

THE FLYING HORSE IN *HENRY V*

HALDEEN BRADY

More than a third of the 141 lines in *Henry V*, Act III, Scene vii, depict the French Dauphin boasting to the Constable of France and Charles of Orleans about his flying horse, astride whom, he declared, that he became "a hawk." Both the horse and hawk are mentioned near the start of the Dauphin's bragging speech.

I will not change my horse with any that treads but on four posterns. *Ça, ha!* he bounds from the earth, as if his entrails were hairs; *le cheval volant*, the Pegasus, *chez les narines de feu!* When I bestride him, I soar, I am a hawk . . . (III.vii.11-17)

Is this passage original with Shakespeare? There is, one may observe in reply, nothing at all corresponding to it in the known sources of the play, Holinshed's *Chronicle* and the anonymous drama, *The Famous Victories of Henry V*.¹ Lacking a model in his sources, Shakespeare presumably invented the description himself. The question is whether he relied only upon his imagination or sought pertinent information from some hitherto unidentified source.

Tales of flying horses were commonplaces in the literature available to the Elizabethans, and Shakespeare cited perhaps the most famous one of all when he mentioned Pegasus. The further descriptive references to his mount as "*le cheval volant*" and to himself as a "hawk" would appear, at face value, additions well within the range of Shakespeare's powers of invention as well as without any particular background. It happens, however, that there existed a well-known medieval fable about Charles VI, the French King featured in *Henry V*, which involved both a hawk and *le cerf volant*.²

According to the fourteenth-century French chronicler Froissart, the Dauphin's father, King Charles VI of France, prior to departing for Flanders in 1382, dreamed that he lost his favorite falcon (*i.e.*, hawk) and that a hart with wings flew to him, placed him on its back, and enabled him to retrieve the bird and return to earth. It is an historical fact that the French King adopted *le cerf volant* for his emblem and bore it proudly into battle. When the bird flew away, the King spoke to the Constable of France about the difficulty of recapturing it. A fuller statement of what occurred may be seen in the English text of Froissart's *Chroniques*.

. . . he said to the constable: "Ah, I fear me I shall lose my falcon, whereof I am sorry, and I have no lure nor nothing else, wherewith to call her again."
And at this point the king thought that there appeared suddenly before

¹ W. G. Boswell-Stone, *Shakespeare's Holinshed* (New York, 1907), pp. 185-186; J. Q. Adams (ed.), *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas* (Boston, 1924), pp. 667-690.

² The word today also means a paper kite flown on a string.

him a great hart with wings and inclined himself before him, whereof he had great joy and thought how he said to the constable: "Sir, abide you here, and I will mount on this hart and so follow my falcon." And so the king thought he mounted on this flying hart, and how the hart according at the king's desire did bear him over all the great woods and trees . . . and incontinent the falcon came and sat her down on his fist: and then the hart flew again over the woods and brought the king to the same laund. . . . And therewith the king awoke and had great marvel of that vision, and he remembered everything thereof right well and shewed it to them of his chamber that were about him; and the figure of this hart pleased him so much, that all his imagination was set thereon . . . when he went into Flanders to fight with the Flemings, he took to his device to bear the flying hart.³

The author of the foregoing English version was Lord Berners, whose *Huon of Bordeaux* is the ultimate source for the name of the King of Fairyland, Oberon, in *Midsummer Night's Dream*.⁴ Yet more important, the historical foundation of *Richard II* (IV.i.162-222), the first of the related chronicle plays to discuss the Lancasters and the father of Henry V, is usually given as Chapter CCXL of the second volume of this English translation of Froissart.⁵ The passage I have quoted comprises a little more than the first half of Chapter CCCCVI of the first volume by Lord Berners, which is probably where Shakespeare first encountered the story unless he had already heard an oral version of it.

It is not unlikely that the Elizabethan audience—at least the English nobility—also knew this medieval fable. Froissart's remarkable explanation of the emblem of Charles VI, which he says the King was proud to boast of to his nobles, would be widely retold and reach far beyond the courtly circles in Paris. Froissart himself visited England in 1395 and paid his respects to Richard II, who was, the chronicler said, "wondrously gracious and kind to me."⁶ Later on, in 1400, Deschamps, whose work became known in London as early as Chaucer's day, wrote a *balade* (No. 67) in honor of Charles VI. In it Deschamps did not feel required to refer to his sovereign by name but designated him allegorically under the title of "*le cerf volant*."⁷ Moreover, the appellation would hardly be forgotten in England, for Charles of Orleans, a nobleman of the French King's entourage, was taken prisoner at Agincourt and remained in Britain, as a prisoner-guest in the literary home of the Earl of Suffolk and his wife, for a quarter of a century, from 1415 to 1440.⁸ It seems probable that Charles VI might be well remembered in London as *le cerf volant* long after his own time, as of course Richard *coeur de lion* was, and that the English nobility would have recognized the description of the hawk

³ G. C. Macaulay (ed.), *The Chronicles of Froissart*, translated by John Bourchier, Lord Berners (London, 1924), pp. 282-283. This English translation was first printed in two volumes, dated respectively January 28, 1523/24 and August 31, 1525, and follows the French original with considerable accuracy. With the aid of my colleague Professor E. T. Ruff, I studied Gaston Raynaud (ed.), *Chroniques de J. Froissart* (Paris, 1897), X, 256 ff., which text gives the hart "twelve wings," *douze ailles*.

⁴ Karl Holzknacht, *The Backgrounds of Shakespeare's Plays* (New York, 1950), p. 238.

⁵ Llewellyn M. Buell (ed.), *King Richard the Second* (Yale University Press, 1948), p. 127.

⁶ F. S. Shears, *Froissart, Chronicler and Poet* (London, 1930), p. 68.

⁷ Le Marquis de Queux de Saint-Hilaire (ed.), *Œuvres complètes de Eustache Deschamps* (S.A.T.F., Paris, 1878), I, 164, 350.

⁸ H. N. MacCracken, "An English Friend of Charles of Orleans," *PMLA* (1911), XXVI, 142 ff.

and *le cheval volant* as an obvious and a natural reference to his son, the Dauphin. Presumably some of the royal playgoers knew French history. They would have been obliged to know the language as well to appreciate the earlier Scene iv in this same Act III, for here the servant Alice teaches Kate her English lesson in the French tongue.

Shakespeare evidently did not invent the episode of the flying horse in *Henry V* but turned, instead, to the English translation of Froissart by Lord Berners, as he had done in *Richard II*, for this colorful symbolism. He recalled the fable of the favorite hawk belonging to the young Dauphin's father and so depicted this King's eldest son in figurative language, giving him, not the flying hart associated with his father, but a *cheval volant* of his own and having him to boast, allegorically, that "I am a hawk."