

THE FALSTAFF OF THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

According to Northrop Frye, "In The Merry Wives of Windsor there is an elaborate ritual of the defeat of winter known to folklorists as 'carrying out death,' of which Falstaff is the victim; and Falstaff must have felt that, after being thrown into the water, dressed up as a witch and beaten out of a house with curses, and finally supplied with a beast's head and singed with candles, he had done about all that could reasonably be asked of any fertility spirit."¹ The Death figure of ancient ritual described by Cambridge anthropologist Jane Ellen Harrison, however, although dressed in women's clothes and "roughly handled or pelted with stones," does not have a beast's head at all, but is "a threshed-out sheaf of corn [tied] into a rough copy of a head and body."² The beast's head which is supplied to Falstaff suggests that perhaps there is another archetypal victim behind his role in Merry Wives. This, I think, is the scapegoat of the Dionysiac ritual, represented, for example, by Euripides' Pentheus in The Bacchae. Like Falstaff, Pentheus is dressed in women's clothes, driven into the woods, and pelted with stones. Finally, however, Pentheus is torn to shreds by the Bacchantes, who, in their hysterical frenzy, see him as a beast, and his head is carried onstage by his mother, who still imagines herself to be carrying a beast's head. Pentheus thus acts as a surrogate for the animal who represented the primitive people's god, and whose flesh, eaten still warm and bleeding, supposedly gave the communicants some of the god's own strength and prowess. Since Falstaff's experiences are analogous to Pentheus' (excepting, of course, the actual sparagmos), it seems to me that Falstaff is not only a fertility spirit, but more specifically, a comic or parodic version of the ritual scapegoat, whose humiliation at the close of the play strengthens the members of the community figuratively, as the eating of the ritual victim's body supposedly strengthened them literally.

NOTES

1. Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 183.
2. Ancient Art and Ritual (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), pp. 69,68.

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