

THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

by William Shakespeare

"The Merry Wives of Windsor" may not be one of Shakespeare's great plays, but it's a load of fun: fun to see; fun to be in; fun to read - once you've seen the play. Reading slows things down so you can catch what you missed in performance; pick up lines that might have been lost while the audience was laughing.

Queen Elizabeth liked to have fun and she especially enjoyed having Shakespeare's company perform at court. According to an old tradition in English theatre, "Merry Wives of Windsor" was written just for her. It is said that the Queen so enjoyed the antics of the rascally, fat knight, Falstaff, in the "Henry IV" plays, that she wanted to see him in love. Shakespeare, her favorite playwright, obliged with a script on short notice.

The author cobbled up several sequences from other plays, as was his custom, but he also included many details from his life in Stratford, including his memories of a Welsh schoolmaster who worked there when the poet was in his teens. The play fairly glows with the atmosphere of English country life and it includes references to several topical events.

While Falstaff is somewhat diminished - as Shakespeare originally conceived him, he would be far too intelligent to fall in love or be taken in by the plots against him - he becomes the center of much fun and the butt of the plot's running joke. The play's verbal music and high spirits have made it a popular comedy and a frequent subject for operatic treatment.

The action begins outside the home of Master George and Mistress Margaret Page, where complications are set in motion. Justice Robert Shallow and his cousin, Abraham Slender, are complaining to Sir Hugh Evans, a Welsh parson, that they have been wronged by Pistol, Bardolph, and Nym, companions to Sir John Falstaff.

Page brings Falstaff outside to settle matters and a kind of peace is cobbled up. Master John Ford's wife, Alice, joins the company, catching Falstaff's roving eye. All are invited inside to "drink down all unkindness." Shallow, Evans, and Slender remain outside to discuss the possibility of Slender wooing young Anne Page, George's daughter.

Slender is, at best, a ridiculous and reluctant suitor; in fact, he is a bit of a fool. And he has competition. Anne is also being pursued by a Frenchman, Dr. Caius. Evans asks Mistress Quickly, housekeeper to Dr. Caius, to intercede with Anne for Slender. She is already speaking to Anne for Dr. Caius and, when the doctor finds that Evans has asked her to intercede for Slender as well; he

challenges the Welshman to a duel. To further complicate matters, Mistress Quickly also agrees to speak up for a third wooer, young Master Fenton.

Meanwhile, Falstaff, residing at the Garter Inn, is obliged to discharge his followers in order to save money. The Host of the Inn agrees to hire Bardolph as a tapster, which is a perfect job for a man devoted to drink. Falstaff then asks Pistol and Nym to take identical love letters to Margaret Page and Alice Ford, hoping to ensnare their loves and, through them, their husbands' incomes. The two men refuse, so Falstaff discharges them and sends his page. Nym and Pistol decide to tell Page and Ford of Falstaff's plan.

Act II begins with Alice Ford reading Falstaff's letter. She is appalled at his proposal. Margaret Page enters with an identical letter and the two decide to punish the knight for his audacity. They send Mistress Quickly to Falstaff, asking him to keep a rendezvous with Mistress Ford the next day at 11 in the morning, when Ford will be out of the house.

Nym and Pistol then tell Ford and Page of the plot. Page laughs it off, but Ford is a jealous man. In order to find the truth of the situation, Ford goes to see Falstaff, disguised as Master Brooke. He offers the fat knight money to seduce Mistress Ford. When Falstaff tells him he already has a rendezvous with her, Ford can barely contain his fury and decides to catch the two of them together.

In Act III, a very reluctant Sir Hugh Evans arrives at the site for the duel, only to discover that he and Dr. Caius have been sent to different places. When the two finally meet, the Host of the Garter Inn reveals the joke and is able to make peace between them.

Slender continues to sigh for "sweet Anne Page" and gets her father's consent to marry. Her mother is still holding out for Dr. Caius. Both reject the suit of Master Fenton for lack of income and his former association with the wastrel Prince Hal and Poins - another backward glance at "Henry IV."

Falstaff visits Mistress Ford and has barely begun his wooing when Mistress Page bursts in to tell them that John Ford is coming home with a group of men ready to rough up the rascally knight. The two hide him in a large basket of dirty laundry and instruct servants to take the heavy load and dump it into the Thames River.

Ford enters and searches the house. Although he finds no one there, Ford is still not convinced. Delighted by their success, the merry wives decide to try another trick and send Mistress Quickly to Falstaff to make another appointment. Reluctantly, he agrees. When Ford comes to see him, Falstaff tells of his narrow escape and of his plan to visit Mistress Ford again. Ford vows that the lecherous knight will not escape him again.

In Act IV, Falstaff once again appears at Ford's house, only to be interrupted again by her husband, who paws through the laundry. The two women quickly dress Falstaff in women's clothes and, when Ford sees him, he is told she is Mother Prat, the fat witch of Brainford, a person he despises. Ford chases the disguised Falstaff out of the house, beating him as he goes.

Deciding that things have gone far enough, the two women tell their husbands of their treatment of Falstaff and Ford apologizes for doubting his wife. Page suggests that they try one more trick. Alice Page reminds them of the old legend of Herne the Hunter who haunts Windsor Forest. They will urge Falstaff to meet them at midnight underneath Herne's Oak and they will disguise all the children and adults as goblins to frighten and torment the old sinner.

As this plot is set in motion, two more are added. Master Page plans to have Slender elope with Anne during the confusion; Mistress Page plans the like for Dr. Caius. Fenton reveals to the Host of the Garter that Anne has told him of the plots and that she intends to elope with him.

At the opening of Act V, we see Falstaff, dressed as Herne the Hunter with a pair of antlers on his head. He meets the two merry wives at midnight and almost immediately, the three hear the sound of spirits in the woods. The two women run away and Falstaff cowers below the tree. The disguised fairies run in and start to pinch and poke the hapless knight.

Nym and Bardolph are disguised as Anne and are taken away, one by Slender; the other by Caius. Fenton takes the real Anne by the hand and they leave. As Bardolph leans close to Falstaff, the knight smells his breath, recognizes him, and realizes that he is being tricked. As the plot is uncovered, everyone has a good laugh at Falstaff's expense. Then both George and Alice Page discover that they have been tricked as well, as Anne and Fenton, now married, return.

Master Page, ever one to see reason, decides there is no use lamenting what has happened and invites everyone, including Fenton and Anne, Falstaff and his retinue, to his home to "laugh this sport o'er by a country fire."

Most critics seem to agree that the play was written hurriedly and concede the likelihood it was likely at Queen Elizabeth's request. It was probably given its first performance before the queen on April 23, 1597, at Westminster, one month before the second Lord Hunsdon, patron of the Chamberlain's Men, was to be received into the Order of the Garter.

While the story may have been adapted from an Italian novella - most likely Giovanni Fiorentino's "Il Pecarone" - it is filled with local places: Windsor Castle and Forest, the great oak, Datchet Mead, the road to Frogmore, even the castle ditch. The characters are of the court and countryside, making this the most English of Shakespeare's plays.

There are several references to individuals who would have been familiar to a royal audience, including a duke of Germany (Count Mompelgart) who had made something of a fool of himself. There is also reason to believe that the Host of the Garter was based on a real person.

"Merry Wives" is noted as the Shakespearean play with a higher proportion of prose than poetry. It was quite popular in its day, then disappeared for a while, but has been in steady performance since 1720. Among the composers who have used the text as a basis for opera are Otto Nicolai ("The Merry Wives of Windsor"); Giuseppe Verdi ("Falstaff"); and Ralph Vaughan Williams ("Sir John In Love").

With or without music, it is a very funny show.