

The Maltese Falcon

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"The A List: The National Society of Film Critics 100 Essential Films," 2002

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In 1539, the Knight Templars of Malta, paid tribute to Charles V of Spain, by sending him a Golden Falcon encrusted from beak to claw with rarest jewels — but pirates seized the galley carrying the priceless token and the fate of the Maltese Falcon remains a mystery to this day.

That crawl appears following the opening credits of "The Maltese Falcon," set to dreamy-sinister music and laid over a dark image of the peregrine statuary seemingly poised in some undiscovered tomb. The grammar is regrettable (surely it should be Knights-Templar?), and suggestive of some haste. Was the foreword perhaps added at the last minute, in an act of desperation, after preview audiences had grown fidgety with reel upon reel of baroque conversations and ornately peculiar comings and goings in a collection of offices and hotel rooms purporting to be modern-day (1941) San Francisco? More than half the film elapses before anyone even mentions the titular bird, let alone accounts for its immense value and lurid history. Yet strike the keynote with that one-sentence prelude and the mantle of legend settles over the entire proceedings.

Of course, "The Maltese Falcon" has become positively encrusted with legend in the six decades since its release. It's the classic hardboiled private-eye movie; the nervy maiden offering of its celebrated director, John Huston; the first glamorous star vehicle for Humphrey Bogart, an icon of American cinema and the 20th century's definition of existential cool; and still the most triumphantly well-cast movie from Hollywood's golden age (rivaled only by "Casablanca"). Watching "The Maltese Falcon" now, everybody and his brother know they're in the presence of something extraordinary. But it's tantalizing to contemplate how easily the brass ring might have been missed—how close the picture might have come to being just another detective thriller, like the two previous screen versions of Dashiell Hammett's groundbreaking novel (respectively so-so, in 1931, and ludicrous, in 1936).

Private eye Samuel Spade (Bogart) is lolling in his swivel chair and rolling a Bull Durham cigarette when his secretary announces "a Miss Wonderly to see you." The lady in question (Mary Astor)—initially a soft fog behind opaque glass—is an aggressively demure crea-



Mary Astor looks on as Humphrey Bogart roughs up Peter Lorre
Courtesy Library of Congress

ture all a-flutter because her sister Corinne has run off with a shady man named Thursby. Could Mr. Spade do something about it? Mr. Spade's partner Miles Archer (Jerome Cowan), a leering sleaze, shows up just in time to usurp the assignment—and within hours/minutes gets abruptly dead. With the police sniffing after Sam as prime suspect (he had, after all, been sleeping with his partner's wife), the detective starts improvising. He's not the only one: The dainty Miss Wonderly (there is no sister Corinne, by the way) becomes the evasive Miss LeBlanc and soon owns up to the scullery-maid moniker Brigid O'Shaughnessy; she and Spade will become allies, after a fashion, and lovers. A lisping Levantine named Joel Cairo (Peter Lorre) also retains Spade's services, then keeps pulling a gun on him. There are two guns in the trenchcoat pockets of a sullen hoodlum (Elisha Cook Jr.) who always seems to be haunting nearby doorways, and just as the pot is really starting to boil, everything and everyone becomes very still at the mention of "the fat man."

John Huston had been laboring as a Warner Bros. screenwriter for several years, after a genially miscellaneous and gadabout early manhood. A couple of particularly successful assignments (Howard Hawks's "Sergeant York" and Raoul Walsh's "High Sierra") won him a shot at directing as well as writing something that Warners briefly planned to call "The Gent from Frisco." The writing came easy: Huston asked a secretary to type out a scene-by-scene breakdown of Hammett's novel; studio boss Jack L. Warner happened to see the "script," congratulated Huston on licking the adaptation, and told him to start shooting next week. Virtually all the film's flavorsome dialogue is Hammett's, and so, of course, is the plot about a slippery

private detective and a fractious cabal of outré characters willing to sacrifice anyone, including one another, to possess an ancient artifact beyond price. As it happened, Huston not only had the good sense to be faithful to Hammett's original and capitalize on its myriad strengths; he also found in it a theme and worldview that would define his own body of work.

For Huston, the Maltese Falcon is only the first instance of an unholy Grail in pursuit of which a collection of strangers make temporary common cause. Whether prospecting for "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre," plotting to steal a fortune in diamonds in "The Asphalt Jungle," aiming to sink a German battleship with "The African Queen," chasing God and vengeance and "Moby Dick," hunting wild mustangs in "The Misfits," getting battered to win a purse in "Fat City," or dreaming of a kingdom in Kafiristan as "The Man Who Would Be King," Huston's motley crew of questers never really find anything but themselves. Aspiration makes a beeline for absurdity; defeat and victory alike are mostly a matter of dumb or bitterly ironic luck. It's the journey, not the destination, that counts, and almost always the only achievable triumph is the weary serenity of self-knowledge.

Still, "The Maltese Falcon" is an exemplary first film, and its dominant tone is a sassy smartness, not despair. Indeed, the narrative personality of the film and the personality of its protagonist are one and the same from the moment Spade is introduced. He will dominate every action and interaction and serve as our point-of-view reference for everything that happens. With only a couple of exceptions—the abrupt, abstract depiction of the film's first murder and the fadeouts of two later scenes—we see nothing that Spade does not see himself (a cardinal principle of the private-eye genre). Even more important, we see him seeing it. Sam's ongoing, moment-to-moment assessment of the shifting vectors of allegiance and advantage, the tradeoff of truth and hastily adapted fiction on the part of his fellow denizens of the "Falcon"'s nightworld, is the most privileged spectacle the film has to offer.

"The Maltese Falcon," like its elusive namesake, is eternally in motion, despite the fact that it transpires in a fiercely interior environment (even the few street scenes feel like interiors) and an inordinate amount of it consists of people talking about things (or the possibility of things) that occur offscreen. Now, "talky" is usually a bad word when it comes to movies. But Hammett's talk is tensile and exotic, and the way Huston films it, talk is dynamic action. The camera is ever ready to adapt, adjust, to satisfy a lively curiosity about an ever-surprising world. Producer Henry Blanke advised his tyro director to "shoot each scene as if it was the most important one in the picture; make eve-

ry shot count." Huston did, with the result that nothing, not even the incidental behavior of anonymous passersby or the riffling of fake I.D. plucked from a suspect's wallet, fails to crackle with energy and insinuation. The dialogue scenes play like relief maps of mined terrain. Looming closeups are juxtaposed against tiny figures tucked away in the distant corners of the same frame. When two police detectives come to brace Spade in his apartment, just their postures, their positions in the frame and the difference in how they're lit, testify to the bulldog antagonism of Lieutenant Dundy (Barton MacLane) and the reluctance and discomfort of Sergeant Polhaus (Ward Bond), who regards Sam as a friend. Among the Falconers, visible tensions are still more fraught, even when the illusion of affability and rapport is being assiduously courted.

Affability and rapport run nowhere higher than in Spade's (and by all means Humphrey Bogart's) scenes with Kasper Gutman, the most obsessive votary of the Black Bird. Gutman, "the fat man," does not make his appearance till midfilm—and Sydney Greenstreet, the 61-year-old stage veteran tapped for the role, was making his own first appearance on a motion picture screen. It's a moment beyond price. Glimpsed in the distant background as his gungel Wilmer (Cook) opens the door of their hotel suite, he emerges from behind a vase of roses, his bulbous trunk floating on twinkletoes, his arm capturing Spade's own to draw him into his parlor and his enchantment, snorting companionably. Gutman is quite mad, but his madness is instinct with grandeur. It is he who, finally, speaks of the Falcon and elevates its pursuit to a cosmic principle. Long after the film has ended, and the sundry on- and offscreen corpses have all been accounted for and morality has been satisfied, the viewer realizes that, by the time he does so, Gutman has no practical reason to tell Spade about the Falcon and its fabulous history. It's just that, as he remarks elsewhere, "I must have my little joke now and then." In his heart, Spade deplores him, but John Huston loves him. So do we, and we'll never shake the secret wish that in an alternative universe Sam Spade might yet take him up on his invitation to "join us on the Quest." The Maltese Falcon remains a mystery to this day.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Richard T. Jameson's essays and reviews have appeared in Straight Shooting, "Queen Anne & Magnolia News," "Film Comment," Mr. Showbiz, and Parallax View.