

# **An Invisible Woman in the Canon: Tracing Alys' Influence in Shakespeare Through Harold Bloom.**

**Dr. B.C. Anish Krishnan Nayar**

Teaching Fellow

Department of English

University College of Engineering

Nagercoil-629004

[anishkrishnannayar@gmail.com](mailto:anishkrishnannayar@gmail.com)

and

**S. Johny**

Research Scholar

Department of English

Scott Christian College

Nagercoil

**H**arold Bloom (1930- ) is one of the most eminent critics of English Literature. He has authored more than twenty books and edited about hundred volumes on Literary Criticism. Bloom's magnum opus is *The Western Canon* (1994), which is a survey of select literary works of the Europe and America, published in the past six hundred years. These works can be considered to be components of a canon, based on which the Western literary tradition can be evaluated. These twenty- six works can be necessarily considered to be yard stick to evaluate the literary achievements of other authors. In other words, *The Western Canon* proposes an aesthetic based evaluation system. This book is classified into four major sections namely "On the Canon", "The Aristocratic Age", "The Democratic Age" and "The Chaotic

Age". The sections are further sub-divided into twenty-three chapters. The most important chapter in this book is the second chapter entitled, "Shakespeare, Centre of the Canon". As the title of this chapter suggests, this chapter focuses on placing Shakespeare in the centre of the Western literary world. While doing so, Bloom has highlighted various important, hitherto unexplored aspects of Shakespeare's literary world. One among those aspects is the echoes of Alys, Bath's wife in Shakespeare's characterization of Falstaff. This paper attempts to explore this aspect proposed by Bloom in detail.

It is to be understood that Bloom wrote *The Western Canon* in response to what he calls "the school of resentment". By "the school of resentment" Bloom denotes the critics who look for political causes in a work of literature. Such critics usually undermine the aesthetic value of a work of art. Bloom says that Shakespeare's question works attempts that try to replace Canon with library (50). The contents of a canon will be selective and exclusive whereas contents of a library will be vast and inclusive. In a way, Bloom's "Shakespeare, Centre of the Canon", can be considered as an attempt to defend Shakespeare from political critics who tend to see him as a petty bourgeois writer.

In the opening of the chapter, Bloom asserts: "Shakespeare and Dante are the centre of the Canon because they excel all other Western writers in cognitive acuity, linguistic energy, and power of invention" (43). He adds, "There is no substitute for Shakespeare: not even in the handful of dramatists, ancient or modern, who can be read and played with him or against him" (50).

Harold Bloom agrees that Shakespeare was not a 'born poet'. He says "Shakespeare is not one of those poets who need to

undergo no development, who seem fully formed from the start, the rare handful that includes Marlowe, Blake, Rimbard, Crane [sic]." (44) Bloom's opinion is that Shakespeare's ascend to the canon was gradual. Bloom feels that Shakespeare came to centre field by 1598.

Bloom says that the creation of Falstaff is an important milestone in the dramatic career of Shakespeare. Bloom says: "By 1598 Shakespeare is confirmed, and Falstaff is the angel of confirmation". He adds, "... Sir John Falstaff is so original and so overwhelming that with him Shakespeare changes the entire meaning of what it is to have created a man made out of words" (45).

Bloom points out that the greatest dramatic invention of Shakespeare as "self-overhearing". Yet another quality is the dynamism of the characters. Bloom opines these qualities too originated from the days of Falstaff. Bloom says: "Shakespeare slyly caught the hint and from Falstaff onward vastly expanded the effect of over-hearing upon his greater characters and particularly upon their capacity to change" (46).

Bloom adds another point too. He says, "Shakespeare from Falstaff on, adds to the function of imaginative writing, which was instruction in how to speak to others, the now dominant if more melancholy lesson of poetry: how to speak to ourselves [sic]" (46)

Bloom extols Shakespeare's Falstaff. Bloom tries to find the prototype of Falstaff within the canon. Bloom asserts that Shakespeare is indebted to none, but Chaucer in the characterization of Falstaff. Bloom makes a remarkable discovery in tracing the roots of Falstaff in Wife of Bath. Bloom says, "There is a tenuous but vibrant link between Falstaff and the equally outrageous Alys, Wife of Bath..." (45).

Bloom says, “Falstaff involves Shakespeare in only one authentic literary debt and it is certainly not to Marlowe or to the vice of medieval morality plays or the braggart soldier of ancient comedy, but rather to Shakespeare’s truest, because most inward, precursor, the Chaucer of the *Canterbury Tales* (45).

There are a number of parallels between Alys, Wife of Bath and Falstaff. For example both Alys and Falstaff quote a verse in First Corinthians where St. Paul “. . . urges believers in Christ to hold fast to their vocation” (45). Alys and Falstaff ironically quote this verse in defence of their misdeeds. For Falstaff, the given vocation is highway robbery and it is matrimony for Alys.

Bloom says. “Both grand ironist vitalists preach an overwhelming immanence, a justification of life by life, in here and now. Each a fierce individualist and hedonist, they join in denying commonplace morality and in anticipating Blake’s great Proverb of Heell: ‘One Law for the Lion and Ox is oppression’” (45)

Harold Bloom explains this idea in his other seminal work, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. There he says,

To reject Falstaff is to reject Shakespeare. And to speak merely historically, the freedom Falstaff represents is in the first case freedom from Christopher Marlowe, which means that Falstaff is the signature of Shakespeare’s originality, of his break-through into an art more nearly his own. Engle, speaking for most of his historicizing contemporaries, tells us “that Shakespeare’s work is subdued to what it works in,” but I wonder why the dyer’s hand of tradition subdued Shakespeare less than it did, say, Ben Jonson, let alone the several score minor post-Marlovian dramatists. Falstaff, not a Marlovian, is quite Chaucerian: he is the son of the vitalistic Wife of

Bath. Marlowe, after an initial inspiring effect, doubtless oppressed Shakespeare; Chaucer did not, because Shakespeare's own genius for comedy came to him far more spontaneously than did an aptitude for tragedy. (278)

When Bloom declares: "Shakespeare is the Canon. He set the standard and the limits of literature (The Western Canon 47), the opinion is formulated on the basis of characterization of Falstaff.

Falstaff is not a mere character. He is an embodiment of what later turned to be Shakespearean artistic philosophy. Bloom says that Shakespeare "... has no theology, no metaphysics, no ethics and rather less political theory than is brought to him by his current critics" (53)

Tolstoy, a ruthless critics of Shakespeare, hated Shakespeare for his lack of religious orientations. Bloom says "... Tolstoy is quite accurate in seeing that Shakespeare, as a dramatist, is neither a Christian nor a moralist" (55). Bloom adds that the "... secret of Shakespeare's canonical centrality is his disinterestedness" (53) and this non-conformist, disinterested spirit has its origin in Chaucer's Alys.

It is interesting to know that it was this woman, 'Alys' a literary character who influenced the creativity of Shakespeare. One can only admire Shakespeare for such a strange choice of inspiration. But then, it was such choices that made Shakespeare into one of the greatest dramatists in history of World Literature.

It took seven hundred years for our academicians to recognize the importance of Wife of Bath. A volume entitled *The Wife of Bath and all her sect* was published in 1997 examining the

importance of Alys. Ruth Evans and Lesly Johnson in their introduction to this book state.

The Wife of Bath has sometimes been read as the epitome of a modern feminist, insofar as she claims that experience is the ground of her authority. . . takes on men at their own game of name dropping . . . and refuses to be silenced by the patriarchal powers-that-be. Yet to commemorate the Wife as a 'feminist' simplifies both history and textuality. (1)

Evans and Ruth are right here. Wife of Bath cannot be classified with ideologically labels. Shakespeare, being a visionary could see this uniqueness. Hence her invisible presence is there in the canonical works of Shakespeare.

### Works Cited

Evans, Ruth, and Lesley Johnson, editors. *The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*. Routledge, 2005.

Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon*. Berkley Publishing Group, 1995.

---.Shakespeare: *The Invention of the Human*. Penguin, 1999.

\*\*\*\*\*