

Falstaff: A Purposeful Paradox

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The paradoxical Falstaff appeals to mankind at all points of their natures. The wicked find in him a bosom companion, the sedate discover a moral lesson which is pleasant in its learning, and the gay are thrilled with the pure joy of his wit. No other character in literature has embodied so many ignoble characteristics and at the same time produced in his readers so many sympathetic reactions. The disreputable, the cowardly, the mean and the villainous have been combined by the artistry of Shakespeare to produce a figure so highly imaginative that we have not the slightest expectation of ever meeting a man who has a similar combination of qualities, and yet the lessening of any of these characteristics would have detracted from the vivid realness of Falstaff. He is completely a character of the imagination, skillfully drawn for the purposes of the author, but he lives far more vividly in the realm of the creative than many flesh and blood heroes live in memory.

Falstaff is a paradox in that he is the personification of evil and yet produces a sympathetic reaction in his reader. He is at one and the same time appealing and repulsive. Shakespeare has violated all the moral rules of literature in making a base character appear lovable. Few sensible persons of today would delight to have their sons consorting with a Falstaff, yet when they read him they not only are not shocked, they chuckle. Evil is represented in almost every line which he utters. He is a perfect representation of corruption, immorality and degeneracy. Most of his statements are either lies or

half-truths, his actions are prompted by convenience, self-love and greed. He holds wide the open door of temptation and invites others to walk with him. An examination of a few excerpts from *Henry IV, Parts I and II* will reveal his crudity, his lack of sensibility, his low ideals and his love of expediency.

Falstaff's true colors are displayed in the first appearance which he makes upon our stage. Prince Hal describes him accurately in Scene II, Act I, Part I: "Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon. . ." Thus, from the very first we are acquainted with the indolence and vice of this man. In this same scene we see his hypocrisy. He resolves to fore-swear his evil ways.

Fal. I must give over this life,
and I will give it over; by
the Lord, and I do not, I am
a villain: I'll be damned for
never a king's son in
Christendom.

Prince. Where shall we take a purse
tomorrow, Jack?

Fal. Zounds! where thou wilt, lad,
I'll make one; and I do not,
call me a villain and baffle
me!

Resolution means but words in the life of Falstaff, a fact which the Prince knows very well. We become acquainted with his cowardice in the scene on Gadshill, Scene II, Act II, Part I, not only through his conversation but through the action which ensues; and his vanity and braggadocio are delightfully plain to all.

in Scene IV of this act which takes place in the tavern at Eastcheap.

Prince. What, fought ye with them all?

Fal. All! I know not what yet call all; but if I fought not with fifty of them, I am a bunch of radish: if there were not two or three and fifty upon poor old Jack, then am I no two-legged creature!

Falstaff's dissolute habits would be amply revealed by the various situations in which we find him as the play progresses, but to make the matter indisputable, our author contrives to have him found with a bill in his pocket showing that he is debtor for "an intolerable deal of sack" and but one half-pennyworth of bread. His bloated condition, a constant object of Hal's ridicule, indicates dissipation, and his very size, untidiness, awkwardness and coarseness of language should be offensive to us. But somehow they are not.

His love of life rather than honor is further illustrated for us in his behaviour at Shrewsbury in Act V of Part I, and his despicable intention to take the credit for the slaying of Hotspur is not at all out of line with his character. His inexcusable abuse of the king's treasury in his capacity as a captain in the royalist army betrays his insatiable greed, which later lends him even the audacity to ask the Chief Justice in Scene II, Act I of Part II, to lend him a thousand pounds after he has despised, patronized and insulted that worthy gentleman. Falstaff is definitely an opportunist of the first rank. He lives in the here and now and pushes away from him every serious thought of the future. All the subterfuges and hoaxes

which he perpetrates are bent towards some immediate end — the gaining of money for more sack, or the reputation of bravery in the present hour.

In view of all these obvious examples of his infamy, why have countless thousands of readers taken Falstaff to their hearts, rejoiced at his triumphs and resented his final ignominious end? The answer, of course, lies in his wit. He is "not only witty in himself but the cause that wit is in other men." And by means of his wit he turns all situations to his advantage, for "a good wit will make use of anything."

The humor of Falstaff is many-sided and will bear investigation. Chief among all its phases, perhaps, is his magnificent art of evasion. The clever and enviable trick of outsmarting and turning the tables on one's persecutors has always been admired. The dexterity and keenness with which Falstaff parries all thrusts at the vulnerable spots in his character and magnanimously forgives those whom he has injured delights and captivates us. His very audacity compels us to admiration. The most wonderful examples of this skill are found in Scene IV, Act II of Part I and Scene II of Act I in Part II. In the former scene, which takes place in the Boar's Head Tavern at Eastcheap shortly after the trick instigated by Poins and the Prince, we find the group, rascals all, assembled to hear Falstaff's recital of the event. His quickness soon reveals to him that something is afoot. He senses treachery in the air and in splendid fashion he casts discretion to the winds and gives the Prince and Poins a tale worthy of their exertion. It is at the beginning of the dialogue when Falstaff says, "... two I am sure I have paid, two rogues in buckram suits," that something clicks in

his mind and he senses the hoax. From here on the tale is monstrous and so wildly framed that the joke begins to turn. When the revelation comes, Falstaff is ready, and his grand assertion that his instinct was greater than himself in forbidding him kill the heir apparent crowns him with glory and his tormentors with confusion. The second outstanding instance of his ability to turn a troubled situation to his own advantage appears in his conversation with the Chief Justice. First feigning deafness, then admitting boredom, he finally parries thrusts defiantly with this gentleman, and as a parting shot asks for the loan of a thousand pounds.

This continuous battle of wits in which Falstaff engages, always managing to slip away from just consequences and turn the situation cleverly to his own account, presents to his readers a delightful conflict in which they themselves join. They, too, play the game with Falstaff.

The success of the game, of course, depends upon the alacrity of Falstaff. None is so quick as he, though the Prince runs him a close second, at seizing the proper remark or epithet for the occasion and uttering it with the right amount of indignation, gusto or pomposity. He has a quickness to make use of the other man's hesitation and thus seize the moment for himself and a clever ability to turn the tide of conversation away from a distasteful subject, such as death by hanging. Of course, he is often inconsistent. Having decided that honor is but a word and therefore empty air, he makes use of his heels to take him from the scene of battle where it may be found; yet in his soliloquy on sack he indicates that he would want to supply his sons with an abundance of this commodity in order that they might be filled with courage and valour. Yet of

a character such as this it is not required that he be plausible but that he entertain us. We love him for his quick ability to evade and escape and reverse a situation, for his pungent vocabulary, his fat belly and strutting walk, and his enthusiasm for his sins.

What then does he add to the action of the play? It may safely be said that his chief function is that of humor and wit. But it is wit for a purpose. If Falstaff is a representation of evil, as he surely must be, and that evil was strong enough to entice a Prince away from his royal pursuits, then it must be shown with all its appeal in order for its power to be understood. In this sense Falstaff illustrates a theory of evil. Evil has an enticing and engaging power over human beings when it appears in the guise of wit and mirth, and a multitude of sins can be drowned in a glass of sack. But nevertheless it receives just condemnation at the hands of the virtuous. The Prince's treatment of Falstaff, judged by Shakespeare's standards, is completely just, and when Falstaff stands completely baffled and crushed in the wake of Henry Fifth's train, it is only that the devil has indeed been given his due.

It must not be forgotten that Sir John Falstaff was a knight and as such he was one of the lesser nobility. This obscure fact which the Falstaff of Eastcheap causes us to forget seems to have double meaning when we consider the condition of the aristocracy of Shakespeare's day. Corruption and vice, graft, injustice and treachery were at the very heart of the system, and the common people, oppressed and ridden by fees and taxes, supported these parasites of the nation. The nobility, swollen to a great size, corrupt and degenerate, seems to find a counterpart in

the enormous bulk of the immoral Falstaff. In this capacity he serves as the representation of a sociological problem, the problem of how to reduce the power of the nobility.

Technically speaking, of course, Falstaff, together with the Prince, is the unifying element of the two plays. Often appearing in both of the parallel plots, he bridges the action from one to another, and the very force of his personality gives life to the whole. Thus we find the historic characters fading in reality beside the imaginative creation. He also serves the dramatic function of a foil for the Prince. The wit and keenness of the Prince is sharpened by his contacts with Falstaff, and the vigor and resolution of the new king is heightened by a comparison with his former companion.

We, of course, are not able to interpret which of these functions, if indeed any or all, Falstaff was first created to serve. But it seems fairly certain that, regardless of the author's original intention, Falstaff outgrew his role. The domination of his personality casts a shadow over every other character or principle in the plays, and Prince Hal himself must share honors with Falstaff. Indeed, in the matter of characterization he must bow completely. Here was a character which grew and grew with each speech he uttered until today we read, not *Henry IV, Parts I and II*, but Falstaff.

SOURCES CONSULTED

Stoll, Elmer Edgar. *Shakespeare Studies*, Macmillan Co., 1927.

Charlton, H. B. *Shakespeare Comedy*, Macmillan Co., 1938.

SAMPLING

We are given a glimpse into a few hours of the life of a small Kentucky town, probably a few years after the turn of the century. A bit of the life of a small community has been detached bodily from its niche in time, unrolled before our eyes, and then placed back with a matter-of-factness which is disquieting. We realize that this story is but a few feet somewhere in the long reel, and we are left to fill, in our own minds, the before and the after.

The Washerwoman's Day

FRANCIS DONAHUE