The Christian Context of Falstaff’s “Finer End”

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“Men of all sorts take a pride to gird at me,” said Falstaff (2H4, I.ii.5), a quip which well describes the efforts of critics to explain the death of the protean knight. Criticism of Falstaff almost by necessity becomes criticism of a Falstaff in an effort to comprehend what Derek Traversi termed his “stupendous complexity of outlook.” Attempts to understand the meaning of Falstaff’s death thus become answers to the question “Who died?” If it is the jolly Falstaff of Maurice Morgann and A. C. Bradley, then his death “represented a humorous ending for a witty man.” However, if one affirms the cowardice and immorality of the glib old sot, as does E. E. Stoll, his death is an appropriately ignoble one: “The jig is up; the game of evasion could not last forever.” If one sides with Alice L. Birney and sees in Falstaff the essential satirist whose purpose is “to expose through verbal attack the vacuity of the established system of values,” his rejection and death are a necessary curb to one whose license borders on revolution and threatens the state.

Falstaff’s death as the ridding of a threat to the commonweal also lies at the heart of the explanation offered by myth criticism, which identifies Falstaff as the surrogate father-figure of Prince Hal, a character who represents, in J. I. M. Stewart’s words, “all the accumulated sin of the reign, all the consequent sterility of the land.” His death becomes explainable as a phenomenon common to human cultures, “the Periodic Expulsion of Evils in a Material World . . . .” Lord Raglan has discussed at length a related Falstaff, the folkloric buffoon who traditionally accompanies princes and heroes; the religious overtones of the death scene thus testify to his function as “holy fool,” but to Raglan “the sanctity seems pagan rather than Christian.” Shakespeare’s use of pagan models for Falstaff’s character also appears in that in-
terpretation of his death as an analogue of the death of Socrates, for each man was accused of misleading youth, asking penetrating questions, serving as a footsoldier, drinking too much and sharing similar physical pains in death.8

If one surveys with Spivack and Dover Wilson the vast background of Falstaff within the tradition of the Vice figure, still another death becomes apparent. Such an approach has links with the mythic Falstaff just cited, for Falstaff partakes of "the Lord of Misrule, the Fool, the Buffoon, and the Jester, antic figures the origins of which are lost in the dark backward and abysm of folk-custom."9 The young king's rejection of him demonstrates the proper decision of one who must choose between the self-indulgent irresponsibility of youth and the sober dedication to governance of the state. Such a Falstaff must die (if offstage and unseen, so much the better) because the king has put away childish things.

Finally, there is the death of the topical Falstaff, Shakespeare's satire on the Protestant martyr, Sir John Oldcastle. Falstaff is surely linked to the fortunes of this Lollard, and, though the playwright seemed at pains to note that the knight's death in Henry V did not reflect that of Oldcastle ("He died a hero, and this is not the man" [2H4, Epil., 31-32]), Alice-Lyle Scoufos exhaustively argues that the numerous parallels with Lord Cobham establish the death scene as a "satiric martyrdom."10 Falstaff as satiric figure also figures in Katherine Koller's reading of the death scene, which finds a parody of the ars moriendi tradition accounting for its "irony and pathos."11

Despite this multitude of possible "deaths," the scene itself still has the power to move us. Falstaff's end has an element of pathos, and, as J. H. Walter states, "the Hostess's description is immortal and the whole play is deepened as a result."12 For the immediate emphasis in this scene, aside from the Hostess's low-comic retelling of it or its dramatic or mythic paradigms, is on the sad end of an old man who turns from his former life and calls upon God with his dying breath. In his last hour, there is only one Falstaff, one which an audience would have recognized from countless religious contexts which counseled amendment of life, among them the Anglican liturgy and certain seasons of the church year. As the sinful Christian who is no longer able to avoid his last judgment through witty repartee or sensual indulgence, Falstaff offers an object lesson in repentance. It is not necessary that Falstaff