

# Falstaff the Brave

by Theodore Dalrymple (May 2015)

I love to read about Shakespeare, in part because to do so is so perfectly pointless. A man cannot always be engaged in useful activity, for something has to be pursued for its own sake and without ulterior motive; and reading about Shakespeare is both harmless and inexhaustible. It would take an entire lifetime to read the works of the Baconians alone, of those who believe that Shakespeare the poet and playwright was not Shakespeare the boy from Stratford-upon-Avon, but rather Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam.

What they write is often – no, almost always – formidably erudite, though a slight air of madness usually hangs over it. The founder of the school, indeed, the American Delia Bacon (1811 – 1859), did end her days in an asylum, but that, I admit, is no argument against Baconianism.

One cannot help but feel admiration and even affection for such people, who work so hard to prove something of no economic value to themselves and purely for the love of knowledge, if perhaps tinged by a desire to score against those whom they call with an unmistakable condescension the *Stratfordians*, the naïve believers in the identity of Shakespeare the poet and playwright and Shakespeare the boy from Stratford-upon-Avon.

Over the years, without really meaning to, I have accumulated quite a little Baconian library, buying their books whenever I happen across them. They are written by many different types: an Irish Jesuit, an English judge, a large landowner, an aged surgeon and anatomist who was said to have committed all the works of both Bacon and Shakespeare, which of course he believed to be by the same person, to memory so that he could collate them, publishing his book in the middle of the Second World War not long before he died; but perhaps my favourite among them for sheer magnificence of folly is Dr Orville Ward Owen, a doctor from Detroit, who in the 1890s persuaded himself by means of a cipher machine that Bacon was Shakespeare and moreover that, also revealed by cipher in the works of the Bard, his manuscripts lay hidden in at the bottom of the River Wye at Chepstow, which he proceeded to dredge at great and ruinous expense to himself, of course finding nothing. He also wrote history plays in what he persuaded himself was the style of Shakespeare. Alas poor man, he died both disillusioned and impoverished, wishing that he had never taken up the subject of the authorship of Shakespeare. Indeed, he was a character of Shakespearean dimension; his life is worthy of study for its failure and for its lesson that we often arrive at predetermined conclusions by methods which

we delude ourselves are objective.

The theory that Bacon was Shakespeare (or is it that Shakespeare was Bacon?) unleashed the dogs of detection, and before long there were other candidates for the honour of having been the greatest author in the history of the world, among them Christopher Marlow, the Earl of Rutland and, the current favourite I believe, the Earl of Oxford. They too have had their immensely learned proponents, most notably the founder of the Oxfordians, the unfortunately-named J. Thomas Looney. I have always thought that intellectual snobbery was part of the motive for the work of the anti-Stratfordians, who at least subliminally dislike the notion that the greatest author in the history of the world was not highly educated, or at least attended no university, which seems somehow against the natural order of things. Perhaps one day a society will be formed to prove that Bill Gates was not the real founder of Microsoft, on the grounds that he never completed a university degree in information technology.

There are whole libraries on every aspect of Shakespeare, from his biography to his bibliography, from his pathography to his punctuation, from his topography to his typography. There are books about his knowledge of botany, seamanship, navigation, soldiering, law and medicine, and many other things as well. There are fewer books about Shakespeare and medicine than about Shakespeare and the law, but nonetheless a very large number. Sir John Charles Bucknill, founder of the journal that was to become the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, started the genre with books such as *The Mad Folk of Shakespeare*, *The Psychology of Shakespeare* and *The Medical Knowledge of Shakespeare*. The last of these books is a powerful call to modesty, for Bucknill wrote it at a time when real medical knowledge, by our standards, was exiguous, but Bucknill nevertheless judged Shakespeare's knowledge by his own standards and some of his judgments now seem distinctly bizarre.

But all these books are as nothing compared with critical and interpretative studies: the municipal library of a small town in the Mid-West compared to the Library of Congress. Again without intending to have done so, I have accumulated (rather than collected) a small library on the meaning of the Sonnets, from Samuel Butler who found them entirely homosexual to A. L. Rowse, who claimed definitively to have identified the Dark Lady, and who spent much of the last part of his very long life pouring petulant and unpleasant scorn on those who did not agree with him.

Hazlitt warns us against the futility of Shakespearean criticism (to which, of course, he added himself). I know what he means: there are furious and often intemperate debates over the meaning of, say, *Hamlet*, that seem to forget altogether that *Hamlet* is actually a work of fiction. (A favourite work of mine is *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* by

Morris Weitz.) But such is the force of Shakespeare's human genius, as Hazlitt calls it, that his characters often seem more real to us, and occupy our imaginations more fully, than do many of our acquaintances. I have found that if one calls Mrs Clinton *Lady Macbeth*, very little remains to be said and everyone knows precisely what one means. Morbid jealousy has been called *Othello Syndrome*, we know exactly what to expect of someone called Falstaffian, and Romeo stands for young love the world over. The psychotherapist, Dr Murray Cox, who practised at Britain's main institution for the criminally insane, Broadmoor, used Shakespeare in his work and said that there was no aspect of his patients' states of mind that was unilluminated by Shakespeare – whose work he knew like the proverbial back of his hand.

But life being for pleasure rather than use, Dr Cox would still have been a great Shakespearean even had he found no utility in his knowledge. And I derive pleasure from books about Shakespeare even if they extend the scope of my knowledge only a little, or rather the scope of my amnesia: for I have reached the age when it is information in, twice as much out.

Recently I happened on a short book, famous among real scholars of Shakespeare criticism, titled *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff* by Maurice Morgann, published in 1777. I had been writing an essay on Falstaff myself, but I did not read Morgann until I had finished, for sometimes other people's ideas muddle rather than clear one's own. I like when writing about a play or character in Shakespeare to take a line or two that I use, legitimately or not, as a key to the whole: for example, 'you would pluck out the heart of my mystery' for Hamlet and 'Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds/ Reverb no hollowness' for King Lear. And for Falstaff, I used 'Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.'

Having finished my little essay, I read Morgann's much more substantial effort with unalloyed pleasure, though the main idea that he propounded did not entirely convince me: that Falstaff was not a coward, at least not a coward by nature. His apparent cowardice, according to Morgann, was more in the nature of prudence, though he does not go so far as to claim that it was prudence exercised in any but for personal survival.

When, for example, Falstaff lays down and plays dead in the course of his brief conflict with Douglas, thus saving his own life, Morgann says that he is merely being sensible, for what good would his certain death at Douglas' hands have served? He, Falstaff, was nearly seventy years old, his experience as a soldier had taught him that rashness in the name of honour was foolish; and indeed one of the first jingles I ever learned was 'He who fights and runs away/ Lives to fight another day.'

By a closer reading of the text than I had performed, Morgann demonstrates, or claims to

demonstrate, that Falstaff was no coward, that what little we know of his previous life (for example from Justice Shallow) suggests the contrary, and that indeed his being given command of foot soldiers, almost all of whom are killed in battle, proves that Prince Hal could not really have thought of him as such. Morgann does not claim that Falstaff was without other vices, but as he justly remarks, boastful lies are boastful lies, not cowardice; he does not consider whether a propensity to boastful lying about fighting exploits is more common among cowards than among the brave. In any case, a statistical correlation between cowardice and boastfulness would not go to prove that Falstaff was a coward, for you cannot justly infer individual characteristics from group ones. From the fact that the Dutch are the tallest people in the world you cannot deduce that a man is not Dutch because he is not tall.

Morgann sets out to overturn the prejudices of all common readers of Falstaff who, like me, take Falstaff's cowardice for granted. Does he not, in addition to playing dead for Douglas, run away from Gads Hill after only token resistance to his assailants? Morgann has a good answer for that, too, in defence of Falstaff's natural courage. And yet one is not convinced.

Morgann tells us that he is not writing for those who are so prejudiced that they cannot or will not change their minds in the face of the evidence. This is a subtle rhetorical move, for it predisposes you to change your mind in order to prove that you are not one of the incurably prejudiced. Nevertheless, I at any rate began at once to think of objections to Morgann's thesis in order *not* to have to change my mind, which is always a painful thing to have to do. Nor should one give up one's prejudices lightly, at the first sign of evidence to their contrary. Prejudices are like spouses, they should not be divorced at the first approach of trouble: though eventually complete incompatibility may necessitate divorce. Throughout his essay, for example, Morgann takes the statements of Falstaff and others much too literally, and does not consider that statements might sometimes be meant ironically rather than literally.

Morgann was by all accounts an amiable man and historically an important one: he was the British signatory of the peace with America. He also predicted future trouble in America with slavery, which he detested, and against which he wrote a strong pamphlet. But his *Essay*, by far his best-known work (which called forth a sarcastic response from Dr Johnson who said that he now looked forward to an essay proving that Iago was a good man), was written, according to the author himself, purely for the intellectual pleasure of proving something of no importance. He wrote it for his own and other people's pleasure, and for no other reason.

Actually, I think that here he was not being quite frank. Just as even the most cynical of hack journalists harbours the faint hope that a few of his pages might survive his death, so

Morgann had a sneaking hope that his little book had more significance than he earlier claims for it. He finishes it as follows:

So... ends an Essay, on which the reader is left to bestow what character he pleases: an Essay, professing to treat of the courage of Falstaff, but extending itself to his whole character; to the arts and genius of his poetic maker, SHAKESPEARE; and through him sometimes, with ambitious aim, even to the principles of human nature.

I suspect that even the reporter of weddings for local newspapers secretly hopes as much.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is