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The Merry Wives of Windsor 1602 Shakespeare

Overview. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* features a version of Sir John Falstaff, the unforgettable buddy of Prince Hal, in *Henry the Fourth, Part One* (1597), and one of Shakespeare half dozen greatest character studies. The Falstaff central to the present play, however, bears little close relationship to the Falstaff of the *Henriad*, and only in one place, in the present play, does Shakespeare even reference the place of Falstaff in the *Henriad*, when he speaks of the fat nobleman as one of Prince Hal's 'rowdy friends.'

Setting. For the setting of the present play, which nominally belongs, say, to the fourteenth century, like the *Henriad*, we might as well be in Shakespeare's Elizabethan England, with its early modern social environment, and very little effort to adjust its themes to the values which dominated British society two hundred years earlier. The Falstaff of the present play falls flat on his face, compared to the *Henriad* Falstaffs, and as always, when Shakespeare falls far below his accustomed level of genius, we challenge ourselves to ask why, and to renew our sense of what it is that is so consistently good in this writer.

Weaknesses. To meet that challenge, let's say that the figure of the present play is a comedic fool, with no semblance of that self-awareness, which makes the Falstaff of Henry IV so heart warming and deeply .human. In the present play Falstaff's efforts to get money and sex, are pitiful and the punishments of his folly humiliate him to such a degree that he seems like a Maypole figure of ritual fun, from some archaic shaming society. (Did you think of Shirley Jackson's devastating story, 'The Lottery,' when you saw that the play would end with the snarky pinching and tickling of Fatman on the village green? Did you wonder what to make out of the historical rumor that Queen Elizabeth, enchanted by the *Henriad*, commissioned Shakespeare to write a play about Falstaff in love?)

Characters

Sir John Falstaff
 Bardolph, Pistol, Nym—followers of Falstaff.
 Robin; page to Falstaff,
 Messrs. Frank Ford and George (Thomas) Page
 William Page; a boy, son to Page
 Sir Hugh Evans; a Welsh parson
 Doctor Caius; a French physician
 John Rugby; a servant to Doctor Caius
 Mistress Quickly; a servant to Doctor Caius
 Robert Shallow; a country justice
 Abraham Sander; cousin to Shallow
 Peter Simple; a servant to Slender
 Fenton; a young gentleman
 The Host of the Garter Inn
 Mistress Alice Ford
 Mistress Margaret Page
 Ann Page; Mistress Page's daughter, in love with Fenton.

Story

The story opens with animated inn-talk, among the local nobility, functionaries, and that gallery of servant folk and hangers on whose conversation is so vivaciously local that it rescues even an undeveloped plot like the present. The nub of it is that Sir John Falstaff, local nobility far fallen, is around town, needs cash, and has hit on a tried and true scheme—for him—for getting some quick money. He has written two letters, identical, to two married ladies of local distinction, praising their beauty and asking them for an

assignation. His plan, of course, is to try to make out with them, and in the course of it to fleece them. This is the same merry overweight con man we knew from the *Henriad*, but instead of working with a group of underworld figures, he is this time a freelance crook. Much of the humor of his behavior fades away in this change.

Subplots. As with many Shakespeare plays--*The Taming of the Shrew* is a fine example—there are two plots running parallel to one another, and ultimately blending with one another. (The plots in question are comedies, in which the protagonists, and some sub-agonists, make it through their respective wooing practices, and come out as a grand conglomerate of winners, each suitor finding his or her appropriate mate.) The chief plot of the present play will surround Falstaff's efforts to woo and above all fleece, while the sub plot will involve the efforts of one of the two wooed ladies to get her daughter advantageously married off. From the dramaturgical standpoint, Shakespeare is enabled to keep the audience vividly moving from one action scene to another—as in a classic 1950's TV show, like the *Honeymooners*—making the watcher's head turn, as he anxiously awaits the next development.

The main plot. To render the main plot of maximum interest, Shakespeare takes advantage of the double identical letters theme. He lets the husbands, of both of the ladies to whom Falstaff writes, find out about the assignations being proposed to their wives. One of the husbands is very easy going about such matters, trusting his wife, and much more interested in a useful marriage for his daughter, than in the fine points of his own marriage. The other husband is the jealous type. He is immediately concerned both to control his property, and to get revenge on the letter writer. The plot unfolds as Mr. Ford, the jealous man under an assumed name, arranges to meet Falstaff in the Garter Inn.

The details. Shakespearian comedy is if anything interested in details. (The greatness of Shakespeare lies in his double brilliance; he has heart, but he is also a geometrician, sketching out the lines of dramatic energy as though they were components of a geometric proof.) Mr. Ford—identifying himself as a Mr. Broom-- tells Falstaff that he, Ford, wants to find a way to make out with a certain Mrs. Ford—Ford's wife—and that he would like Falstaff to test the waters, by trying to seduce the lady. If Falstaff is successful, that will mean that it is worthwhile for Mr. Broom to have a try. Falstaff, accordingly, has a try, but has failed to pre think, for of course, in a grapevine culture like that of the Garter Inn, the ladies have for some time been sharing notes about Falstaff's letter and plans. They are ready and waiting for the old fool, when he makes his move on Mrs. Ford. In order to hide him for his own sake, as they put it, they hastily dump him into a foul smelling laundry basket—Falstaff later describes the disgusting linens that buried him—and dump him into the river.

Second effort. Falstaff is persistent, and sets up another assignation with Mrs. Ford, who of course shares the delectable details with Mrs. Page, the easy going one. Once again Mr. Ford arrives home at the crucial moment, and the ladies have to hop fast, to get Falstaff, who has arrived for his big date, out of the way or, better, disguised. All they can think of is the outfit and bonnet of the aunt of one of the serving women in the Garter Inn. This time Mr. Ford comes on 'Mr. Broom,' and beats the shit out of him with a broomstick. Falstaff, though ego battered, survives, and lives to trick again.

Tone-shift. We are at the brink, this time, of one of those tone shift moments when Shakespeare refuses us the ease of narrative wrap-up. Watch this. The two women decide it is time for their own revenge, and, having shared with their husbands their own knowledge of the tricks that had been going on, they make their own plan for humiliating their pursuer. The Festival of Herne the Hunter comes to hand, a perfect solution.

Festival. For this rustic festival, annually performed around the Windsor oak, in the English forest land, a figure of the legendary Herne the Hunter appears in rustic garb, to the delight of the locals, and especially of the children. On the present occasion the gullible Falstaff is gussied up comically, stationed under the oak while the children, dressed as fairies, dance around the tree, tickling, pinching, and lightly burning the to them comical fatman who gradually realizes how emphatically he is being made a fool.

Finale. At the end, after Falstaff has gotten his comeuppance, and the right marriages have been brought to completion among the sub-plot contestants—bells ringing especially for Mrs. Page's charming Ann and her lover, Fenton—the whole *dramatis personae* trek off to Mrs. Page's friendly house, for hot cider around a country fire. Falstaff himself is invited!

Themes

Love and Marriage. Both the Pages and the Fords offer us a glimpse into middle class married life in Elizabethan England. We see easily recognizable developments: jealousy when one's spouse-possession is courted by another, or, alternatively, self-confident easiness about the spouse's fidelity; desire to set up attractive marriages for the children.

Jealousy and Revenge. Mr. Ford will be the perfect example here. He is eager to attack Falstaff for his address to Mrs. Ford, and to this end traps Falstaff into a complex set of self-humiliating actions.

National traits. Two of the locals—the French doctor and the Welsh parson—speak English with a heavily interlarded dose of their own native language. Shakespeare is keenly sensitive to the comic bizarre of such language blends, as well as to the speech of laborers on the street, who speak an English barely intelligible to the English scholar of our own day.

Self-awareness. The understanding of self, which makes a literary character round, and full of implications, rather than flat, and simply part of the narrative, is totally lacking to Falstaff in the present play, whereas 'roundness' is the name of the game, in rendering the Falstaff of the *Henriad* funny, human, and universal.

Falstaff

Character. Falstaff is clearly the main character, though lovers of this character in the *Henriad*, with his deep and reckless humanity, will feel let down by the one dimensional, totally clueless fat figure that Shakespeare has created here. Shakespeare makes up, in part, by turning Falstaff into a figure of humiliation in the present play, and thus giving the reader the curious fascination of indulging that 'desire to humiliate'—or to be humiliated--which never fails to spice up a failing narrative.

Parallels. One thinks, yes, of Shirley Jackson's powerful short story, 'The Lottery,' which subjects to ritual stoning a housewife who has the bad luck to become a community scapegoat. The same kind of desperation, which downpours over the main figure in Jackson's story, strikes Ajax, in Sophocles' play of the name, when he learns that the most humiliating of fates, the not receiving the armor of Achilles, has befallen him. What could more accurately deflate romantic expectations, such as those of Falstaff, than to be pushed aside like Werther, at the apex of his passion, and to be invited to the wedding of the woman he adores?

Illustrative moments

Plotting. From the beginning of the play, Falstaff is all about improving his cash flow and at the same time satisfying his libido. (He has clearly had plenty of practice at this dual activity.) He hopes to make a catch and take away a personal loan!

Romancing Falstaff proposes assignations to the two married women, to whom he has written. He hopes they will keep their mouths shut, and not share their letters with one another, but he is wrong, big time, and pays a heavy price for his innocence.

Dumped. Falstaff's first big planning error is to arrive, for an assignation with Mrs. Ford, at the time when Mr. Ford is about to arrive. The ladies have to hide the fat man in a basket of filthy laundry, then later to dump him in the river.

Disguised. The ladies take their own comic-sadistic revenge on Falstaff, by dressing him up as a serving woman's auntie, and turning him over to the jealous Mr. Ford to beat.

Ridiculed. At the end, thanks to the ladies' revenge plot, Falstaff dresses as Herne the Hunter in a rural festival, at which the children, dancing as fairies, pinch him, singe him, and generally make him, Mr. Fatman himself, the joke of the festival.

Discussion questions

What do you think of the distinction between a flat and a rounded literary character? Do you accept the distinction between the Falstaff of the *Henriad*, and the Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*? What is the secret of literary roundedness here?

Why do you think the present play is widely considered to be one of Shakespeare's weakest plays? Is it a question of a simplistic plot? Or are we wrong to make a quick judgment of this play?

Do you get a sense, from this play, of the nature and quality of village life in Elizabethan England? What is the place of the Inn, in the society we catch many glimpses of here?