

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than 1,000 words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

Interpreting Falstaff

To the Editor:

In his article "Falstaff as Parodist and Perhaps Holy Fool" (*PMLA*, 90, 1975, 32–52) Roy Battenhouse employs a method of literary interpretation that needs to be carefully analyzed. It is at one and the same time incredibly complicated and remarkably simplistic. Battenhouse self-consciously observes that his own commentary "must seem pedantically tedious" (p. 40); and a little further on (p. 43) he clearly identifies Falstaff with Shakespeare in a way that reflects his consistent determination to regard this one character as the author's privileged spokesman—"It is a stroke of genius on Falstaff's part (alias Shakespeare's). . . ." A direct consequence of such identification is that the irony that thus envelops Falstaff apparently does not even touch the other characters. Thus, when Falstaff hails the newly crowned Henry v, who is supposedly no more than a ruthless opportunist, as "My King! My Jove!" his words are to be understood as "an impeccably Christian prayer or plea" (p. 32); but when Hal assures his father of his own reformation, "the father to whom Prince Hal returns is no heaven-virtued father, but instead a counterfeit of the Bible's father" (p. 48). Similarly, when Henry as king repudiates Falstaff, we are to regard it as the wise man's humiliation and martyrdom; but when Justice Shallow is disappointed by the nonfulfillment of Falstaff's ridiculous promises, we are told that he "richly deserves the eventual discomfiture of finding his expectations evaporate" (p. 45). In short, while Falstaff casts his pearls before swine, all the other characters are mere counterfeiters, deserving only to be ridiculed and unmasked by the "holy fool."

Such interpretation, by the critic's own admission, is necessarily based upon "wayside evidence tucked here and there" (p. 34); and it finds only "wayside support from the observations of other scholars" (p. 33). This wayside evidence, inconclusive as it is, can be used as the basis for general interpretation only if the interpretive statement begins with a formula that disarms the reader with its apparent modesty and at the same time allows almost any conclusion the critic cares to draw. Consider the following examples: "For it

could mean . . ."; "Can we not infer . . .?"; "a reference, I think, to . . ."; and the like. The Falstaff essay is literally teeming with variations of this formula; and the formula itself is not merely a stylistic device—it is essential to the interpretive method, which can proceed only by piling inference upon inference, all of which inferences are derived from bits of wayside evidence rather than from the work as a whole and its overall design.

But why resort to wayside evidence when the obvious signposts are so clear? (These signposts include the biblical material, which D. J. Palmer ably sets forth in "Casting off the Old Man: History and St. Paul in 'Henry IV,'" *Critical Quarterly*, 12, 1970, 267–83.) The answer seems inescapable, and it is this: because such a method enables the critic to impose an interpretation upon the text that the text itself stubbornly resists. In this case the interpretation is a highly romantic view of Falstaff which holds that the marvelous old reprobate is in fact a "holy fool," subject to humiliation and ridicule by those with whom he associates though he is clearly superior to them in both wisdom and righteousness. By a feat of rationalization worthy of Falstaff himself, he is represented not as the "old man," whom the relevant passage in Ephesians enjoins us to "cast off," but as the "new man, which after God is created in righteousness, and true holiness" (iv.24). Thus the meaning of the work is effectively stood on its head; and the irony that permeates the Henry plays is not enriched but destroyed. When Falstaff complains that "company, villainous company, hath been the spoil of me," he refers quite straightforwardly to the corrupting influence of Prince Hal, whose own "conversion" is no more than a "counterfeit miracle." Ignore the fact that a result of the Reformation, from which perspective Shakespeare wrote, was to identify the interests of religion with those of the state; ignore (or gloss over) Shakespeare's explicit reference to Henry v as "the mirror of all Christian kings"; ignore everything but wayside evidence concerning "plump Jack Falstaff," whose wisdom shines forth from behind empty bottles of sack and baseless pretensions to lechery, both of which are merely a mask for a spirit rich in Christian virtues.

Though I approve of the values—or at least some

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.

ROGER L. COX
University of Delaware

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