. Oldcastle was eventually a leader of this incendiary group. At the same time he maintained his bond with the young King Henry. Oldcastle was investigated and came under suspicion of heresy and possible sedition. He was prosecuted and thrown into the Tower of London, from which he escaped into the London demimonde. Though he appealed to Henry for protection and assistance, as circumstances became more and more serious there was little the King could do. It became apparent that Oldcastle was gathering supporters to revolt against the regime. Henry severed his ties with the man. He was captured, tried and executed by hanging and burning. It is reasonable to suppose that the author of *King Henry V* found it unwise in Elizabethan England to depict an illustrious English monarch as a close friend of a radical heretic who planned rebellion against church and state. The character was therefore altered in name and nature to “Falstaff,” a self-indulgent soldier with no real political agenda at all. Profound as those changes may have been, some tincture of Sir John Oldcastle, Christian martyr, remained. Not only is the comradeship and rupture thereof kept in place, but so are the aspects of nonconformity and autonomy. After all, Falstaff is no mere party animal. He has ideas. There is evident in his discourses a preternatural intellect as formidable as his expansive waistline. Despite his carousing, he has thought deeply and abides by his own code of principles. Conventional society he mocks. In Falstaff’s rough-and-tumble credo, then, we catch just a glimpse of Oldcastle, and Hal’s awful break with the fat knight has a vital precedent. Thus, when we overhear Falstaff dream wistfully on the occasion of Hal’s promotion of throwing out the Lord Chief Justice, his constant foe (and Hal’s foe), it is all-too-easy to imagine that Falstaff harbors substantial and dangerous political aims or plots of anarchy. That is a confusion which fails to detect the ghost of Oldcastle. Those who accuse Falstaff of such stuff are wide of the mark. Falstaff’s muttered imprecations against the Lord Chief Justice are the taunts of a child. He is light years removed from the seriousness of a Hotspur or Jack Cade. Mr. Curtis, a professor at a Christian University, is surprisingly off the scent when he sees rebellion in Falstaff. As Socrates told Antisthenes that he could see his vanity through the holes in his cloak, we should be able to see Oldcastle’s Christian zeal and ambition peeping through the tattered garments of the playful Jack Falstaff.

2. Sir John Fastolfe (1380 – 1459)

It's interesting that sources vary as to whether it was John Oldcastle or John Fastolfe who was page to Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, a role assigned by Shakespeare to Falstaff. (*King Henry IV*, Part Two, III, ii, 23-25) This is important because in *Richard II* we see that Thomas Mowbray was the mortal enemy of Bolingbroke, future King and father of Prince Hal. It is natural, then, that on the unruly ascension of Bolingbroke to the throne that former page would tend to view the reign of King Henry IV with skepticism, to say the least. Falstaff therefore stands in opposition to the Machiavellian seizure and exploitation of power represented by Bolingbroke, a Machiavellianism passed on to his sons, Princes Hal and John.

Fastolfe was a knight who fought in King Henry V's army. He took part in the siege of Harfleur in 1415 and was elevated to Knight of the Garter in 1426. He fought against the French who were led by Joan of Arc. Because of incidents at the Battle of Patay Fastolfe was accused of desertion or cowardice, but his reputation was restored on further hearing. He apparently had a proprietary interest in the Boar's-Head Tavern, which identifies that place as a part of actual history. There were rumours he had been sympathetic to the Lollard cause, but these may have been the result of confusion. Because of his supposed cowardice and association with the Boar's-Head Tavern, it is believed that Shakespeare adapted his name when dropping Oldcastle's, thus creating our comic hero. Fastolfe is mentioned expressly in negative terms in *King Henry VI* as a coward, but in fact we know almost nothing about what sort of person John Fastolfe was. The substance of Falstaff's personality comes from other sources and from Shakespeare's poetic imagination.

3. Gargantua (appeared as character in the writings of Rabelais in 1532, 1534)

Gargantua was a major literary character created by Francois Rabelais (1494 – 1553) as part of a massive campaign of satire in the first part of the 16th century. Shakespeare was certainly familiar with him, as we can be sure since (1) he was immediately famous in Europe, (2) the resemblances between Gargantua and Falstaff are uncanny and impressive, and (3) Shakespeare refers to Gargantua in *As You Like It* (III, ii, 220). In *Shakespeare – The Invention of the Human*, Prof. Harold Bloom points out that it was Algernon Charles Swinburne who first showed the affinities of Rabelais' Panurge (one of Gargantua's relations) and Falstaff.



Gargantua Being Fed Mustard by Four Men by Gustave Doré

Algernon Charles Swinburne, now mostly forgotten as both poet and critic, yet superb as both, adroitly compared Falstaff to his true companions, the Sancho Panza of Cervantes and the Panurge of Rabelais. He awarded the palm to Falstaff, not just for his massive intellect but for his range of feeling and indeed even for his “possible moral elevation.” Swinburne meant a *morality of the heart, and of the imagination*, rather than the social morality that is the permanent curse of Shakespearean scholarship and criticism, afflicting historicists old and new, and Puritans sacred and secular. Here Swinburne anticipated A. C. Bradley, who rightly remarked that all adverse moral judgments upon Falstaff are antithetical to the nature of Shakespearean comedy. (Bloom, 281, emphasis added)

A few illustrative comments from M. Pierre Beaudry may be helpful in giving us a sense of the Gargantuan temperament.

In comparison with the smallness of feudal man’s thinking, Rabelais’ Renaissance man is a giant of intellectual and moral standing, who breaks with all of the old rules, all the taboos, all the old habits of a decrepit medieval society, breaking with all types of formalism and hypocrisy, especially religious hypocrisy. While the Sorbonne theologians based their recruitment to the Church on guilt, Rabelais destroyed guilt and replaced it with laughter. His characters Gargantua and his son Pantagruel are therefore quite naturally giants, because they are accomplishing a gigantic task proportional to their size. Both of them are the most outrageously loquacious talkers, great eaters and great pissers, [See, *King Henry IV*, Part Two, I, ii, 1] who will overwhelm any in their path, with the most powerful weapons of war against littleness: metaphors which they spin and weave without end, sparing no one in their masterful irony, from parody to satire to gross exaggeration. Their favorite targets are backward monks, manipulative and hypocritical churchmen, scholastic teachers, Aristotelian sophists, lawyers [and] courtly manners

Even the names of Rabelais’ characters are gigantic. For instance, when Gargantua came into the world he cried out ‘Drink, Drink, Drink’, whereupon his father . . . decided to name him ‘great gullet.’

But laughter is the best thirst quencher of all

Rabelais, who was a practicing doctor in Lyon, used moderate wine drinking as a curative means of eliminating diseases of tension, and he believed that laughter – here no limits

were prescribed – had a similar curative effect on both the soul and the body. Rabelais gave the highest priority to jokes as curative means of solving problems of the mind. That is why, in a warning to the reader, Gargantua emphasizes that '*Laughter is the proper characteristic of man*'. Laughter, wine and dirty jokes become political weapons in the war against the pervasive disease of oligarchism. (Pierre Beaudry, "What Does It Mean To Be Rabelaisian?" The Schiller Institute, *Fidelio*, Vol. IX, No. 4, Winter, 2000, emphasis added, n.p.)

Astute students of cultural history will recognize that Gargantua is a modern version of the Greek god Dionysus, who was worshipped as Bacchus, the god of wine and merriment, by the Romans. Literary presentation of this standpoint begins with *The Bacchae* of Aristophanes. The Bacchic sensibility is today carried forward in Carnival celebrations in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and New Orleans, Louisiana.

Later figures in the same tradition echo Falstaff. Consider the "Ghost of Christmas Present" in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. He appears to Ebenezer Scrooge as a jolly long-haired giant capped with holly wreath and glittering icicles. He bears a cornucopia and sits before a vast feast. His most eloquent accoutrement is a scabbard without a sword, a symbol of peace. From this merry Ghost it is but a small step to that winking old elf, Father Christmas (Saint Nicholas, Santa Claus), with his great sack stuffed with toys for children.

Looked at from the point of view of modern philosophy, all these personages, Dionysus/Bacchus, Gargantua, Falstaff, the Ghost of Christmas Present and Father Christmas are restatements in artistic form of the Life Force identified and articulated in the voluntaristic metaphysics of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) and Henri Bergson (1859 – 1941). Significantly, it is Bergson who extrapolated from the "*elan vital*" or life force to the first important theory of comedy and laughter. Whether we approach the matter from the point of view of myth, theology or philosophy, we find ourselves confronted with Something transcending the boundaries of mundane human affairs. Viewed in terms of secular philosophy, Falstaff is the Life Force. In terms of myth, he is Bacchus. This transcendent ethos is the real reason lapses in propriety do not drag him down into disrepute. This is comedy, after all. Puritanical critics of Falstaff seem to forget that. When Punch strikes Judy, do we chuckle –or call the police? A sense of humor is a gift from the gods, but sadly some have been short-changed in that department. These are the Malvolian literalists among us who never get the joke. Amusingly, for them Falstaff must always be a villain. But he remains always above–or below–with the gods. He is a chthonic personage indistinguishable from the life force itself. In that respect, Dionysus should never have been classed with the Olympians. His roots are subterranean. As Apollo is above, Dionysus rules here below. The ambit of our daily round

is narrow; we measure out our lives with coffee spoons, as Eliot put it. But in our dreams, in myth and art, we are in contact with the Transcendent (or Immanent), with Something that breaks through the carapace of everydayness and transforms and liberates the human spirit. Once this is grasped we are free to smile, to appreciate a character so much larger than ourselves that we too are enhanced. Where we were grim, we laugh; where we were tedious, we play; where we plodded, now we dance.

4. Socrates (469 – 399 BC)

In Plato's *Phaedo*, after Socrates consumes the poison hemlock, he covers himself with a shroud and quietly passes away. A moment later, his disciples are astonished to see him sit up and address them. "Crito," he says, "we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius [Greek god of healing]. See to it and don't forget." (*Phaedo*, 118)

These are his last words to us: "Don't forget."

The man all thought was dead still lived and had something to impart to his friends: death may be an illusion after all, seems to be the implication.

Now update to the battle of Shrewsbury. Hapless Jack Falstaff is dueling with the fierce and implacable Earl of Douglas, an infinitely more skillful and dangerous adversary than himself. He is on the brink of death, then collapses on the ground as though slain. Hotspur and Prince Hal cross words and swords, and after a terrible struggle Hal destroys Hotspur. Seeing the prostrate remains of Sir John, Hal speaks.

What, old acquaintance! Could not all this flesh

Keep in a little life? Poor Jack, farewell.

I could have spared a better man.

O, I should have a heavy miss of thee,

If I were much in love with vanity.

Death hath not struck so fat a deer today,

Though many dearer in this bloody fray.

Embowelled will I see thee by and by.

'Till then, in blood by noble Percy lie.

(*Henry IV*, Part One, V, iv, 101-109)

Strange to hear Hal's poetry in the midst of battle. What elicits it? What sentiment is here expressed? We have not the haughty disdain shown by the newly crowned King in *King Henry IV*, Part Two, (V, iv, 47-69). Not at all. What we hear are almost words of love, restrained and unrecognized as such. Hal can't quite bring himself to mourn, to shed a tear, to use the word "friend" instead of "acquaintance." But the truth was friendship, the animadversions of Hal to the contrary notwithstanding. One can sense it in Hal's voice, finding Falstaff, his companion, supporter and mentor, dead at his feet: "O, I should have a heavy miss of thee, If I were much in love with vanity." What does this couplet mean? What is felt is love and remorse. Hal will keenly miss his just departed friend, and, in fact, misses him "dearly" (note that usage) already. But no sooner felt, the sentiment is squelched by the business-like Prince of Wales, our sometime poet. He chokes off what he feels, letting stern calculation trample it down. "Well," he seems to rationalize, "I won't actually miss you, Jack, because, after all, our pursuits when I frolicked with you in Eastcheap were vain. I'm grown up now, no longer a lover of vanity." Good bye Falstaff. Here a virtue is built out of sheer hypocrisy. Perfect shallowness and self-deception are caught in the very act. The love is there, present inside Hal, but on account of his swelling pride he cannot acknowledge it. The felt bond is sufficiently strong to fuel a paean in iambic pentameter, but too weak to appear to him as what it is. The courage necessary to admit his love of Jack Falstaff is not part of Hal's nature. He has just slain Percy and is well on his way to becoming a clone of his biological father, brave enough to contend with enemies in battle, but not brave enough to confess his love for his friend, even to himself. Who's "cowardice" is greater: that of the fellow who played dead to save his life, or the guy who hasn't the candor and gumption to admit his own feelings of friendship?

Hal departs, and Falstaff, the dead person, like Socrates, arises from sullen earth. Unlike Socrates, who cheered up his disciples and wiped away their tears as he prepared for a death he fully accepted, knowing his soul would outlast his body, Falstaff rises having heard his student (Hal) declare the withholding of his love because of his teacher's "vanity," as he prepares to march to the throne. Can we blame Falstaff? Had he allowed Douglas to actually take his life who would gain from it? Falstaff denies that he "counterfeited" death in that it is death which is the counterfeit of the living person. For Falstaff "the better part of valor is discretion," and many who have benefited from his instruction on this score now wish to turn and snarl at him. The positions of Socrates and Falstaff are tantalizingly congruent on the issue of life and death. For Socrates the corpse is a counterfeit human because it is the

body alone; the real individual is the soul. For Falstaff, in rejecting the accusation that he is counterfeiting, he reasons that pretending to be a counterfeit demonstrates one's reality and authenticity. He appears dead to have life more abundantly. As Harold Goddard said in the passage cited above, it is Prince Hal in his cynical realism who is the counterfeit of humanity. To play at falsity (as an actor does onstage) is to find the truth: all the world's a stage. (*As You Like It*, II, vii, 139) Socrates and Falstaff almost agree: death is a counterfeit. Socrates teaches that the deceased's life is elsewhere, while for Falstaff only the whole man is real. Neither accepts the value of the husk. What is significant here is that behind the roistering clown Falstaff is a world of moral thought, a world unrecognized by his detractors.

Let us bid farewell once more to these two philosophers. Here is the end of Socrates by hemlock.

Up till this time most of us had been fairly successful in keeping back the tears, but when we saw that he was drinking, that he had actually drunk it, we could do so no longer. In spite of myself the tears came pouring out, so that I covered my face and wept brokenheartedly – not for him, but for our own calamity in losing such a friend. Crito had given up even before me, and had gone out when he could not restrain his tears. But Apollodorus, who had never stopped crying even before, now broke out into such a storm of passionate weeping that he made everyone in the room break down, except Socrates himself, who said, 'Really my friends, what a way to behave! Why this was my main reason for sending away the women, to prevent this sort of disturbance, because I am told that one should make one's end in a tranquil frame of mind. Calm yourselves and try to be brave.' This made us feel ashamed, and we controlled our tears. Socrates walked about, and presently, saying that his legs were heavy, lay down on his back – that was what the man recommended. The man – he was the same one who administered the poison – kept his hand upon Socrates, and after a little while examined his feet and legs, then pinched his foot hard and asked if he felt it. Socrates said 'no'. Then he did the same to his legs, and moving gradually upward in this way let us see that he was getting cold and numb. Presently he felt him again and said when it reached his heart, Socrates would be gone. The coldness was spreading about as far as his waist

After a little while he stirred, and when the man uncovered him, his eyes were fixed. When Crito saw this, he closed the mouth and eyes.

(*Phaedo*, 117c – 118)

Again, here is Mistress Quickly talking about Falstaff's final moments.

So a bade me lay

more clothes on his feet. I put my hand into the bed

and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone.

Then I felt to his knees, and so up'ard and up'ard, and

all was as cold as any stone.

(*King Henry V*, II, iii, 21-25)

Such congruences are hardly accidental. They reflect the most profound of influences and conjoint purposes.

This is partially recognized by Prof. Harold Bloom, who observes that "Scholars have recognized that Mistress Quickly's account of Falstaff's death, in *Henry V*, clearly alludes to Plato's story of the death of Socrates, in the *Phaedo*." (Bloom, 292) This parallelism Bloom attributes to Shakespeare having read Montaigne, from whom our author is supposed to have derived the bulk of his knowledge of ancient wisdom, including this account of the demise of Socrates. Bloom deserves much credit for demonstrating that Falstaff is indeed the Socrates of Eastcheap. Unfortunately for Bloom's particular explanation of influence, an examination of Montaigne's writings will reveal that the account of Socrates' death in the *Phaedo* appears nowhere in Montaigne. (See, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, M.A. Screech, ed., Penguin Classics, 1991) That means "Shakespeare" got the narrative of Socrates' death somewhere else. The fine detail suggests nothing so much as "Shakespeare's" reading of Plato, which would of course have been in ancient Greek. There is a point to ponder.

We may round things out with a medley of Socrates/ Falstaff commonalities, understanding that this enumeration should not be taken as final.

1. Socrates and Falstaff are both poor.
2. They are both physically unhandsome.
3. They both enjoy and provoke laughter

4. Falstaff and Socrates are comic characters. (See Aristophanes, *The Clouds*)
5. Falstaff and Socrates are both drawn to *caritas*, *philia* and *eros*.
6. Each was the most eloquent speaker of his time.
7. Both raised philosophical questions.
8. The manner of their deaths is strikingly similar.
9. Both had powerful enemies who finally succeeded in destroying them.
10. Each of them died because of his dedication to his chosen nonconformist mode of living.
11. Socrates and Falstaff both maintained "thinking shops" in which they took up a wide range of topics with anyone who would listen and participate. Shakespeare's Falstaff holds forth at the Boar's-Head, while Socrates maintained a "think shop" where he consorted with disciples and other interlocutors from 431 to 424 BC. (See, R. Hackforth, *The Composition of Plato's Apology*, Cambridge, University Press, 1933, 156-157. See also, David P. Gontar, "The Problem of the Formal Charges in Plato's Apology," *Tulane Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. xxvii, 1978.)
12. Socrates is hen-pecked by his wife, Xanthippe; Falstaff is arrested at the suit of harridan Mistress Quickly.

The challenge in writing about a literary character such as Falstaff is that to do so constructively one must have training and expertise in the history of thought, especially philosophy. Those whose experience is restricted to an isolated discipline such as "literary criticism" or "English literature" are at a disadvantage in taking on texts composed by polymathic geniuses such as "Shakespeare" who tread the wide stage of history and the world's wisdom literature.

III. Conclusion

Reducing the richness and complexity of Falstaff to the one-dimensionality of a Vice figure cannot be viewed as anything but a loss. When one of the most important roles in all literature is trivialized, so are the dramas in which he stars. Such diminution of character implicitly challenges the ability and judgment of Shakespeare, who lavished so much care and learning on Falstaff. Shrink wrapping the sage of Eastcheap is a mode of forgetting him, neglecting to consider Shakespeare's heartfelt injunction to remember this man. It is to attempt to perch in the clouds and look down on Falstaff and his creator. But up so high

everything below must seem insignificant. In applying white glove standards to Falstaff one sacrifices greatness on the altar of mediocrity, as though anyone pushing his shopping cart down the aisles of the local discount store could determine the relative merits of Moses, Napoleon, Beethoven and Tolstoy. What was their credit rating? This is to turn the world upside down. The danger of what calls itself literary criticism is that its practitioners sit in judgment on artists whose shoelaces they are unworthy to unlatch. The works of the ages are dismissed with a curt wave of the hand. But we do not sit in judgment on Lear, Hamlet and Falstaff. Their creator, through them, takes our measure, and when we wade into print it is evident to all the limitations we bring to our task. Scorning Falstaff for his irregular deportment is like lashing out at Mt. Everest for its snowy crags and boulders.

There was only one historical Socrates. But three very different writers, Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Plato each gave distinctly different presentations of his life and personality. Xenophon, a military man innocent of irony and the depths of philosophy, saw only what he was equipped to see: a purveyor of prudence and nostrums. Today minds the size of a walnut presume to check the cynosure of the dramatic heavens and pronounce on his worthiness. In so doing they become comic, pygmies who would add to their stature by looking askance at gods, heroes and giants. That is not the path to growth. Shakespeare enlarges us not when we belittle him but when we catch a glimpse of the scope and depth of his world, a world he wishes to share with us. Instead, our contemporaries reduce the great to erase anything beyond their ken. Falstaff is aware of the syndrome. "Men," he says, "take a pride to gird at me. The brain of this foolish-compounded clay, man, is not able to invent anything that tends to laughter more than I invent, or is invented on me. I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men." (*King Henry IV, Part Two, I, ii, 6-10*)

There have been many who can only find in Falstaff a bad man. Socrates might observe that such persons must be experts in the nature of goodness. He might invite them to explain what goodness is that we, too, might be wise. If that feat proves challenging, we might pause and view with more patience the larger-than-life personality of Falstaff. Plato taught that the very essence of learning and education is a recollection of the content of our own souls. He called it "anamnesis." When we learn, we remember. We come to know ourselves. As we absorb the characters of Shakespeare we change, we develop, we grow. And when after many years we look within, we will be most fortunate if we find there something of Falstaff.

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