

# FALSTAFF Among Shakespeare's Characters

by C. FAIGAO

THE AGE OF ELIZABETH was an era of intellectual freedom, of growing intelligence, of material comfort among all classes, of unbounded enthusiasm. The English loved Elizabeth and Elizabeth loved England and the English. Under her reign the drama rose to its height of development and the drama spoke through the genius of one man.

It was a time of literary patronage and lucky, indeed, was the writer who could find a man of height and substance to hang on to for the publication of his works. But if a literary patron was invaluable, much more so was the imperial nod of approval. The Queen's approbation was worth half a dozen patrons for the young writer looking for his bearings.

Nicholas Rowe, who dared the first serious attempt at writing a life of Shakespeare, asserts that Queen Elizabeth was so well pleased with the admirable character of Falstaff in the two parts of *King Henry IV* that she commanded Shakespeare to continue it for one more play and to show Falstaff in love. With this, Shakespeare "officially arrived" and Sir John Falstaff started trekking on his way to immortality.

It must have been partly to oblige the Queen that Shakespeare commits himself in the Epilogue to the Second Part of *King Henry IV*. The dancer says:

One more word, I beseech you.  
If you be not too much cloyed  
with fat meat, our humble author  
will continue the story, with Sir  
John in it, and make you merry  
with fair Katherine of France.

It is to the artistic integrity of Shakespeare that he held the demands of high art of greater import than a casual promise, and does not continue the story of Sir John. Or if he does so in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, he converts Sir

John into a regular buffoon in no way connected with the comic creation in the *Henry IV* plays. On the contrary, he kills two birds with one stone,—he satisfies the queen and leaves his artistic honesty intact.

When a Hollywood actress has reached a certain degree of popularity, it is often the practice of Hollywood producers to look for a picture to provide a proper vehicle for her special talents. It seems that it was the other way with Shakespeare when he created Falstaff. He had to create him to fit a role. Thus he is in some respects an artistic freak, an aborted brainchild of the poet's artistic convenience. Hardin Craig says:

*Falstaff is from the point of view of literary history an accident, a very happy accident... (he) happened into the drama from a very varied body of antecedent circumstances...*

This is only one of the many instances in which Shakespeare is pretty cavalier with the facts in order to suit the higher purposes of drama.

The characters in *Henry IV* fall naturally into two groups, with one man serving as the pivot for the action of each group. The historical plot revolves upon Hotspur; the Falstaffian comedy revolves upon Falstaff. In the contemplation and portrayal of Hall, who is to be developed into England's "darling king," Shakespeare needed a Bohemian background. That background painted, the dramatist next needed a fit figure to supply it with color and give it personality. Thus Falstaff was born.

And Falstaff did not spring full-grown like Aphrodite from the broad brow of Zeus. From one of the sources of the comic incidents of the play, an old anonymous chronicle called *Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, Shakespeare appropriated the name of Sir John

Oldcastle, -- the modern offense of plagiarism had not yet been invented—which name was transliterated to Falstaff. The actual Sir John Oldcastle was a Lollard martyr and, unlike Brutus, was an honorable man. The influential remnants of his family resented the sly digs on their favorite ancestor contained in the Prologue to Part I of *Henry IV*. For this, Shakespeare makes public apology in the Epilogue to Part II of *Henry IV*, when he makes the dancer say:

*... Falstaff shall die of a sweat,  
unless already 'a be killed with  
your hard opinions (in our times,  
public opinion, or the complaints  
in the Public Pulse Columns) for  
Oldcastle died a martyr, and this  
is not the man.*

All this by way of saying, in the language of Hollywood's script-writers, that the characters in the play are purely fictitious and any resemblance with any character, living or dead, is purely coincidental with the turns of the fecund Shakespearian genius.

Judging from this, we are tempted to suggest that Shakespeare's must have been a kind age, in which a public apology consisting of two lines in an epilogue could easily suffice as a balm for an enraged conscience. Ours is a more sensitive generation. We have less art now and more suits for civil damages. #

Faith is to believe what we do not see; and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe.

*St. Augustine*

Philosophy: A route of many roads leading from nowhere to nothing.

*Bierce*

We always love those who admire us, and we do not always love those whom we admire.

*La Rochefoucauld*