

form of them—that Battenhouse desires to propagate, they seem to me to be imposed upon the text rather than derived from it. The unfortunate result, as far as the Henry plays are concerned, is an eccentric and distorted view of a major literary text. Falstaff is no doubt a more fascinating character than Henry v—disreputable and rebellious figures in literature are often more appealing than those who represent political authority and tradition. But this should not throw us into utter confusion about the nature and meaning of the work in question. Our commentator insists that Falstaff goes about larding the earth “not merely with his sweat, but covertly with a Christian spirit as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves” (p. 33). We are told, however, that in serious confrontations with that spirit “Prince Hal’s response is merely to make fun of Falstaff” (p. 39). It is surely true, as Battenhouse echoes W. H. Auden in suggesting, that Scripture “enjoins Christians to show charity” to both king and clown; but nowhere, so far as I can discover, are we enjoined to mistake the one for the other.

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To the Editor:

I agree that Roy Battenhouse’s astonishing interpretation of Falstaff is potentially of such significance that it demands our attention as scholars and teachers. Battenhouse’s understanding of Shakespeare’s emblematic method is so well grounded in Scripture, so morally sound and esthetically discriminating that it provides a foundation for what I trust will be a school of criticism. If his essay has any fault, it is only that he sometimes does not do justice to his own argument. He rightly perceives, for instance, that the Boar’s Head is a “hangout for Corinthian lads” (p. 41), but he does not pursue this biblical reference with his customary energy and imagination. Had he done so, he would have found the scriptural key to his whole argument in II Corinthians. The overt reference in the play is the cellar boys’ calling the Prince “a Corinthian, a lad of mettle, a good boy” (*IH4*, II.iv.11–12). For the groundlings, this means simply that the Prince is jolly and carnal, but for Battenhouse it means also that he is of the *old* church, a worshiper of Diana, a servitor “of illusion in a comedy-of-errors world of enticingly silver but actually coppersmith values” (p. 47). So far, so good, but Battenhouse omits to mention that there are also Corinthians of the *new* church, and of these we may take not just that sometime resident of Corinth, St. Paul, as the New Testament type, but also that resident master of spiritual values at the Boar’s Head, Falstaff. St. Paul, of course, is the scriptural source of Falstaff’s divine foolishness, just as he is the

source of Erasmus’ praise of folly: “I fay againe, let no mā thinke, that I am foolifh: or els take me euē as a foole, that I alfo may boaft my felf a litle” (II Cor. xi.16, Geneva).

It is a measure of Battenhouse’s insight, unaided in this instance by scriptural reference, that he correctly reads Falstaff’s confession of “more flesh than another man” as a confession of more frailty only to the groundlings, but, to the discerning audience, as an ironic and muted claim to his spiritual superiority over his self-righteous and ruthless Plantagenet friend (p. 34). All doubt in this matter is cleared when we realize that Falstaff is referring to II Corinthians x.2–7:

- I thinke to be bolde againft fome, ^w eftime vs as thogh we walked according to the flefh.
- 3 Neuertheles, thogh we walke in the flefh, yet we do not warre after the flefh,
 - 4 (For the weapons of our warrefare are not carnal, but mightie through God, to caft downe holdes)
 - 5 Cafting downe the imaginations, and euerie high thing that is exalted againft the knowledge of God. . . .
 - 7 Loke ye on things after the appearance? If anie man truft in him felf that he is Chrifts, let him confider this againe of him felf, that as he is Chrifts, euē fo *are we* Chrifts (Geneva).

This scriptural reference is damning against the self-righteous Prince. As Battenhouse has shown, the whole function of “Falstaff as Parodist” is the Pauline one of “casting down our imaginations” of the high and mighty. The wars of the usurper Plantagenets are carnal, but Falstaff as a divine fool is a warrior after the spirit. By “appearance,” the thigh wound that he gives to the dead Hotspur is an emblem only of his cowardice, but scripturally considered it is an emblem of the mortification of the flesh in the Pauline spirit of love.

When we base our interpretation of Falstaff on II Corinthians, no longer looking “on things after the appearance,” we find that truly “the letter killeth, but the Spirit giueth life” (iii.6). It has been claimed that Falstaff’s moon-emblem is morally negative, while the Prince’s sun-emblem is morally positive (“Some Emblems in Shakespeare’s Henry iv Plays,” *ELH*, 38, 1971, 512–27). But this is scripturally naïve. Erasmus, following the Pauline tradition, remarks that the moon always signifies human nature, or the flesh, and we now know that “flesh,” when applied in the Pauline sense to Falstaff, means “spirit” (*Praise of Folly*, Chicago: Packard, 1946, p. 118). Likewise, said St. Paul, “Satan him felf is transformed into an Angel of light” (II Cor. xi.14). So much for the Prince’s resolve to “imitate the sun” (*IH4*, I.ii.185), which, significantly, will be only an *imitation*, what Battenhouse calls in his inimitable style a “coppersmith value.”

Scholars unacquainted with the topos of God as

puer senex may take offense at Battenhouse's identification of Falstaff as God almighty. In the Christian emblems of the plays, he is not only God the Father but also God the Son. It has been suggested that when, at the end of his first scene with Shallow, Falstaff says, "If the young dace be a bait for the old pike, I see no reason in the law of nature but I may snap at him" (2H4, III.ii.307–09), the emblem involved is the popular one where, in the world of nature, or the "flesh," the big fish eat the little ones (ELH, 38, 1971, 513–14). According to this interpretation, Falstaff as the big fish in these shallow waters is a type of greedy, ruthless human nature. We know from II Corinthians x.3, however, that although Falstaff walks in the flesh *he does not war after the flesh*. There is no reason in the law of nature why he may not snap at Shallow, but Falstaff at the deepest level does not follow the law of nature. He may "snap" at Shallow, as Battenhouse indicates, but he would never actually devour him. He means Shallow no harm in relieving him of the thousand pounds that weigh down his soul. Out of his profound scriptural knowledge, Falstaff has perceived at the beginning of the scene, when Shallow alludes to Psalm xlix in juxtaposition to Ecclesiasticus xxxviii.25, that Shallow's is a soul to be saved. These are the deepest meanings of the imagery of the young dace and the old pike. Falstaff, like the apostles, is a fisher of men, and, like the Son of God, his emblem is the fish.

Such is the potential significance of Battenhouse's interpretation of Shakespeare's history plays that it would be hard to open Scripture to a page that did not lend it support.

JAMES HOYLE
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Mr. Battenhouse replies:

I am grateful to James Hoyle for adding to my evidence the pertinence of II Corinthians x–xi. Although this passage is not the only biblical key to Falstaff's foolishness (there are other sources, as I noted, in Proverbs xxvi.5 and I Cor. i.27 and, behind that, the foolishness of Christ in accepting a cross which labeled him disreputable), II Corinthians xi is an especially noteworthy instance of how Christian discipleship can intermingle two senses of the word "fool." St. Paul, who here faces the problem of how to deal with backsliding Christians (i.e., *old church* Corinthians, lovers of faction and self-display—like Henry's England in this respect), decides to educate them by putting on the kind of folly they reckon as wisdom, namely, boasting. He reasons something like this: the divine foolishness of Christ is that of suffering abasement out of love for others; yet when this gospel is falsified by pretenders who deceive with a specious righteousness, Paul must

translate his own ministry into a mock mode in order to be heard. He will speak, he says, "not after the Lord, but as it were foolishly," glorying as his rivals do in a reciting of works, though his intent thereby is to display the foolishness of boasting. Such is Paul's double-sided practice of "fool for Christ." It is similar, as Hoyle notes, to that of Erasmus in his *Praise of Folly*.

Hoyle risks misunderstanding, however, when he loosely speaks of "an identification of Falstaff as God." Falstaff's identity, I would insist, is simply that of a Christian ironist playing fool. With a covert faith, he is witnessing in the manner of a Feast of Fools choir clerk. When I cited, as an instance of the *puer senex* topos, some martyrs' vision of God as hoary-headed yet youthful, I was implying only that Falstaff reflects these envisioned qualities in an emblematic way. I think this is what Hoyle, too, really means despite some incautious phrasing and a logic that elsewhere overswiftly equates "flesh" with "spirit." More accurately, he makes the point that Falstaff's flesh is his humanity, and that in a Pauline sense Falstaff is walking *in* this flesh but not *after* it when using its size to dramatize human frailty. Spiritually, he is warring not against flesh and blood, but against carnal imaginations. Thus, a mortifying of Shallow's imagination is Falstaff's harmless purpose—a "snapping" far different, for instance, from that of the whales of *Pericles* II.i, "who never leave gaping till they've swallowed the whole parish, church steeples, bells, and all." So I welcome Hoyle's alertness to the scriptural roots of Shakespeare's symbolism, and I hope he and others may be prompted to extend this kind of "source" study to other plays.

Roger Cox, understandably, wishes to protect Shakespeare's plays against interpretations that in his view distort. Let me therefore say, sympathetically, that the conventional view of Falstaff he harbors is one I also accepted for some years—although with an accompanying uneasiness. My uneasiness stemmed from the tantalizing nature of various "wayside" facts: were they to be regarded as inconsequential nonsense, or were they, perhaps, cannily shrewd in some way I was not understanding? One such fact, imagistically too big for suppressing, was Falstaff's likening himself to Pharaoh's fat kine (whose symbolic meaning, I recalled, this king could not fathom though its purport was immense). What purport might there be, then, in the equally conspicuous image of the pillow that Falstaff uses when playing king? And might he be speaking genuine truth to the Chief Justice in Part II when naming himself no ill angel and no misleader? While I pondered these enigmas it struck me one day that perhaps they were like the "seed" in the parable of the Sower—"for the birds" in the devil's view but fruitful when rooted in Christian soil. Following that