

SOUTHWEST SHAKESPEARE

COMPANY

presents



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DRAMATIS



PERSONAE

FALSTAFF

The central figure of this comedy, he's looking for a rich mistress to woo so he can pay off his debts.

THE MERRY WIVES

MISTRESS ALICE FORD
MISTRESS MARGARET PAGE
They work together to teach Falstaff a lesson.

THE HUSBANDS

FRANK FORD GEORGE PAGE
Ford is overcome with jealousy at the thought of his wife being wooed by Falstaff; Page knows his wife will only give Falstaff harsh language at his advances.

THE FOLLOWERS

BARDOLPH, PISTOL, AND NYM
Falstaff finds the limit of their loyalty with his latest scheme.

THE LOVE INTEREST

ANN PAGE
She loves and intends to marry Fenton no matter what her parents think.

THE CITY OFFICIALS

ROBERT SHALLOW
A county justice who is tired of Falstaff's mischief.

SIR HUGH EVANS
A Welsh parson with the need to be a part of everyone's disputes.

THE SUITORS

ABRAHAM SLENDER
Shallow's kinsman

DOCTOR CAIUS
A French physician

FENTON
A young gentleman

THE SERVANTS

PETER SIMPLE
Slender's servant.

JOHN RUGBY
Caius's servant

MISTRESS QUICKLY
Another servant to Caius and will double as Host of the Garter Inn
(the character of HOST is not in this production.)

DID YOU KNOW?

The Merry Wives of Windsor is the first notable play in the English language that centers wholly on characters from the low and middle classes.

SHOW SUMMARY



1

Justice Shallow and Sir Hugh Evans has had enough of Falstaff's antics and discuss what to do to rid Windsor of him. Meanwhile, Falstaff, out of money, hatches a plan to seduce both Mistress Page and Mistress Ford so he can use their money to pay off his debts. However, when his followers Nym and Pistol refuse to help in his plot, he fires them. In an act of revenge, Nym and Pistol make their way to Ford and Page to inform them of the plot. We also discover Dr. Caius, Slender, and Fenton are all vying for Anne Page's hand in marriage setting off a rivalry between Dr. Caius and Evans, Slender's kinsman and they plan to duel.

2

Mistress Page and Ford discover that they've been sent identical wooing letters with only the names changed from Falstaff and hatch a plan to teach him a lesson. Pistol and Nym deliver the news to Page and Ford of Falstaff's plan; Page is not bothered, but Ford's jealousy consumes him. He decides to take on the alias of Brooks and hatches a plan to entrap Falstaff by offering him money to seduce Mistress Ford to break down her reputation so he, too, could pursue his own romantic endeavors; Falstaff reveals his instruction to go to the Ford home at 10 o'clock. Meanwhile, Caius and Evans have been told different locations to meet for their duel; Caius assumes Evans is a coward.

3

Evans, too, is convinced that Caius isn't man enough to duel. When Caius and others arrive, it is discovered that the two had been sent to different places to duel so that Windsor wouldn't lose its parson or doctor. Meanwhile, Falstaff arrives at the Ford home and the Mistresses set forth their prank. Ford arrives home to discover there is no suitor and asks for forgiveness. The Mistresses aren't done with Falstaff and decide to pull another prank on him and send word for Falstaff to return at 8 o'clock. Fenton declares his true love to Anne. Falstaff learns of his new appointment to woo Mistress Ford and informs Ford (disguised as Brook) which sets off his jealousy again.

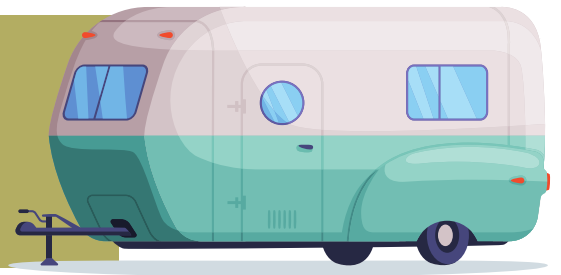
4

Falstaff arrives again at the Ford house only to fall victim to the Mistresses' second prank. They reveal the letters and pranks to their husbands. Ford, again, asks for forgiveness and promises never to be suspicious again. The four of them conspire together to pull one final prank on Falstaff in a public setting: the oak tree known as the haunting site of Herne the Hunter. The plan requires the help of Anne and others to disguise themselves as fairies. Falstaff receives word of a third rendezvous at midnight with BOTH Mistresses and his spirits are lifted. Fenton and Anne plan to elope.

5

Falstaff informs Ford (disguised as Brook) to accompany him to his rendezvous. Falstaff arrives as instructed dressed as Herne the Hunter at midnight. The townsfolk unfold their fairy plot. Within this plot is a secondary plot: Page has informed Slender (his suitor of choice) and Mistress Page has informed Dr. Caius (her suitor of choice) the manner of dress in which Anne would be disguised with instruction to steal her away and secretly get married. Anne outsmarts both of her parents. All is revealed to Falstaff who takes the news in good humor.

THE REAL WORLD: WINDSOR



A unique feature of this comedy is that it is set entirely in England. Being set in the well known city of Windsor, Shakespeare was able to put the actions of these relatable characters who speak almost entirely in prose (common-speak) in places that actually existed, making this comedy a favorite among Elizabethan audiences. Below is a visual guide of landmarks used in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

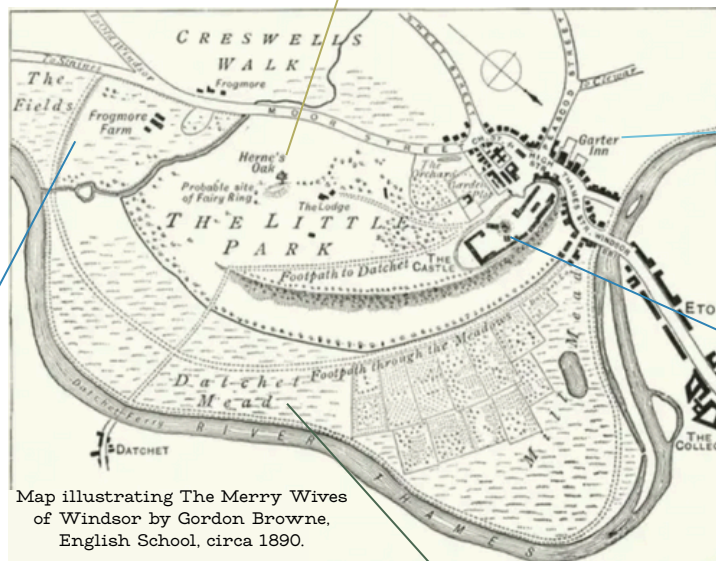
FROGMORE AND THE FIELDS

The duel locations of Caius and Evans. The estate was acquired by Henry VIII in the 16th century, and the house itself was built between 1680 and 1684. It used to house members of the Royal Family, but is now used for private and official events hosted by the Royal Family such as Prince Harry and Megan Markle's wedding in 2018.



THE LITTLE PARK

The area of the Great Park where the final scene takes place, with references to the castle ditch, a pit, and Herne's Oak.



Map illustrating *The Merry Wives of Windsor* by Gordon Browne, English School, circa 1890.

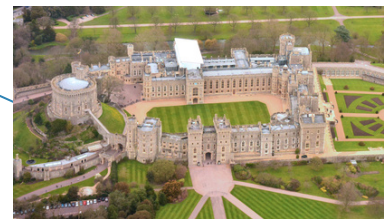
DATCHET MEADS

A meadow near Datchet, a village adjacent to Windsor, where Falstaff is thrown into the river.



THE GARTER INN

A real inn that existed in High Street opposite the castle during the 16th and 17th centuries. The name comes from The Knights of the Garter and many pubs in England still use the symbol of the Garter on their signs.



WINDSOR CASTLE

Windsor Castle is the oldest and largest occupied castle in the world. It was originally built in the 11th century by William the Conqueror after the Norman invasion of England. The monarch has used it since the reign of Henry I (1100-1135).

LOCATION LOCATION LOCATION

For centuries, directors has used the idea of "feeling local" as a way to invite audiences into comic versions of environments they recognize as their own. In this adaptation, the action is set in a trailer park in the American Southwest.

FOLKLORE, FAMOUS FIGURES



...AND FALSTAFF

HERNE THE HUNTER



Herne the Hunter is a prominent figure in English folklore. This mysterious entity is depicted as a ghost with antlers growing from his head, riding a horse, and accompanied by a pack of ghostly hounds. He's known to torment cattle, cause trees to wither, and appear at night, especially during storms.

FAIRY QUEEN



The Fairy Queen is the female ruler of the fairies.

Depending on the work, she may be named or unnamed; Titania and Mab are two frequently used names. In English folklore, she is seen as a symbol of Queen Elizabeth I.

OLD WITCH OF BRENTFORD



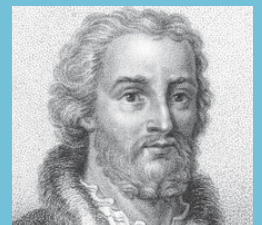
This character is most likely based on Gillian of Brentford, a figure in folklore and literature.

She appears in earlier works predating Merry Wives, including a poem from 1563 and a lost play from 1599, "Friar Fox and Gillian of Brentford" and is portrayed as wise and cunning.

JOHN FALSTAFF'S ORIGIN STORY

Though the character of Falstaff is a beloved fictional character who appears in 3 of Shakespeare's works, his origin can be traced back to two knights from English history:

The character was initially named SIR JOHN OLDCASTLE. Oldcastle was a knight from Herefordshire who was executed for heresy and rebellion. After he was prosecuted for heresy against the Church and escaped from the Tower of London, he allegedly plotted against his old friend Henry V.



Shakespeare changed the character's name to "Falstaff" following complaints from Oldcastle's descendants. The name "Falstaff" likely derives from SIR JOHN FASTOLF, who fought in the Hundred Years' War. He had a controversial reputation, having been temporarily stripped of his knighthood after the Battle of Patay, where the English suffered a defeat against Joan of Arc.





FOOD FOR THOUGHT

References to food and drink are used throughout *Merry Wives* and serve a multitude of purposes within the narrative. The inclusion of details about commonplace foods like cheese and butter adds realism to the play and connects it to the world Shakespeare's audience knew, and they are woven into the play's fabric to create comedy, define characters, subtly comment on society and culture, and connect with the audience through shared experiences of food and its many meanings. Below are some notable examples of how food and drink are used throughout the play.

FOOD AS INSULTS

“You Banbury Cheese!”

In Act I scene i, Falstaff hurls this insult at Slender.



Slender is described as thin and lacking in substance; a wonderful example of Shakespeare's purposeful selection of character names that reflect the look or nature of the character. Banbury cheese was known as being a pale, thin cheese with a very large rind.

This insult suggests that Slender has a slight frame and is shallow, lacking in depth, or even useless, like the cheese with its large rind.

“...Mechanical Salt-Butter Rogue!”



Falstaff hurls this insult at Ford in Act II scene ii.

Salted butter in Elizabethan England was often imported from places like Flanders; the salt being used as a preservative during transportation. Salt butter was considered lower in quality and less fresh than local, unsalted butter.

This suggests Falstaff viewed Ford as someone who was both low-class (“mechanical”), unlikable (“salt-butter”), and untrustworthy (“rogue”).

FOOD AS ROMANCE

“Let the sky rain potatoes; let it hail kissing-comfits, and snow eryngoes”

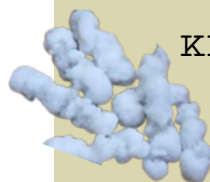
POTATOES were considered exotic imports in Elizabethan England. Because of their rarity and high cost, some thought potatoes had aphrodisiac qualities.



SACK



Sack is a Spanish dry sherry that Falstaff frequently mentions as an anchoring characteristic to represent his gluttony. He mentions a love for sack in celebration, seduction, and as a means to comfort and warm himself.



KISSING COMFITS were candies made with anise and caraway seeds and were thought to sweeten breath, making them useful for kissing.

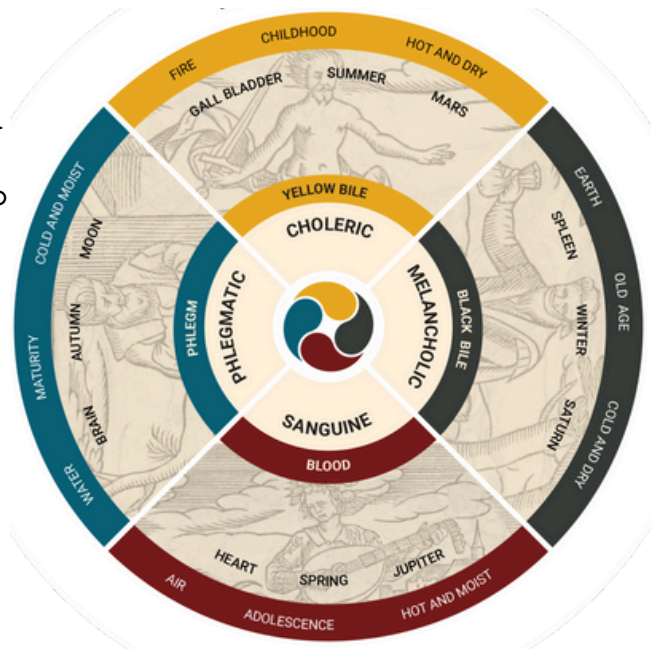
ERYNGOES were candied sea-holly roots, a believed to have aphrodisiac qualities among other medicinal uses in Elizabethan England.





HUMOROUS HUMOURS

The four humours theory, also known as humorism, was an ancient medical belief system that heavily influenced medical practice and understanding of health and disease for over two millennia. This theory originated in ancient Greece and was further developed and popularized by figures like Hippocrates and Galen. It proposed that the human body was composed of four primary fluids, or humours, and that the balance of these humours was essential for good health and well-being. Shakespeare used the four humours as a means to define the character traits of many of his characters throughout his works.



PHLEGM

An excess of phlegm (originating in the brain) was linked to a phlegmatic temperament, characterized by being calm, collected, and sometimes sluggish or apathetic.

BLACK BILE (MELANCHOLY)

An excess of black bile (originating in the spleen) was linked to a melancholic temperament, characterized by introspection, contemplation, and sometimes sadness or depression.



BLOOD

An abundance of blood (originating in the heart) was linked to a sanguine temperament, characterized by cheerfulness, optimism, and sociability.

YELLOW BILE (CHOLER)

An excess of yellow bile (originating in the liver) was believed to cause a choleric temperament, characterized by irritability, aggressiveness, and ambition.

"I beseech you, be not so phlegmatic..."

Act I scene iv

This quote highlights Mistress Quickly's poor grasp of language, as she misuses the word "phlegmatic" when addressing Doctor Caius who is characterized as a short-tempered and easily offended Frenchman, the opposite of a phlegmatic temperament.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

William Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* may be over 400 years old, but the themes of jealousy, revenge, forgiveness, and gossip are still relevant today. Use these questions to spark your exploration of this text and production and why Shakespeare's works remain relevant in a modern world.

1. The play revolves around rumors (Falstaff's letters, Ford's suspicions). How does gossip function as a tool of control in the play? How does this translate to small-town or trailer park dynamics today?
2. Mistress Ford and Mistress Page work as a team. How does their friendship empower them in a world where men (Ford, Falstaff, Page) underestimate them?
3. The wives' pranks escalate (laundry basket, disguise, fairy torment). Is their revenge proportionate to Falstaff's crimes, or does it border on cruelty? Where's the line between funny and mean-spirited?
4. Anne Page secretly loves Fenton despite her parents' wishes. How does her subplot parallel the main plot?
5. Why does Falstaff—usually a clever schemer—keep falling for the wives' tricks? Is it greed, arrogance, or something else?
6. After his jealous rage, Ford repents. Is his apology enough, or does the play let him off too easily? Why or why not?
7. How does the American Southwest trailer park context reframe the original play's class dynamics?
8. Could the wives' revenge work today (e.g., posting Falstaff's cringe-worthy DMs online)? Would it still feel like "justice" or go too far?
9. The rivalry between Caius (French) and Evans (Welsh) plays on national stereotypes - how does Shakespeare use their exaggerated accents and mannerisms for comedy while still making them sympathetic characters?
10. Slender is completely outmatched in wit by Anne yet persists in pursuing her. How does this dynamic compare to Falstaff pursuing the wives despite constant humiliation? What does the play suggest about persistent but incompetent suitors?