

Chaucer Lost and Found in Shakespeare's Histories

Jacob Hughes

It should come as no surprise that Shakespeare and Chaucer, the two artistic monuments in early English literature, have faced comparative scholarly treatment over the past century. This treatment, though, has been relatively uneven in terms of scope and intent, and there is considerably less of it than one would expect. With an increasing number of exceptions since the 1980s, it has been generally focused on what noted Chaucerian E. Talbot Donaldson refers to as “source hunting,” i.e., identifying sources rather than discussing their significance or purpose.¹ However, critics such as Donaldson and Anne Thompson have found that Chaucer’s thematic influence is rife throughout much of Shakespeare’s canon. While many authors showcase their erudition by referencing their exemplars, Shakespeare owes more to Chaucer than a few borrowed plots and quotations; he frequently implements Chaucerian characterizations (or caricatures) and thematic patterns that are relevant to his own art. Far from random, Shakespeare reflects on Chaucer’s influence in his plays. More specifically, Shakespeare frequently, though often subtly, draws attention to his Chaucerian influence through characters who can be considered entertainers or stage managers. And very often these Chaucerian entertainers, when we examine the root of their poetic influence, stem from Chaucer’s own discussions of art and entertainment.

Without context or provenience, there is no good reason to wonder why Shakespeare never directly references Chaucer in his known canon. Apart from a mention in the prologue of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* as a source, Shakespeare seems to avoid Chaucer’s persona entirely, despite his clear narrative indebtedness to the poet for that play and for *Troilus and Cressida*. To be fair, Shakespeare might not have had anything to do with the prologue of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*; John Fletcher is as likely a culprit, if not more so. That play’s dual authorship notwithstanding, Shakespeare almost never mentions any of the sources he likely drew from. As a dramatist, he was not obligated to cite his every source, nor would that practice

be sustainable. To suggest otherwise would be ludicrous; and yet, it is hardly fair to say that Shakespeare lacked any sort of autobiographical impulse. Some of his most significant exemplars do feature in his plays in one form or another. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in book form, features importantly in *Titus Andronicus* and John Gower—Chaucer's colleague and author of *Confessio Amantis*—appears as a chorus character in *Pericles*. A Gower also appears in *Henry IV, Part Two* as a member of the King's party, reporting news and being invited to dinner by Falstaff in Act II²; a soldier in *Henry V* shares the same name. John of Gaunt, Chaucer's brother-in-law and his most notable patron, receives one of the most dazzling speeches in the canon, in *Richard II*, despite his relatively small part compared to his son, Henry Bolingbroke. Justice Shallow mentions a "Scoggin" in *Henry IV, Part Two*, likely the moralist Henry Scogan, tutor to Henry IV's children,³ and dedicatee of Chaucer's envoy. Shakespeare seems very familiar with the two courts most crucial to Chaucer's life—those of Richard II and Henry IV—including both major and minor figures who characterize Chaucer's "narrow aristocratic circle" among the *dramatis personae* and at least mentioning others: John of Gaunt, Henry Scogan, and John Gower were among his key audience members.⁴ From an artistic standpoint, Donaldson even suggests that Chaucer was Shakespeare's only meaningful English poetic influence.⁵ Given Shakespeare's fascination with the late 14th and early 15th centuries, Chaucer's fame, and the most auspicious opportunities to include at least a passing reference or stage cameo to England's most important poet, Chaucer's absence—in all forms—seems glaring. Assuming that the idea of a Chaucerian entertainer is a viable, and to some extent real, construct, the notion that Shakespeare missed such a fruitful opportunity to engage Chaucer in one or more plays set in the poet's own time is not only highly suspect, but unlikely.

The implication is that Chaucer does indeed feature in Shakespeare's history plays, though the locus of his influence is cleverly disguised. While Shakespeare surely recognizes Chaucer as an exemplar—possibly his only significant exemplar in English—he does not seem interested in paying homage to him as he does with Ovid and Gower. Chaucer's methods are much more relevant to Shakespeare, especially as they pertain to professional entertainment.

In keeping with the idea of a Chaucerian entertainer, theatrics and wordplay are Falstaff's ancillary vocation. But he does not exist independently from the play's setting; Falstaff's antics are inseparable from his socio-historical context. This context bridges Shakespeare's Early Modern period and his understanding of Chaucer's Middle Ages; Falstaff serves as a kind of Chaucerian conduit or lens through which we can read the plays' central themes. More specifically, Falstaff represents a kind of Chaucerian echo. He embodies a part of Shakespeare's literary origins, voiced indirectly by quotations, affectations and, at points, stark resemblances to "the father of English poetry." As such, Falstaff is the most overtly Chaucerian of Shakespeare's Chaucerian entertainers. Moreover, Shakespeare's own self-conception as an entertainer is bound up in Falstaff as well. The fat knight could be viewed as a locus in which Shakespeare and Chaucer interact.

It is crucial to acknowledge that while Falstaff severally echoes Chaucer, his characterization is not solely indebted to the poet. Falstaff's connections to the historical Lollard Sir John Oldcastle and to career soldier Sir John Fastolf have long been established.⁶ Oldcastle's name was initially borrowed for the anonymous *Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* and—proving offensive to that knight's descendants—was later dropped for Shakespeare's *Henriad*. Fastolf was co-opted in the first part of Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays. Regardless, Falstaff is not a simple embodiment of any one real person, nor is he likely a direct allegorical representation of a historical figure. He is larger than life and complex. Falstaff evades easy characterization, being neither wholly commendable nor objectionable. Critically, he often evades moderate readings. Harold Bloom ardently insists, "Time annihilates other Shakespearean protagonists, but not Falstaff, who dies for love. Critics have insisted that this love is grotesque, but they are grotesque."⁷

Bloom's bardolatry aside, it seems unlikely that Shakespeare would invest so many speaking lines in Falstaff if he was either boring to write for or a simplistic paragon of vice. Writers and readers can both love characters and approach them with great moral ambivalence. Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*—who Donaldson in *Swan at the Well* points out has much in common personally with Falstaff, especially in the way of wit⁸—evokes similarly varied responses. Donaldson points out a shared trait between these two larger than life characters that might illuminate their appeal to some and distastefulness to others:

[A]lthough others may find what they do reprehensible, they find their occupations fully justified because they are *their* occupations, and they find them congenial. Their ideas of the world may be at variance with other people's ideas, but they are at home with them, and do not intend to alter their styles for anyone.⁹

These subversive qualities uniquely empower Falstaff with a perspective otherwise beyond our reach as readers. We can only ever take Falstaff as he is. Falstaff's role as a Chaucerian lens, or echo, is never at odds with any of his other characterizations. Sir John is ever overlapping.

Though Falstaff continues as a Chaucerian representative throughout the other Henry plays in the tetralogy, the shadows of Chaucer's poetry creep into Shakespeare's drama prior to Falstaff's direct involvement. In *Richard II*, Chaucer is indirectly infused throughout the play via the frequent use of the term "pilgrimage."¹⁰ Henry Bolingbroke mentions that he and his foe Mowbray are "like two men / That vow a long and weary pilgrimage" (2.3.49)¹¹ in regard to their conflict, which is distinguished from his later pontification that he will "make a voyage to the Holy Land" (5.6.49). It is unclear why Shakespeare uses "pilgrimage" for "voyage," though he may be distinguishing between Henry's initial metaphorical use of the term and his later literal yet unrealized intention. John of Gaunt uses the term in a similar manner when begging Richard to shorten his son's banishment, fearing that his advanced years will preclude a reunion: "Thou canst help time

to furrow me with age, / But stop no wrinkle in his pilgrimage” (1.3.230). Henry responds to his father’s insistence that banishment can be “a travel that thou takest for pleasure” (1.3.262): “My heart will sigh when I miscall it so, / Which finds it an inforced pilgrimage” (1.3.263-264).

Aging, banishment and suppression do not necessarily match up neatly with pervasive themes in *The Canterbury Tales*, or in a thematic manner that Shakespeare finds meaningful enough to indicate that he was thinking of it. However, those themes may be biographically relevant to Chaucer himself. Perhaps significantly, the term “pilgrimage” is used only by Chaucer’s patrons—Richard II, John of Gaunt and Henry IV. Coincidentally, Terry Jones points out that as a literary figure, Chaucer’s relationship to those three nobles may well have been considerably governed by aging, a kind of banishment, and potential suppression of his works leading up to his eventual retraction.¹² Chaucer’s biographical associations can be derived from his works without necessarily consulting historical records. In *The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse*, the poet appeals directly to King Henry IV, and seems to be in dire straits:

O conqueror of Brutes Albyon
Which that by lyne and free eleccion
Been verray kyng, this song to yow I sende,
And ye, that mowen alle oure harmes amende,
Have mynde upon my supplicacion.
(22-26)¹³

Chaucer grandiosely implies that Henry is the rightful bearer of the crown, despite his succession by coup and the death of Richard. Chaucer was a member of Richard II’s court, but it seems as if he has at least initially succeeded in surviving the transition, though he was having dire financial woes. Benson suggests that Chaucer’s *Complaint* may indicate that the grants originally approved by the new king may not have been paid.¹⁴

Chaucer’s most prominent court connections maintain their presence, to a degree, through the remaining Henry plays, but Falstaff also draws from and alludes to *The Canterbury Tales* directly. Among them, the two *Henry IV* plays contain the most significant allusions to Chaucer’s works. But Shakespeare does not simply pile Chaucerian sources into Falstaff’s massive frame; he puts Chaucerian methods into action through him.

Falstaff’s initial antics highlight him as a professional analogue to both Chaucer and Shakespeare, though at first obliquely. In *Henry IV, Part One*, Poins reports “pilgrims going to Canterbury” (1.2.126),¹⁵ a connection noted by Thomas McNeal.¹⁶ Poins suggests that Hal, Falstaff and company should don “vizards” (1.2.128) and rob the pilgrims at Gadshill. Hal is at first reluctant, but agrees after Poins promises a better ruse on Falstaff: robbing him after he loots the pilgrims. Ultimately, the pilgrims get the short end of the deal. Despite Hal’s reservations, we later learn he does not have problems with taxation through government channels.

Falstaff predicts Hal's eventual hypocrisy: "There's neither honesty, manhood, nor good fellowship in thee, nor thou camest not of the blood royal, if thou darest not stand for ten shillings" (1.2.139-141). Ultimately, Hal plays along with Poin, duping Falstaff into dropping his spoils. The exchange of funds here is representative of the royal tax collection process: The pilgrims are figures without agency who pay taxes, collected by Falstaff, and reaped by the heir apparent. The same analogy, strangely, applies to the artistic process of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Regardless of the stories' authenticity, Chaucer depicts himself collecting tales from his fellow pilgrims, and records them for the entertainment of others. Loomis points out that Chaucer's audience was primarily aristocratic¹⁷—a fact surely not overlooked by Shakespeare. Thus, Chaucer's tale-telling is analogous to Falstaff's own antics: an entertainment enjoyed, and possibly exploited, by royalty.

Falstaff's own stories are often trumped-up exaggerations, or flat-out lies, but even still his presentation is wholly entertaining and self-aware. Past the surface of the matter, Falstaff addresses a perennial question in literary art: Is fiction a lie? In his General Prologue, Chaucer takes care to mention that whenever a story bears repeating, the teller has the responsibility of reporting the facts as closely as they were spoken to him:

For this ye knowen also wel as I,
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche or large,
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.
(A 732-739)¹⁸

Certainly, Falstaff's tall tales do not meet this criterion, and he is mocked by Hal for his exaggerations: "These lies are like their father that begets them; / gross as a mountain, open, palpable" (2.4.225-226). However, the fat knight responds wittily, praising his own instinct for not killing the heir apparent. Effectively, Falstaff is not so much a liar as he is what we would call a "bullshitter." Even though Bardolph and Peto later reveal that the knight hacked his sword with a dagger, his story seems so obviously exaggerated and contrived that one wonders how seriously Falstaff expected Hal and Poin to take him. This tongue-in-cheek pontification on the verity of Falstaff's claims echoes Chaucer's scheme in the General Prologue: The poet does not expect his audience to treat the work as history, but as a tale. When Chaucer warns that the speaker who fails to memorize whomever he is quoting entirely may "feyne thyng, or fynde words newe," he is actually paying homage to the creative process. Falstaff, as Shakespeare's authorial response to Chaucer, answers this claim through theatricality. The entire post-Gadshill spectacle is a show, replete with exaggerated language, costumes (the vizards) and even makeup in the form of blood,

as Bardolph bemoans that Falstaff made the would-be thieves “tickle our noses with spear-grass to make them bleed, and then to beslobber our garments with it and swear it was the blood of true men” (2.4.309-311).

Falstaff’s own operation as a dramatist, similar in philosophical bearing to Chaucer’s handling of truth in the General Prologue, harkens back to the poet’s caricature of himself in *The Canterbury Tales*. “Chaucer the pilgrim,” as critics such as E.T. Donaldson would identify the character, appears as a kind of bumbling, rotund, “wide-eyed,” simple-minded and jolly fellow, a depiction very similar to his own characterization in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*.¹⁹ His tale of *Sir Thopas* is described as “nat worth a toord” by the Host, who interrupts its telling (B2, 2119).²⁰ Similarly, Hal does not seem impressed by Falstaff’s antics. Yet Hal calls for further performance—just as the Host does—asking Falstaff to “stand for my father, and examine me upon the particulars of my life” (2.4.376-377), whereupon Falstaff responds by preparing his stage, props, and makeup: “this chair shall be my state,/this dagger my sceptre, and this cushion my crown” (2.4.378-379), even calling for another cup of sack “to make my eyes look red, that it may be thought I have wept” as he plays Hal’s father (2.4.385). The entire presentation seems absurd, yet serves to highlight more subtle issues and establish Shakespeare’s skillful blending of fiction within fiction—just like Chaucer’s telling of *Sir Thopas*. Despite our understandable suspicion of the Hostess’s credentials as a drama critic, she praises Falstaff’s performance: “O Jesu, he doth it as like one of these harlotry players as ever I see!” (2.4.395-396). Isaac Asimov notes that Falstaff employs “exotic words and farfetched similes often drawn from nature,”²¹ taking a euphuistic tone—balanced sentences characterized by contrast. Shakespeare depicts Falstaff as a capable actor, instilling him with linguistic flourishes so that both his staged and real audiences see that he puts on a good show. Effectively, Falstaff uses the drama to defend himself after Hal turns the tables, forcing him to switch roles. While Falstaff’s interpretation of the King assumes that the fat knight is the only point of virtue in Hal’s unruly lifestyle, Hal’s own projection of his father demands the fat knight’s banishment, to which Falstaff responds:

But to say I know more harm in him than in myself, were to say more than I know. That he is old, the more the pity, his white hairs do witness it; but that he is, saving your reverence, a whoremaster, that I utterly deny. If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked! if to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old host that I know is damned: if to be fat be to be hated, then Pharaoh’s lean kine are to be loved. No, my good lord; banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poins: but for sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff, and therefore more valiant, being, as he is, old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry’s company, banish not him thy Harry’s company: banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.
(2.4.466-480)

Hal’s chilling reply is “I do, I will” (2.4.481), and the production halts as

Bardolph reports that a sheriff and his entourage are approaching. Falstaff demands that the performance continue, crying, "Play out the play: I have much to say in the behalf of that Falstaff" (2.4.484-485), maintaining his displaced defense. He will never get the opportunity, as the play never resumes.

Like Chaucer the Pilgrim, Falstaff is silenced amidst an artistic defense. Chaucer laments his own interruption:

"This may wel by rym doggerel," quod he [the Host].
"Why so?" quod I, "why wiltow lette me
Moore of my tale than another man,
Syn that it is the beste rym I kan?"
(B2, 2115-2118)

Chaucer the Pilgrim is eventually asked to tell something else: "Sire, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme. /.../ Or telle in prose somewhat, at the leeste" (B2, 2122-2124). Chaucer's stand-in is naïve and bumbling, both through his interactions with the other pilgrims and his attempt at a tale.²² Falstaff, though instilled with wit, suffers from a similar plight, since no one will take him seriously as he attempts to defend his position through art. While we do hear defensive soliloquies from him, he never attempts to reassert his value in Hal's presence. Rather, Falstaff is prone to introspection and self-justification. The only defense for both stand-ins is, ironically, through art, and both are interrupted amidst their critiquing.

Aside from Chaucer's literary self-defense, the lampooned chivalric elements in *Sir Thopas* importantly link with Falstaff. As with some of his other tales, Chaucer satirizes the chivalric and romance traditions through the Thopas character. Larry Benson suggests that beyond the clear literary satire, Chaucer may have been satirizing Thopas's behavior as a "would-be gentleman, who works just a bit too hard at observing the proper forms of romance knighthood."²³ Aside from his pretentiousness, Thopas is not a particularly chivalrous or skilled knight. For example, he neglects to bring his armor while afield, and after encountering a giant, Thopas boasts,

Tomorwe wol I meete with thee,
Whan I have myn armoure;
And yet I hope, *par ma fay*,
That thou shalt with this lancegay
Abyen it ful sowre.
(B2, 2007-2012)

The giant throws stones at Thopas, who retreats but never returns. Though he goes through the general motions of chivalry, Sir Thopas never really follows them through. He seems more caught up in the pomp than in the practice.

Falstaff himself is a poor-behaving gentleman, and as such, serves a similar

purpose to both Chaucer the Pilgrim and Sir Thopas. Marjorie Garber points out the parallel Shakespeare sets up between the lower class characters and the antics of the nobility: "The Gads Hill caper is another version of Hotspur's rebellion, another kind of anarchy and robbery; both are the result of the failed kingship of Henry IV and his usurpation of the throne."²⁴ Harold Goddard observes a similar nuance:

The hypocrite has always been a favorite subject of satire. Henry IV is one of the most subtly drawn and effective hypocrites in literature, in no small measure because the author keeps his portrayal free of any satirical note. But not of any ironical note.²⁵

Thus Shakespeare, like Chaucer, avoids direct satire, and instead operates using characters either easily dismissed for their vices or confirmed by their limited virtue. Even Falstaff himself is an example of how badly a noble can behave and still retain his station. In his own defense, Falstaff pays homage to this particular strategy, considering the royal target involved. While he is never shy about bantering with Hal, Falstaff's only genuine defense comes in the form of his thinly veiled performance. As is likely the case with his "bullshitting" session prior to the mini-play's performance, one wonders to what extent Falstaff expects his audience to ignore his embedded messages—the knight's depiction of his own character is comically exaggerated. Chaucer, on the other hand, overstates his mask's ineptitude, far enough so that his audience will understand the joke: The author of *The Canterbury Tales* is a skilled poet (unless we believe his earlier assertion about telling the tales as accurately as he heard them), and yet his own tale is interrupted for being sub-par. Shakespeare creates a similar literary habitat for Falstaff, but the knight is never allowed to completely reconcile his clown persona with his inventive one. All of the accoutrements of a poor production are present, and Falstaff's performance is interrupted, yet the audience understands that Shakespeare is a skillful playwright, and in a self-reflexive manner presents a simultaneously skilled and bumbling Falstaff as a kind of mirror not just to Chaucer's own foolish caricature, but to the author himself. To a degree, Shakespeare wears this dual-faced mask—one for Falstaff the clown, the other for Falstaff as the creator within it.

Falstaff's theatricality is significant not just in terms of how Shakespeare identifies with him as a performer and author—he is, at least in part, a caricature bred of Shakespeare's artistic response to Chaucer the Pilgrim. Shakespeare instills part of Chaucer's methodology and physicality in Falstaff. In the prologue to *Sir Thopas*, the Host says of Chaucer, "He in the waast is shape as wel as I" (B2, 1890), indicating that both are overweight. The most revealing self-references come from some of Chaucer's other poems. In *Lenvoy De Chaucer a Scogan*, the poet suggests that he is "hoor and rounde of shap" (31),²⁶ or old and fat. Gross notes that since Scogan was only thirty years old at the time, Chaucer must be referring to himself (1087).²⁷ In *House of Fame*, the giant eagle complains that "Geffrey" is "noyous for to carye" (574).²⁸ Finally, in *Merciles Beaute*, Chaucer puns, "Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat" (27).²⁹ Falstaff, one of Shakespeare's best-loved characters, is legendary for his rotundity, and Bardolph confirms this notion: "Why, you are so fat, Sir

John, that you must needs be out of all compass, out of all reasonable compass, Sir John” (3.2.21-23). Apart from their shared girth, old age also figures prominently in Chaucer’s and Falstaff’s character portraits. In the first *Henry IV* play, Prince Hal, while aping his own father, refers to Falstaff as “that old white-bearded Sathan” (2.4.463). Furthermore, Falstaff describes himself as a meddler, an “apple-john” (3.3.4). We can assume a similar depiction of Chaucer the Pilgrim, as he bustles about the company at the tavern, learning about his fellow travelers on the evening of the pilgrimage.

Perhaps due to their social natures, both characters consort with dubious individuals and nobles alike, crossing class boundaries in the associations that they keep. “Company, villanous company, hath been the spoil of me” (3.3.9-10), laments Falstaff, though the audience may find his remark ironic. Chaucer’s busybody interactions with the vile Summoner, whom he describes “As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe, / With scalled browes blake and piled berd, / Of his visage children were aferd” (A 626-628), seem contradictory in nature. The pilgrim concludes that the Summoner is ultimately “a gentil harlot and a kynde; / A bettre felawe sholde men noght fynde” (A 647-648), despite his sinister behavior. Whilst drunk, the Summoner “Thanne wolde he speke no word but Latyn” (A 638), and not very well, for “A fewe termes hadde he, two or thre, / That he had lerned out of som decree” (A 639-640), seeming like a nastier version of Pistol. Chaucer is grouped in the General Prologue with questionable company: “There was also a Reve, and a Millere, / A Somnour, and a Pardoner also, / A Maunciple, and myself—ther were namo” (A 542-544), perhaps paralleling, and possibly accounting for, Falstaff’s own seedy associates.

Reputation may be at least partially at stake for Shakespeare in his self-conception via Falstaff. Though Falstaff is verbose, witty, and has a penchant for entertainment and productions, his audience seems largely low-born at this point in his life, save for Hal. According to what he would have us believe in his soliloquy against Shallow being a liar in *Henry IV, Part Two*, Falstaff was familiar enough with John of Gaunt to pun on the elder Lancaster’s name, albeit at the expense of Shallow: “I saw [Shallow getting beaten], and told John a’ Gaunt he beat his own name, for you might have thrust him and all his apparel into an eel-skin” (3.2.324-325).³⁰ Chaucer also puns on Gaunt’s name in *The Book of the Duchess*: “A long castel with walles white” (1318), referring to “Lancaster” and his wife Blanche.³¹ Shakespeare makes a similar “castle” pun in *Henry IV, Part One* when Hal calls Falstaff “my old lad of the castle” (1.2.41-42), a reference to Sir John Oldcastle.³² Regardless of his station, Shakespeare’s involvement with the theater and its professionals was likely perceived as a lowbrow cultural pursuit. In his sonnets, Shakespeare disparages his own profession: “Alas, ‘tis true, I have gone here and there, / And made myself a motley to the view, / Gor’d mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear (110.1-3).

There are further significant links between Falstaff’s and Chaucer’s associations. One is literary, as Falstaff invokes a character from *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* in the context of complaining about his company. After he discovers that his

pocket has been picked, Falstaff sends the Hostess out to find the culprit. When she returns, he calls out to her, “How now, Dame Partlet the hen? Have you inquir’d yet who pick’d my pocket?” (3.3.52-53). The footnote to the *Riverside* edition simply states “traditional name for a hen,” alluding to Falstaff’s mockery of the Hostess’s “agitation and flutter,”³³ but McNeal recognizes its Chaucerian origin³⁴: Falstaff’s gibe is not so much a barnyard reference as a literary one. Chauntecleer, the noble rooster in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, is infatuated with one of his seven wives, “Of whiche the fairest hewed on hir throte / Was cleped damoysele Pertelote” (B2, 4059-4060).³⁵ Chauntecleer has a disturbing dream about being eaten by a Fox, and Pertelote dismisses his concerns outright, despite the Rooster’s educated insistence of its significance.³⁶ The Hostess replies indignantly to Falstaff’s own concerns, and repeats “Sir John” in a nagging fashion no fewer than seven times in her next thirteen lines of dialogue (54-72). Significantly, in the prologue to *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, the Host refers to the nun’s priest as “sir John” (B2, 2810). Furthermore, in the same manner that Chaucer’s Pertelote denies Chauntecleer’s dream-visions, the Hostess rejects Falstaff’s accusations of thievery:

Why, Sir John, what do you think, Sir John? Do you think I keep thieves in my house? I have search’d, I have inquir’d, so has my husband, man by man, boy by boy, servant by servant. The tithe of a hair was never lost in my house before.
(3.3.54-58)

Essentially, Falstaff’s invocation of this particular reference from Chaucer serves to highlight his unjust treatment on the part of the Hostess—she dismisses his plight out of hand, like Pertelote. Ultimately, Chaucer’s Pertelote proves incorrect, and Chauntecleer is temporarily captured by a fox, though he is able to save himself using his wit. Thus, while Falstaff suggests that he is being henpecked, identifying with Chauntecleer’s plight, his reference also indicates that he is fond of the Hostess: “He loved hire so that wel was hym therwith” (B2, 4066).

Falstaff’s self-identification with Chauntecleer may also serve to explain his behavior toward his other Eastcheap companions. Benson describes Chaucer’s Chauntecleer as “learned as well as courtly,”³⁷ certainly first amongst the other chickens. While Falstaff’s mannerisms surely are not the courtly ideal, his parallel context must be considered. Chauntecleer is noble, wonderful to listen to, and first amongst the chickens, but he is still a chicken. By the same token Falstaff exhibits great wit and intelligence, and is enjoyable to listen to and be around. Harold Goddard points to Falstaff’s irresistible allure as a companion, noting Bardolph’s lament at the fat knight’s death in *Henry V*: “Would I were with him, wheresome’er he is, either in heaven or in hell” (2.3.7-8).³⁸ However, if the mock-heroic parallel can be carried through to Falstaff, his physicality seems to precede any virtue, just as Chauntecleer’s precludes the Rooster from being noble. While he may well be first among the rogues at Eastcheap, Falstaff still projects the image of a failed noble,

a testament to both the shortcomings of the chivalric system and the potential consequences of abusing it. Yet, on the other hand, are the values of Falstaff and Chauntecleer diminished *a priori* due to their natures? Chauntecleer is a chicken, and Falstaff is fat, but their virtues are both independent of, and corroborate with, their vices; they praiseworthy when they deserve it and mocked for the same, yet never once should either character's shortcomings overpower his virtues. The same applies for the reverse. Falstaff could hardly provide piercing social commentary, or even just fun, if he were a conformist.

In the Nun's Priest's mock heroic form, the audience should be tempted to overlook any uncomfortable parallels that the animals share with humans. Larry Benson notes that "Chaucer delicately maintains the balance between the two, combining the elements of courtly discourse with occasional sharp reminders that the characters are, after all, only chickens."³⁹ However, Chaucer embeds a literary safety valve in the form of the mock-heroic. If his motives are questioned by noble patrons, the poet can simply default to Benson's assumption in his own defense. Falstaff serves a similar purpose. Should his subversion turn too many heads, the author can simply default to the position that "it is just Falstaff and his companions, after all." Garber notes the parallels between the interactions of the Boar's Head ruffians and Henry's own court, pointing specifically to Falstaff's tale-telling after the Gadshill incident and its subsequent mock theatrical performance:

Henry IV does, in a way, "counterfeit" the person of a king ("person" in this sense is nicely related to *persona*, or mask, as well as to "body"). Falstaff's imaginary men in buckram are the "low" and comic counterparts of the many men marching in the King's coats, and Falstaff's lie is in a way no more a lie than Henry's claim to the crown. Men in costume are men in costume, whether they are encountered in the tavern, on the highway, on the battlefield, or, indeed, on the stage.⁴⁰

For Chaucer, the form of the mock-heroic in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is manifested, and masked, in barn animals. Again, perhaps beyond coincidence, "Chauntecleer" is an anagrammatic amplification of "Chaucer." Shakespeare's audience, depending on its familiarity with *The Canterbury Tales*, may well have made this association, at least subliminally. In any case, for Shakespeare, the lower class characters and Falstaff as their leader mirror the main action and actual concerns of the nobles. They are operating as Shakespeare's barnyard animals.

As a writer, Chaucer had to exercise great caution when embedding any critiques in his works. Patronized by John of Gaunt and Richard II, Chaucer's political connections were strong, and he depended on them for his sustenance, as evidenced in his appeal to Henry IV in *The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse*. *The Canterbury Tales* depicts members of the clergy, nobility, middle class, and peasantry at varying moral gradations, ranging from the commendable clerk to the vile friar. His own caricature, Chaucer the Pilgrim, allows the poet to move among his characters in such a way that we get to know them almost as well as Chaucer the

Poet does. The Pilgrim is impressed, perhaps for all of the wrong reasons, with many of his company, and his often flattering descriptions are questionably praiseworthy, aimed at careful readers. For example, when the Monk decries the Benedictine Rule, declaring it “nat worth an oystre” (A 182), the Pilgrim reports, “And I seyde his opinion was good” (A 184), going on to explain that it is foolish to go mad with study. However, the monk is an “outridere” (A 166), and an owner of greyhounds—he does not go mad with study, but does not study at all. The Pilgrim is impressed with the Monk, who is not very impressive *as* a monk. Chaucer’s pilgrim mask partially obscures his poetic countenance, but not completely. For Chaucer’s message to take hold, he could not have utterly subsumed his own identity in his pilgrim.

Falstaff presents a similar problem, though his conception is more complex in many respects. Not only is Shakespeare using Falstaff—the entertainer, tale-teller, and faux theater performer—as a mask, but he is fashioning that mask in the likeness of Chaucer. In *Henry IV, Part One* there is mainly circumstantial evidence, though very compelling, suggesting such a link. The Gadshill caper, Falstaff’s philosophical motives in connection with *Sir Thopas* and his identification with Chauntecleer from *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, physical characteristics, and the similarity in company that they keep seem, at least subliminally, to connect Falstaff and Chaucer the Pilgrim. On their own, these thematic instances point toward a Shakespearean mindfulness of Chaucer, situated in the poet’s own historical context. In *Henry IV, Part One*, Shakespeare’s use of Chaucer could have been relatively self-contained, especially as it seems to draw primarily on themes from *The Canterbury Tales*.

However, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are not the only works that connect in some meaningful manner with Falstaff. The fat knight expands his Chaucerian invocations to some of the poet’s other works, and incorporates them so as to indicate a direct connection between the two. For example, In *Henry IV, Part Two*, Falstaff laments his financial situation after the Chief Justice refuses him a loan:

I can get no remedy of this consumption of the purse; borrowing only lingers and lingers it out, but the disease is incurable...’Tis no matter if I do halt; I have the wars for my color, and my pension shall seem the more reasonable. A good wit will make use of anything. I will turn diseases to commodity.
(1.2.235-237, 244-248)

Falstaff’s woes significantly echo *The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse*, both in tone and intention. Chaucer, in his last known piece of writing, levels his own appeal to Henry IV, pleading “Have mynde upon my supplicacioun” (26)⁴¹ to the King directly. Falstaff commands his page, “Go bear this letter to my lord of Lancaster, this to the Prince, this to the Earl of Westmorland” (1.2.237-239), seeking similar aid from noble company. He likens his money troubles to a terminal illness, staved off only for a short while.

Chaucer’s gravity concerning his “supplicacioun” shares Falstaff’s tone. Chaucer was reliant on his government pensions, as were all civil servants. In 1390

he was robbed by highwaymen at “le Foule Oke” in a forest near Kent, “a short way from London in the direction of Canterbury,”⁴² though inconsistencies in the record blur whether he was robbed once or three times, possibly also in Surrey.⁴³ Crow and Leland assert that the records unanimously affirm that Chaucer was blameless and those responsible were punished,⁴⁴ but he may have lost up to twenty pounds of the King’s money and his own. After Henry deposed Richard II, Chaucer’s previous royal annuities were apparently renewed, plus an additional forty marks a year for life, though Crow and Leland note that Chaucer’s *Complaint* “suggests that the grants approved by the new king had not yet been paid.”⁴⁵ Like Falstaff, Chaucer attempts to turn his misfortune into something profitable.

Shakespeare understands Chaucer’s treatment of his financial woes, and uses “disease” in a complex metaphorical sense. Though Chaucer describes his purse as a lady, she has “been lyght” (3). Falstaff’s wordplay with disease extends our understanding of “lyght” to consumption, and since Chaucer’s financial woes endanger his life, the disease metaphor seems applicable to the poet. Regardless of Chaucer’s attitude toward his lady’s sickness, he pleads, “Beth hevvy ageyn, or elles moot I dye” (14). Thus, Chaucer’s money troubles could be seen as a terminal illness unless they are treated. Chaucer and Falstaff enact supplication—which will hopefully lead to healing—through writing.

This relationship between disease and commodity, commodity and writing, is reinforced when the Page reports, upon Falstaff’s request, a physician’s opinion of the fat knight’s health based on a urine sample: “He said, sir, the water itself was a good healthy water, but for the party that ow’d it, he might have moe diseases than he knew for” (1.2.3-5). Falstaff retorts, “I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men” (1.2.9-10). Falstaff’s disease—his wit—is also the source of his authorial impetus. Falstaff shares this disease with Chaucer and Shakespeare, in their characters and livelihoods. Authors are indeed sources of wit in others, and Falstaff’s remark may be serving as a double entendre, a signal that we should see Falstaff as a kind of artist.

Aside from his connections to Chaucer’s poetry, Shakespeare also incorporates elements of significant biographical information. He quixotically connects Falstaff to some of Chaucer’s acquaintances via Master Shallow, who apparently knew Falstaff as a youth. Though the fat knight warns us of Shallow’s liberal exaggerations, “how subject we old men are to this vice of lying” (3.2.304), Shakespeare provides us with some insight into Falstaff’s company as a youth. Notably, he seems familiar with John of Gaunt, Chaucer’s great patron and brother-in-law. Though Shallow pretends, as Falstaff puts it, to have “been a sworn brother to him” (3.2.321), as Chaucer was, Falstaff himself seems to have been more familiar:

I’ll be sworn ‘a [Shallow] ne’er saw him [John of Gaunt] in the Tilt-yard, and then he burst his head for crowding among the marshal’s men. I saw it, and told John a’ Gaunt he beat his own name, for you might have thrust him and all his apparel into an eel-skin. (3.2.321-326)

Falstaff's wordplay with the meaning of "gaunt" does not simply suggest a familiarity between the two, but more significantly points to Falstaff's previous reference to commodity. As noted, Falstaff is convinced that his wit is his saving grace financially. It is not unreasonable to conclude that Falstaff, like Chaucer, was patronized (or tolerated) by John of Gaunt for his wit.

In conjunction with his pronouncements on knowing John of Gaunt, Shallow mentions an incident between Falstaff and a man named Scoggin: "I see him break Scoggin's head at the court-gate, when 'a was a crack not thus high" (3.2.29-30). The footnote to the *Riverside* edition reads "Shakespeare was perhaps thinking of John Scogan, the court jester to Edward IV and hero of a jestbook popular in the later sixteenth century,"⁴⁶ a sentiment echoed by S.B. Hemingway.⁴⁷ However, according to McNeal, Shallow is most likely referring to Henry Scogan.⁴⁸ Laila Gross notes this Scogan as the likely recipient of Chaucer's *Envoy de Chaucer a Scogan*.⁴⁹ McNeal contends "that Shakspeare [sic] took the name *Skogan* from the poems relating to the man at the back of Speght's *Chaucer*—that we may now drop the court jester to Edward IV for good and all."⁵⁰ Scogan was the tutor of Henry IV's children, and he wrote a moral ballad for them that quotes the entirety of Chaucer's *Gentilesse*.⁵¹ Shallow's allusion to Falstaff's conflict with Scoggin, no matter how exaggerated, makes greater sense in the context of Chaucer's own work. In his envoy, Chaucer skewers Scogan for offending Venus:

But now so wepith Venus in hir spere
That with hir teeres she wol drenche us here.
Allas! Scogan, this is for thyn offence;
Thow causest this diluge of pestilence.

(11-14)

It makes sense that Falstaff would embattle himself with Scoggin over moral issues; by his nature, Falstaff challenges the boundaries of morality. Falstaff is, of course, better equipped for verbal sparring than a physical altercation.

Additionally, Falstaff's interactions with women suggest a telling parallel with Chaucer's own attitudes. Shakespeare may have derived this connection from Chaucer's apparently forced *The Legend of Good Women* in the Prologue by "Queen Alceste."⁵² As Shaner and Edwards explain, any allegorical connection between Chaucer's life and his prologue is a matter of debate.⁵³ Regardless, Chaucer's poetry is ambivalent toward women: *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Against Women Unconstant*, and *The Complaint of Mars* are particularly notable examples. Falstaff suffers from a similar predicament. After his death, the boy reports of Falstaff, "A said once, the dev'l would have him about women" (*Henry V* 2.3.35-36), and that they are "dev'ls incarnate" (31-32).⁵⁴ This may indeed reflect Chaucer's own equivocation about women, as projected in several of his works. Though Chaucer may well have only loosely allegorized or even fabricated the conversation with Queen Alceste from *The Legend of Good Women's* prologue, Shakespeare may nonetheless have incorporated this aspect of Chaucer's mask into Falstaff.

Despite their poetic affinities, it seems at first that Chaucer and Falstaff

share little in common biographically. A character sketch of Falstaff reveals that he is essentially an aristocrat in his own right, though his specific titles are in question. He is frequently referred to as “Sir John,” and we see him (somewhat) engaged in combat and responsible for rallying troops. Chaucer, on the other hand, was a civil servant, whose role was primarily of the administrative middle class, though he was closely connected to the court and relied on the patronage of nobles. Donaldson, however, cautions us against assuming that Chaucer the pilgrim, Chaucer the poet, and Chaucer the man were the same person:

The fact that these are three separate entities does not, naturally, exclude the probability—or rather the certainty—that they bore a close resemblance to one another, and that, indeed, they frequently got together in the same body. But that does not excuse us from keeping them distinct from one another, difficult as their close resemblance makes our task.⁵⁵

Judging by Shakespeare’s use of his own masks, he is just as perceptive a Chaucer critic as Donaldson. While Loomis objects, “But Shakespeare wears no mask; he is not there at all,”⁵⁶ her assertion is somewhat mitigated by the fact that Chaucer is never specifically named in the tales except in the prologue to *The Man of Law’s Tale* (B1, 47),⁵⁷ and even then his name is never connected specifically to the narrator. Donaldson even identifies this chronicler as “presumably someone called Geoffrey,”⁵⁸ yet critical consensus identifies Chaucer as the narrator: rightly so, as “Geoffrey” is named in other works, such as *House of Fame*. It is entirely plausible that Shakespeare learned how to mask himself from Chaucer’s example, especially considering that his masks are closely associated with Chaucerian references.⁵⁹ Falstaff, therefore, seems a likely mask for Shakespeare, even coded in the syllables of their names in the form of “Fal-staff” and “Shake-speare,”⁶⁰ and a locus for his identification as a masked author vis-à-vis Chaucer.

So both Chaucer and Shakespeare are represented in the *Henriad*, though perhaps in the same massive body: Shakespeare’s mask with a Chaucerian face. Goddard acknowledges that the complexity of Falstaff’s character leads to a potentially dualistic interpretation of his behavior:

Which is he? A colossus of sack, sensuality, and sweat—or a wit and humorist so great that he can be compared only with his creator, a figure... livelier than life? One might think there were two Falstaffs.⁶¹

Furthermore, Goddard argues that this complexity may account for Falstaff’s girth,⁶² suggesting that Shakespeare implies that more than one Falstaff could inhabit the same body.

Why would Shakespeare invest so much of Chaucer, the greatest English poet that preceded him, into the problematic Falstaff? On one hand, Chaucer the pilgrim keeps questionable company himself, interacting with even the vilest members of the Canterbury pilgrimage. Benson notes, “Perhaps Chaucer the

pilgrim—cheerful, tolerant, but no fool—is closer than has been thought to Chaucer the man, who may even have relished an occasional rascal,” though the character is deeply complex and avoids simple characterizations.⁶³ Chaucer the pilgrim, on the other hand, may not have simply relished rascals: He may have been one. He interacts with everyone, crossing class boundaries just as Falstaff does.

Despite the compelling links between Falstaff and Chaucer’s mask, the fat knight’s rejection scene at the end of *Henry IV, Part Two* throws a disturbing pall over their connection. It must be noted that Falstaff’s caricature, if indeed inspired by Chaucer’s self-conception, must be distinguished from Chaucer the poet. There is no way of knowing the full extent of Shakespeare’s familiarity with Chaucer’s biography—the only records of Shakespeare’s sources are alluded to in the plays themselves. Unfortunately, that means there is no way to gauge whether Shakespeare distinguished between Chaucer’s mask in his poetry and the man himself. Donaldson, however, cautions against assuming that Shakespeare’s understanding of Chaucer was limited: “Shakespeare himself provides the final indication of the way Shakespeare read Chaucer, and that way is with full appreciation of his complexity.”⁶⁴ Thus, Shakespeare himself is a Chaucerian, concerned with the complexities of the poet’s meaning, but also incorporates that concern into his own art.

Falstaff is a locus where Chaucer and Shakespeare interact, where their masks meet. If an understanding of Falstaff is extended to his representation as this locus, Chaucer’s retraction and the rejection scene are inextricably linked with Shakespeare’s treatment of Sir John. When an ecstatic Falstaff rushes in to see his friend’s coronation, the moment is “one of the most devastating in any of Shakespeare’s plays.”⁶⁵ Hal, now Henry V, proclaims, “I know thee not, old man” (5.5.47). If Chaucer the pilgrim can appropriately be read as a component of Falstaff, he too has been rejected as an otherworldly literary relic, a Munchausen, a “defaute of myn unkonnyng” (*Retraction* 1, 1082)⁶⁶ in Chaucer’s words. Chaucer the Pilgrim is subsumed as one of many “translacions and editynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns” (I 1085). The England of *Henry IV, Part Two* is “drooping” (I.i.3). Richard’s regime, which apparently valued literacy and learning, and, significantly, Chaucer, is replaced with the rule of the Henrys:

One way of mapping the decline is to notice how much of this play is written in prose. Almost every scene in verse is followed immediately by a longer one in prose, full of topical humor, bawdy puns, sexual innuendo and braggadocio, and endless discussions of how much things cost. The prose world is swallowing up the world of poetry....⁶⁷

Though it seems that Falstaff is no poet (neither is Chaucer the pilgrim, really), his wit carries him far, until he is silenced at the end, unable to respond to his own banishment, or to sufficiently employ his bullshitting skills on the now angry Shallow. Falstaff’s theatrics, his words, have ceased, and despite the play’s epilogue, we never see him again. Harold Bloom gravely suggests “The greatest of all fictive wits dies the death of a rejected father-substitute, and also of a dishonored

mentor.”⁶⁸ Chaucer’s world, as Garber puts it, is being swallowed by prose. Though the new King tells Falstaff to “Leave gormandizing” (5.5.52), Goddard notes Henry “turns to his attempt to swallow France.”⁶⁹ This consumption language survives in *Henry V*. Exeter delivers Henry’s message to the King of France, insisting,

Deliver up the crown, and to take mercy
On the poor souls for whom this hungry war
Opens his vasty jaws; and on your head,
Turning the widows’ tears, the orphans’ cries,
The dead men’s blood, the privy maidens’ groans,
For husbands, fathers, and betrothed lovers,
That shall be swallow’d in this controversy.
(2.4.104-109)

Significantly, Chaucer the pilgrim is swallowed by Chaucer the poet’s retraction. Historically, Chaucer the man also quickly fades from the record.

The relationship between Chaucer, Falstaff, and Shakespeare is complex and tangled. While we can speculate that Shakespeare feared, or felt, rejection in his own artistic circle, and incorporated Chaucer’s own self-rejection, there is no positive biographical source to draw upon. However, if we view Falstaff as Shakespeare’s mask, representative of his response to Chaucer’s *persona*, more than a modicum of anxiety simmers in the last act of Falstaff’s final play. Even the knight’s reported death scene is suggestive of Chaucerian themes:

‘A parted ev’n just between twelve and one, ev’n at the turning o’ th’ tide;
for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile
upon his finger’s end, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as
sharp as a pen, and ‘a babbl’d o’ green fields.
(*Henry V*, 2.3.12-17)

This depiction seems to match Donaldson’s perception of Chaucer’s “outmoded” popular conceptualization as a “wide-eyed, jolly, roly-poly little man who, on fine Spring mornings, used to get up early...and go look at daisies.”⁷⁰ Falstaff himself was, and still is, one of Shakespeare’s most beloved conceptions. Is Shakespeare, like Chaucer, retracting the fat knight, anticipating the problems he will cause in *Henry V*?

Falstaff’s death is more significant than a convenient killing-off. During the battle of Agincourt, Fluellen points out several superficial similarities between Alexander the Great and King Henry. But among the facile references to rivers and places starting with the letter *M*, Fluellen and Gower argue over comparisons on how Alexander and Henry treated their closest friends. Fluellen insists Alexander “did in his ales and his angers, look you, kill his best friend, Clytus” (4.7.37-39). Gower protests that their king “never kill’d any of his friends” (4.7.41), but Fluellen

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makes a chilling retort:

as Alexander kill'd his friend Clytus, being in his ales and his cups; so also Harry Monmouth, being in his right wits and his good judgments, turn'd away the fat knight with the great belly doublet. He was full of jests, and gipes, and knaveries, and mocks—I have forgot his name.

(4.7.44-50)

Even so late in the play, Falstaff's rejection haunts Henry's motives. This additional acknowledgment of Henry's responsibility for Falstaff's death, according to Goddard, is "Shakespeare's last judgment on the rejection of Falstaff."⁷¹ Goddard contends that this moment, and Henry's entrance immediately following where he declares he was never angry "Until this instant" (4.7.56), doubly confirms that the king's behavior has been calculated and ruthless.⁷² So Falstaff is a public sacrifice to Hal's own performance apotheosis, which he announces at the beginning of *Henry IV, Part One*:

And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
I'll so offend, to make offense a skill,
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

(1.2.212-217)

In some respects, Falstaff sowed the seeds of his own destruction. Hal was an excellent understudy to Falstaff's theatrics, but the future king's aims in his methods were distinct from his mentor's. For all of his faults, Falstaff is generally a fun-loving reprobate, and the audience has to wonder, at least on some level, why it is better off with a man who swallows countries instead of sack. But if Falstaff is a sacrifice to Henry's rise, what are we losing? What aspect of Falstaff's rejection is Shakespeare casting judgment on?

Regarding his portrayal of Falstaff in his film *Chimes at Midnight*, Orson Welles commented:

[T]he film was not intended as a lament for Falstaff, but for the death of Merrie England. Merrie England as a conception, a myth which has been very real to the English-speaking world, and is to some extent expressed in other countries of the Medieval epoch: the age of chivalry, of simplicity, of Maytime and all that. It is more than Falstaff who is dying. It's the old England dying and betrayed.⁷³

While Welles' notion of "Merrie England" is anachronistic to Shakespeare, considering Chaucer's echoes in Falstaff's character, the playwright might well be on

the same relative track as Welles. Nostalgia aside, Shakespeare's sensitivity to the late 13th and early 14th centuries would necessarily contrast Chaucer's presence and subsequent disappearance. Though far from idyllic, Richard II's reign maintained a living "father of English poetry." Henry IV's rule signaled a drastic change and long following period of strife, during which Chaucer was almost entirely absent. His disappearance parallels Falstaff's in *Henry V*, and one cannot help wondering if Chaucer was also regarded as too subversive to further comment on current affairs, as Terry Jones suggests in *Who Murdered Chaucer?*

Significantly, Falstaff is related to another famous subversive disturber and corrupter. A number of critics have noted parallels between Falstaff's reported death scene in *Henry V* and Plato's telling of the death of Socrates.⁷⁴ Paul M. Cubeta points out that the Hostess, who has had a troubled relationship with Falstaff in the past, provides a "Christian charity starkly missing in Falstaff's monarch" in her comforting of the knight in his final moments.⁷⁵ Further,

Her ministrations may also be reminiscent of those of Socrates' friends at the onset of the death of their companion, condemned as another alleged villainous, abominable misleader of youth and a threat to the established political order.... (181)

Cubeta notes that the Hostess's telling of Falstaff's death—"I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone; then I felt to his knees, and so up'ard and up'ard, and all was as cold as any stone" (2.3.23-26)—perhaps recalls Thomas More's own recollection of Plato's account in the *Phaedo* in his "Remembrance of Death" from *Four Last Things*: "lying in thy bedde...thy nose sharpening, thy legges coling, thy fingers fimpling...all thy strength fainting...and thy death drawing on."^{76,77} Shakespeare adopts a decidedly English interpretation of Socrates's death, and even transposes "Arthur" for "Abraham" (2.3.9-10), which Garber contends as "a splendidly 'English' malapropism for the biblical phrase 'in Abraham's bosom' (Luke 16:22)."⁷⁸ It is uncertain whether Shakespeare would have associated Chaucer with a corrupter of youth, but the parallels between Falstaff, Chaucer, and Socrates do not strain credulity, given their close provenience. In any case, barring any specific link between Chaucer and Socrates, both Falstaff and the philosopher are rejected teachers. While their methods may be to some extent outdated or outmoded, something culturally tangible is indeed being lost in this exchange of lives for power. It seems that all three—Falstaff, Chaucer, and Socrates—leave us when *we* would least want them to, but when it is most convenient for their respective potentates.

While it is tempting to jump to a specific "point" in Shakespeare's use of Falstaff as a Chaucerian-fashioned mask, the bard may not have reached any definitive conclusion himself, as to either Falstaff or Chaucer. Though not above borrowing some narrative elements from his exemplars, Shakespeare does not so much emulate Chaucer's work as he reacts to it. This trend could indicate that Shakespeare attempted to come to terms with his understanding of Chaucer, rather

than simply incorporating convenient plot devices and showing off his breadth of reading. Just as Chaucer retracts what we regard as his best work, Shakespeare allows Falstaff to be rejected. But the lesson is embedded in those rejections. The audience is responsible for giving meaning to the loss of Chaucer and the loss of Falstaff. It is entirely possible that Shakespeare feared his own eventual rejection, that he might be filtering the anxieties of authorial reputation and his legacy as a writer through his understanding and perception of England's greatest poet. Nevertheless, the audience must reconcile the likes of Falstaff, who is reflective of both the best and worst of both worlds in terms of wit and reputation. The same applies to readers of Chaucer. Can we actually divorce Falstaff and *The Canterbury Tales* from their respective vices? It seems impossible to understand or experience their virtues without considering what these vices imply. How could Chaucer lampoon medieval social norms without his flawed pilgrims? How could Shakespeare address the complexities of honor without Falstaff? As Donaldson suggests, "although others may find what they do reprehensible, they find their occupations fully justified because they are *their* occupations, and they find them congenial."⁷⁹ Whatever good exists in a character like Falstaff must be sought in the entire scope of his behaviors, not just individual qualities. These virtues and vices are not unharmonious in the least. Thus, there is no dissonance in Shakespeare's appreciation of Chaucer, though there may well be in his reckoning of Chaucer's self-conception as an author, who just happens to be a living part amidst a greater cast of characters.

Endnotes

- ¹ E. Talbot Donaldson and Judith J. Kollmann, eds. *Chaucerian Shakespeare: Adaptation and Transformation*. Medieval and Renaissance Monograph Series II (Detroit: Michigan Consortium for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 1983), 1.
- ² Thomas H. McNeal. "Henry IV, Parts I and II, and Speght's First Edition of Geoffrey Chaucer," *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin* 21.2 (April 1946), 87.
- ³ Laila Z. Gross. "The Short Poems." *The Riverside Chaucer*. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), 636.
- ⁴ Dorothy Bethurum Loomis. "Chaucer and Shakespeare," *Chaucer's Mind and Art*. ed. A.C. Cawley (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1969), 169-170.
- ⁵ Donaldson, *Chaucerian Shakespeare* 5.
- ⁶ See also Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 274.
- ⁷ Bloom, 272.
- ⁸ E. Talbot Donaldson, *The Swan at the Well* (London: Yale University Press, 1985), 131.
- ⁹ Donaldson, *The Swan at the Well* 130.
- ¹⁰ Michael Delahoyde is responsible for this observation (and many others). For a more complete discussion of Chaucer's lyrical influence on Shakespeare, see Delahoyde's "Lyric Poetry from Chaucer to Shakespeare," *Brief Chronicles V* (2014): 69-100.
- ¹¹ All quotations of the canonical play are taken from *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997), 847-883.
- ¹² Terry Jones and Robert Yeager, Alan Fletcher, Juliette Dor, Terry Dolan. *Who Murdered Chaucer?: A Medieval Mystery* (New York: St. Martin's, 2004), 63-68.
- ¹³ All quotations of the canonical poem are taken from *The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), 656.
- ¹⁴ Benson, "Introduction," *The Riverside Chaucer*, xxv.
- ¹⁵ All quotations of the canonical play are taken from *The First Part of Henry the*

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Fourth in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997), 889-927.

- 16 McNeal, 89.
- 17 Loomis, 169.
- 18 All quotations of the canonical poem are taken from *The Canterbury Tales General Prologue* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 23-36.
- 19 E. Talbot Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970), 2.
- 20 All quotations of the canonical poem are taken from *The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 212-217.
- 21 Isaac Asimov, *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1970), 353-354.
- 22 Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* 1-2.
- 23 Benson, "The Canterbury Tales," *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1-22.
- 24 Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 316.
- 25 Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 162.
- 26 All quotations of the canonical poem are taken from *Lenvoy De Chaucer A Scogan* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 655.
- 27 Laila Z. Gross, "The Short Poems," *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1087.
- 28 All quotations of the canonical poem are taken from *The House of Fame* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 348-373.
- 29 All quotations of the canonical poem are taken from *Merciles Beaute* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 659.
- 30 All quotations of the canonical play are taken from *The Second Part of Henry the Fourth* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., 928-973.
- 31 Colin Wilcockson, Explanatory Notes to *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 976.
- 32 Herschel Baker, "Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2: Explanatory notes," *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed., 891.
- 33 Baker, 911.
- 34 McNeal, 89.
- 35 All quotations of the canonical poem are taken from *The Nun's Priest's Prologue, Tale and Epilogue* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 252-261.
- 36 Benson, 18.
- 37 Benson, 18.
- 38 Goddard, 176.
- 39 Benson, 18.
- 40 Garber, 317.
- 41 All quotations of the canonical poem are taken from *The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 656.
- 42 Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson, *Chaucer Life Records* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 477-489.
- 43 Martin M. Crow and Virginia E. Leland. "Chaucer's Life," *The Riverside Chaucer*, xxv.

- 44 Crow and Leland, xxv.
- 45 Crow and Leland, xxv.
- 46 Baker, 946.
- 47 Quoted in McNeal, 91.
- 48 McNeal, 91.
- 49 Gross, 636.
- 50 McNeal, 92.
- 51 Gross, 636.
- 52 All quotations of the canonical poem are taken from *The Legend of Good Women* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 588-630.
- 53 M.C.E. Shaner with A.S.G. Edwards, "Explanatory notes to the *Legend of Good Women*," *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1061.
- 54 All quotations of the canonical play are taken from *The Life of Henry the Fifth* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed, 979-1021.
- 55 Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* 1.
- 56 Loomis, 174.
- 57 All quotations of the canonical poem are taken from *The Man of Law's Introduction, Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 87-104.
- 58 Donaldson, *The Swan at the Well* 7.
- 59 My current manuscript project, built from my dissertation titled *Shakespeare's Chaucerian Entertainers*, focuses on a number of these characters.
- 60 Bloom, 273.
- 61 Goddard, 175.
- 62 Goddard, 176.
- 63 Benson, 6.
- 64 Donaldson, *The Swan at the Well* 2.
- 65 Garber, 357.
- 66 All quotations of the canonical poem are taken from *Chaucer's Retraction* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 328.
- 67 Garber, 348.
- 68 Bloom, 272.
- 69 Goddard, 211.
- 70 Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* 2.
- 71 Goddard, 249.
- 72 Goddard, 251.
- 73 Quoted in Bridget Gellert Lyons, *Chimes at Midnight* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 262.
- 74 Bloom, 292. Cf. Cubeta.
- 75 Paul M. Cubeta. "Falstaff and the Art of Dying," *Sir John Falstaff*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 181.
- 76 Cubeta, 181.
- 77 All quotations are from the MS *The vvorkes of Sir Thomas More Knyght, sometyme Lorde Chauncellour of England, wrytten by him in the Englysh tonge*. Printed at London: At the costes and charges of Iohn Cawod, Iohn VValy, and Richarde