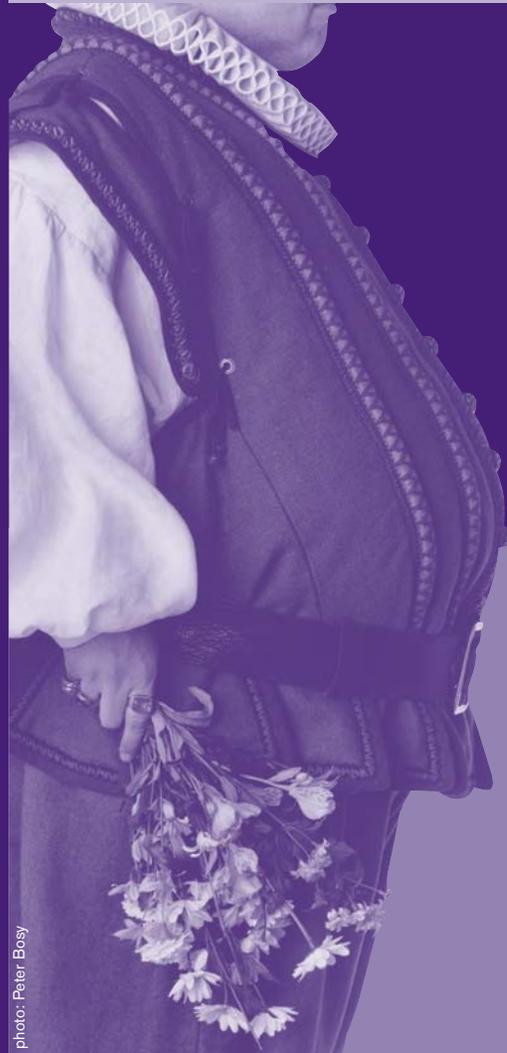


The merry wives of windsor

chicago
shakespeare theater
on navy pier

photo: Peter Besy



Teacher handbook



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Chicago Shakespeare Theater is Chicago's professional theater dedicated to the works of William Shakespeare. Founded as Shakespeare Repertory in 1986, the company moved to its seven-story home on Navy Pier in 1999. In its Elizabethan-style courtyard theater, 500 seats on three levels wrap around a deep thrust stage—with only nine rows separating the most distant seat from the stage. Chicago Shakespeare also features a flexible 180-seat black box studio theater, a teacher resource center, and a Shakespeare specialty bookstall.

In its first 17 seasons, the Theater has produced nearly the entire Shakespeare canon: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like It*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Cymbeline*, *Hamlet*, *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *King John*, *King Lear*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, *Macbeth*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *Pericles*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Tempest*, *Timon of Athens*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *The Winter's Tale*.

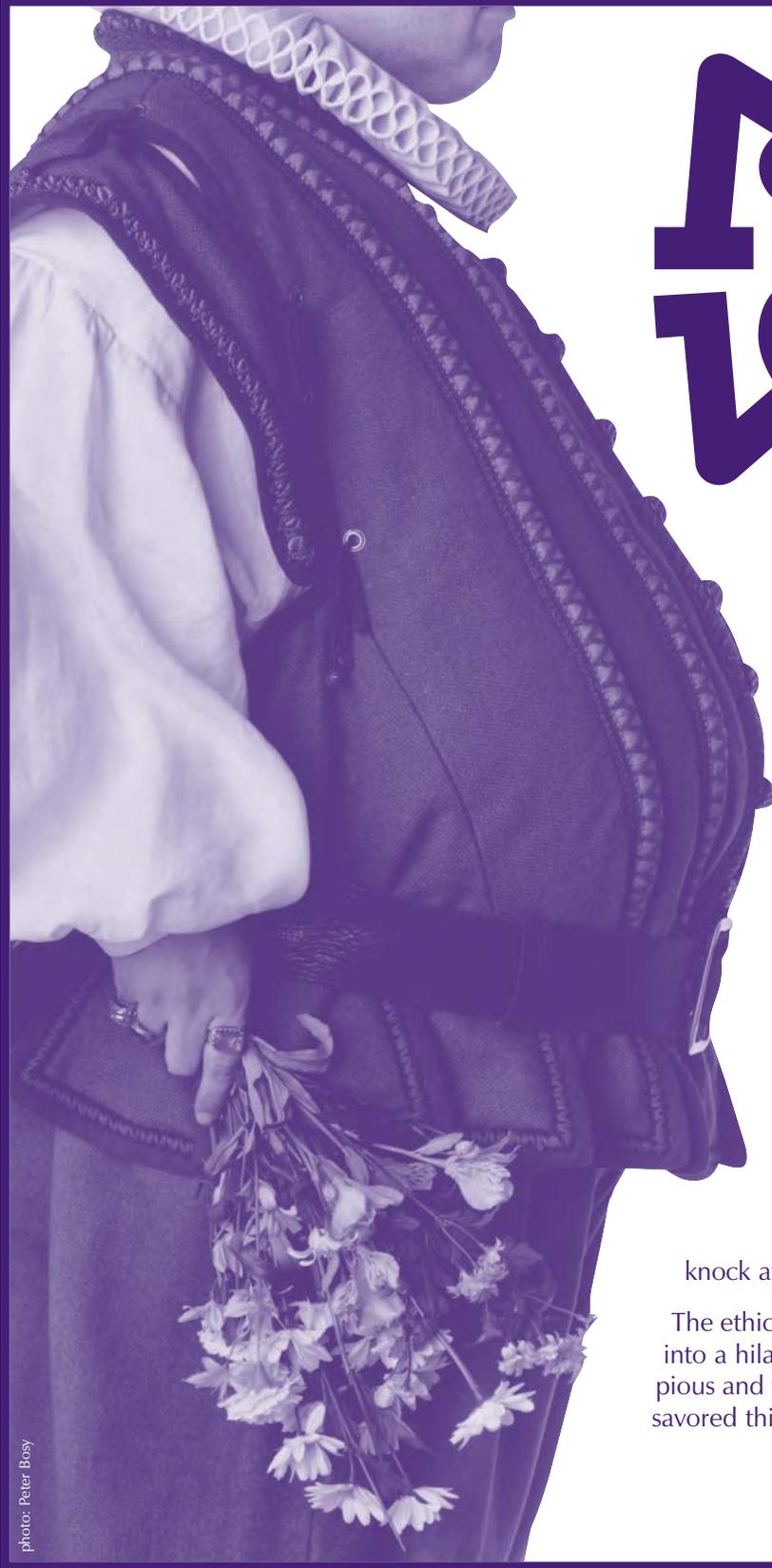
Each year Chicago Shakespeare receives widespread critical acclaim for artistic excellence and its accessible, creative approach to Shakespeare's work. Chicago's Jeff Awards year after year have honored the Theater, including repeated awards for Best Production and Best Director, the two highest honors in Chicago theater.

Since Chicago Shakespeare's founding, its programming for young audiences has been an essential element in the realization of its mission. Team Shakespeare supports education in our schools, where Shakespeare is part of every required curriculum. As a theater within a multicultural city, we are committed to bringing Shakespeare to a young and ethnically diverse audience of 50,000 students each year. Team Shakespeare's programming includes free teacher workshops, student matinees of mainstage shows, post-performance discussions, comprehensive teacher handbooks, and an abridged, original production each year of one of the "curriculum plays." Team Shakespeare offers a region-wide forum for new vision and enthusiasm for teaching Shakespeare in our schools.

The 2004–2005 Season offers a student matinee series for Chicago Shakespeare Theater's mainstage productions of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. This winter, Chicago Shakespeare presents especially for students a 75-minute abridged adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors*, at its theater on Navy Pier and on tour to schools and theaters across the region. We hope that you and your students will enjoy our work—and Shakespeare's creative genius brought to life on stage.



Marilyn J. Halperin, Director of Education
Cathy Switalski, Team Shakespeare Manager
Kelly A. Lewis, Publications Manager



The Merry Wives of Windsor

written by William Shakespeare
directed by Barbara Gaines

There is more life and reality in the first act of The Merry Wives of Windsor alone than in all German literature.
—letter from Engels to Marx, 10 December 1873

When Falstaff comes knocking in Windsor with his suitcase full of schemes and scandal, two wives will give him a run for his money through their world, where family life is treasured, traditions honored, and virtue is the winner who takes all. In the generally peaceful and irrefutably normal Windsor countryside, husbands hold forth in tones of male bravado, children frolic in carefree abandon, and wives—well, they take care of the rest.

Like our own, Windsor is a world where values are put to the test, and where jealousy and deception show themselves to be real ingredients of life. And much like that uninvited visitor at the front door, those less-than-honorable qualities of humankind continually knock at the ethos of Windsor's middle-class culture.

The ethical battle that ensues is transmuted by Shakespeare's pen into a hilarious romp, the converging of the witty and witless, the pious and the irreverent, the innocent and the jaded. Shakespeare savored this menagerie—and we hope, you will, too. 🌸

photo: Peter Bosy

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Art That Lives



Drama, like no other art form, is a living art. It is written to be performed live before a group of people who form an audience and together experience a play. Ancient cave paintings depict men disguised as animals. Since ancient times, impersonation and imitation have served man

in his effort to express himself and to communicate. The drama of western civilization has its roots in the ancient Greeks' religious rituals and observances. Until the Renaissance, when Shakespeare wrote, drama was closely tied to religious beliefs and practice.

Drama not only depicts human communication, it is human communication. In theater, unlike television or film, there is a two-way communication that occurs between the actors and their audience. The audience hears and sees the actors, and the actors hear and see the audience. We are used to thinking about the actors' roles in a play, but may find it strange to imagine ourselves, the audience, playing an important role in this living art. Because the art lives, each production is guaranteed to be different, depending in part upon an audience's response. Live drama is the sharing of human experience, intensely and immediately, in the theater, which momentarily becomes our universe.

A live theater production depends upon its audience. The best performances depend upon the best actors—and the best audiences. When the actors sense a responsive, interested audience, their work is at its best—full of animation and energy. When the actors sense disinterest, they, too, are distracted, and the play they create is less interesting.

One actor described the experience of live performance as a story told by the actors and audience together. In this sense, you are also a storyteller in the experience of live theater. We hope you'll enjoy your role—and help us give you a dramatic experience that you'll always remember.

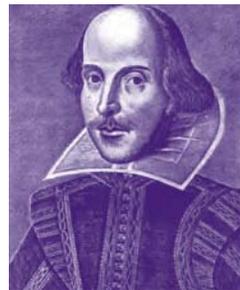
[Theatrical performance] is essentially a sociable, communal affair. This is important. To resist this is, I think, to ruin one of the very important parts of the theatrical experience. Let the play and let the fact that temporarily you are not your private self, but a member of a closely-fused group, make it easy for the performance to 'take you out of yourself.' This, I suggest, is the object of going to a play...to be taken out of yourself, out of your ordinary life, away from the ordinary world of everyday.

—Tyrone Guthrie, 1962

How can you help us give you the best performance we can?

- Please don't talk during the performance. Talking distracts the actors as well as the people sitting nearby.
- Respond naturally to our play. Emotions are part of drama. We hope that you'll laugh, cry and even gasp—but as a natural response to the story, and not in order to distract attention from the stage.
- Please keep all “noisemakers”—food, gum, personal stereos, etc.—back at school or on the bus! In a quiet theater, wrappers and munching are heard by all, the actors included.
- No photographs of any kind, please! Flashbulbs can make the actors lose their focus and can be dangerous. Digital cameras, along with all other kinds of recording devices, are prohibited.

Bard's Bio



The exact date of William Shakespeare's birth is not known, but his baptism, traditionally three days after a child's birth, was recorded on April 26, 1564. His father John Shakespeare was a tanner, glover, grain dealer and town official of the thriving market town of Stratford-upon-

Avon. His mother Mary Arden was the daughter of a prosperous, educated farmer. Though the records are lost, Shakespeare undoubtedly attended Stratford's grammar school, where he would have acquired some knowledge of Latin and Greek and the classical writers. There is no record that Shakespeare acquired a university education of any kind.

Some skeptical scholars have raised doubts about whether Shakespeare, due to his relatively average level of education and humble origins, could have possibly written what has long been considered the best verse drama composed in the English language. But not until 1769, 150 years after Shakespeare's death, did these theories arise—and, to all appearances, Shakespeare's contemporaries and immediate successors never seemed to question whether William Shakespeare wrote the celebrated works attributed to him.

At 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior. They had one daughter Susanna, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith. Hamnet, Shakespeare's only son, died at age 11. From 1585, the year in which the twins were baptized, until 1592, when he is first referred to as a dramatist in London, we know nothing of Shakespeare's life. Consequently, these seven years are filled with legend and conjecture. We may never know what brought Shakespeare to London or how he entered its world of theater. The first reference to Shakespeare as an actor and playwright appears in 1592 and was made by Robert Greene, a rival playwright and pamphleteer, who attacked Shakespeare as an "upstart crow" for presuming to write plays (when he was only a mere actor) and copying the works of established dramatists.

Subsequent references to Shakespeare indicate that as early as 1594 he was not only an actor and playwright, but also a partner in a new theatrical company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which soon became one of London's two principal companies. The company's name changed to the King's Men in 1603 with the accession of James I, and it endured until the Puritans closed the theaters in 1642. From 1599 the company acted primarily at the Globe playhouse, in which Shakespeare held a one-tenth interest.

During his career of approximately 20 years, Shakespeare wrote or collaborated in what most scholars now agree upon as 38 plays. His earliest plays, including *Love's Labor's Lost*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Richard III*, *King John* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, were written between 1589 and 1594. Between 1594 and 1599, Shakespeare wrote both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar* as well as other plays, including *Richard II*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *As You Like It*. His great tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, were composed between 1599 and 1607, and were preceded by his last play traditionally categorized as comedy, *Measure for Measure*. The earlier histories, comedies and tragedies made way for Shakespeare's final dramatic form—the so-called "romances" which were written between 1606 and 1611 and include *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. These were the plays of a playwright no longer bound by the constraints of his earlier historical and tragic forms. Although single volumes of about half his plays were published in Shakespeare's lifetime, there is no evidence that suggests he oversaw their publication. It was not until 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, that 36 of his plays were published in the First Folio. Drama was only just beginning to be understood as "literature" as we understand it today, and so it is not at

all surprising that so little attention was given to Shakespeare's plays in published form until seven years after his death. However, we do know that Shakespeare did oversee the publication of three narrative poems and a collection of 154 sonnets.

Shakespeare seldom devised his own plots for his plays, but creatively borrowed here and there from histories, prose romances, poems, and plays of his own and others. Shakespeare was an ingenious dramatic artist with a vast imagination. He created masterpieces out of conventional and unpromising material. In Shakespeare's time, ancient stories were told and re-told. The important thing was not the originality of the plot but how the story was told. In the telling of a story, there are few writers who rival Shakespeare in theatricality, poetry, and depth of character.

By 1592, Shakespeare had emerged as a rising playwright in London, where he continued to enjoy fame and financial success as an actor, playwright and part-owner of London's leading theater company. After living life in the theater for nearly 20 years, in 1611 he retired to live as a country gentleman in Stratford, his birthplace, until his death on April 23, 1616.

Shakespeare was the man, who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them not laboriously, but luckily; when he describes any thing, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature; he looked inwards, and found her there.

—John Dryden, 1688

The First Folio

Now faire Hippolita, our nuptial hood
Drawes on apace: four happy daies
Another Moone: but oh, me thinks, I
This old Moone wanes; She lingers n
Like to a Step-dame, or a Dowager,
Long withering out a yong mans reuennew.
Hy. Four daies wil quickly steep theefeloes
Four nights wil quickly dreame away the tim
And then the Moone, like to a silver bow,
Now bent in heauen, shal behold the night
Of our solemnities.

The, Go Phisfray,
Stirre vp the Athenian youth to meriments,
Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth,
Turne melancholy forth to Funerals:
The pale companion is not for our pompe,
Hippolita, I wou'd thee with my sword,
And wanne thy loue, doing thee iniuries:
But I will wed thee in another key,
With pompe, with triumph, and with reueliti

Shakespeare wrote his plays for the stage, not for the printed page. In Shakespeare's day, plays were not considered "literature" at all. When a play was printed, it was printed inexpensively in a small book, called a "quarto," the sixteenth-century equivalent of our paperback editions. It was not until 1616, the year of Shakespeare's death, when a contemporary of his, dramatist Ben Jonson, published his own plays in an atlas-size book called a "folio," that plays were viewed as literature worthy of publication. Jonson was chided as bold and arrogant for his venture.

Two of Shakespeare's close colleagues decided to ignore tradition and gather his plays for publication. In 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, the first Folio, a book containing 36 of his 37 plays, was published. The first Folio was compiled from stage prompt books, from the playwright's handwritten manuscripts, from various versions of some of the plays already published for use in the theater—and from the memory of his actors. Its large format (much like a modern atlas) was traditionally reserved for the "authority" of religious and classical works.

Shakespeare's first Folio took five "compositors" two-and-one-half years to print. The compositors manually set the type by first memorizing the text line by line. There was no copy editor, and the compositors frequently altered punctuation and spelling. Errors caught in printing would be corrected but, due to the prohibitively high cost of paper, earlier copies remained intact. Of the 1,200 copies of the first Folio that were printed, approximately 230 survive today, each slightly different. Chicago's Newberry Library contains the Folio in its rich collections (and it can be reviewed in small groups by appointment).

Chicago Shakespeare Theater's use of the first Folio as its script and "blueprint" is unusual. The first Folio serves as the most authentic and effective manual available to Shakespearean actors nearly 400 years after its publication. Its punctuation gives clues to our actors about what words to emphasize and about what ideas are important. In Shakespeare's own theater company, with only a few days at most to rehearse each new play, these built-in clues were essential. Today, they still help actors make the language much easier to understand—even though you're hearing language that's 400 years younger than ours.

A key to understanding Shakespeare's language is to appreciate the attitude toward speech accepted by him and his contemporaries. Speech was traditionally and piously regarded as God's final and consummate gift to man. Speech was thus to Elizabethans a source of enormous power for good or ill . . . Hence the struggle to excel in eloquent utterance.

—David Bevington
"General Introduction"
The Complete Works of Shakespeare
Harper Collins, 1980

Shakespeare's England



Elizabeth I ruled England for 45 years from 1558 to 1603 in a time of relative prosperity and peace. "Few monarchs," says Shakespearean scholar David Bevington, "have ever influenced an age so pervasively and left their stamp on it so permanently."

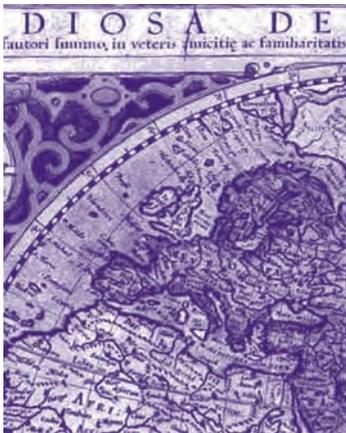
The daughter of Henry VIII and his second wife Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth was regarded by many Catholics as an illegitimate child and an illegitimate monarch. The politics of religion constantly threatened Elizabeth's reign even though it was one of the most secure that England had known for hundreds of years. Religious conflict during the Tudors' reign pervaded every aspect of English life and, most particularly, its politics. Elizabeth had no heir, and so throughout her reign the matter of succession was a real and disturbing threat to the nation's peace (and a recurrent subject of Shakespeare's plays). While Shakespeare was writing *Julius Caesar*, one of the Queen's favorites, the Earl of Essex, rebelled against her government. Shakespeare's portrayal of the enforced abdication of a king in *Richard II* was censored in performance during Elizabeth's reign.

Elizabethan England was a smaller, more isolated country than it had been previously or would be later. It had withdrawn from its extensive empire on the Continent, and its explorations of the New World had barely begun. There was a period of internal economic development as Elizabeth ignored the counsel of her advisors and kept out of war until the attempted invasion by Spain and the Great Armada in 1588. England's economy was still, however, based in agriculture, and its farmers were poor and embittered by strife with rich landowners who "enclosed" what was once the farmers' cropland for pastures. Uprisings and food riots were commonplace in the rural England surrounding Stratford-upon-Avon, where Shakespeare grew up. London, then the largest city of Europe, was a city of contrasts: the richest and the poorest of England lived here, side by side. While many bettered themselves in a developing, urban economy, unemployment was a serious problem. It was a time of change and social mobility. A rising middle class for the first time in English history aspired to the wealth and status of the aristocracy.

Under Elizabeth, England returned to Protestantism. But in her masterful style of accommodation and compromise, she incorporated an essentially traditional and Catholic doctrine into an episcopal form of church government that was ruled by the Crown and England's clergy rather than by the Pope. Extremists on the religious right and left hated her rule and wanted to see Elizabeth overthrown. She was declared a heretic by Rome in 1569, and her life was endangered. "Her combination of imperious will and femininity and her brilliant handling of her many contending male admirers have become legendary," says David Bevington, and resulted in a monarchy that remained secure in the face of religious and political threats from many sides. In choosing not to marry, Elizabeth avoided allying herself and her throne with a foreign country or an English faction which might threaten her broad base of power and influence.

Throughout Renaissance Europe, governments were centralized, assuming the power that once belonged to city-states and feudal lords. The rule of monarchies, like Elizabeth's, was absolute. Elizabeth and her subjects viewed the monarch as God's deputy, and the divine right of kings was a cherished doctrine (and became the subject of Shakespeare's history plays). It was this doctrine that condemned rebellion as an act of disobedience against God. However, this doctrine didn't free Elizabeth from occasional rebellion at home—even from her closest advisors—or from challenges from abroad.

Childless, Elizabeth I died in 1603. The crown passed to her cousin James VI, King of Scotland, who became England's King James I. James, who ruled from 1603 to 1625 (Shakespeare died in 1616), clearly lacked Elizabeth's political acumen and skill, and his reign was troubled with political and religious controversy. He antagonized the religious left, and his court became more aligned with the Catholic right. It would be James' son, Charles I, who would be beheaded in the English civil wars of the 1640s.



The Renaissance



Theater

A man who would later become an associate of Shakespeare's, James Burbage, built the first commercial theater in England in 1576, not much more than a decade before historians think

Shakespeare first arrived on the London theater scene. Burbage skirted rigid restrictions governing entertainment in London by placing his theater just outside the city walls, in a community with the unglamorous name of "Shoreditch." The name reflected the position of his theater, on the shore of the Thames River and just beyond the ditch created by the walls of London.

Burbage was not the only one to dodge the severe rules of the Common Council by setting up shop in Shoreditch. His neighbors were other businesses of marginal repute, including brothels and bear-bating arenas. Actors and playwrights in Shakespeare's day were given officially the status of "vagabond." They were considered little better than common criminals unless they could secure the patronage of a nobleman, or better still, the monarch.

Shakespeare and his fellow actors managed to secure both. They became popular entertainment at Queen Elizabeth's court as the Lord Chamberlain's Men and continued to enjoy court patronage after King James came to the throne in 1603, when they became the King's Men. Their success at Court gave Shakespeare and his fellow shareholders in the Lord Chamberlain's company the funds to build the Globe playhouse in 1599. The Globe joined a handful of other theaters located just out of the city's jurisdiction as the first public theaters in England.

Shakespeare may have developed his love for the theater by watching traveling acting troupes temporarily transform a courtyard into a theater. When he was a boy growing up in rural Stratford-upon-Avon, acting troupes traveled around the countryside in flatbed, horse-drawn carts, which did triple duty as transportation, storage for props and costumes, and stage. Their horses pulled the cart into an inn yard or the courtyard of a country estate or college. People gathered in the courtyard to watch, some leaning over the rails from the balconies above to view the action on the impromptu stage below.

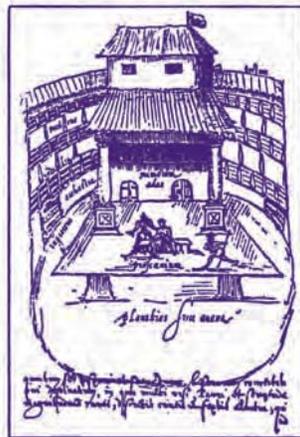
Many of these traveling performances staged religious stories, enacting important scenes from the Bible. During the Renaissance, the stories enacted in these performances became more secular. Public officials scorned the theater as immoral and frivolous. The theaters just outside London's walls came to be feared as places where physical, moral and social corruption were spread. They were frequently shut down by the authorities during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when the city was menaced by the plague, or by political and social rioting. Even when the theaters were open, the Master of the Revels had to read and approve every word in a new play. The show could not go on until he gave his permission.

All kinds of people came to plays at the Globe, and they came in great numbers. A full house in the Globe numbered about 3,000 people. Though the same dimensions as the original structure, the reconstruction of the Globe holds 1,500 at maximum capacity—an indication of just how close those 3,000 people must have been to one another! They arrived well before the play began to meet their friends, drink ale and snack on the refreshments that were sold at the plays. From start to finish, a day at the theater could take half the day. It was more like tailgating at a football game, or going with friends to a rock concert than our experience of attending theater today.

Affluent patrons paid two to three pence or more for gallery seats (like the two levels of balcony seating at Chicago Shakespeare Theater) while the “common folk”—shopkeepers and artisans—stood for a penny, about a day's wages for a skilled worker. They were a demanding, diverse group and Shakespeare depicted characters and situations to appeal to every level of this cross-section of Renaissance society. The vitality and financial success of the Elizabethan theater is without equal in English history.

There was no electricity for lighting, so all plays were performed in daylight. Sets and props were bare and basic. A throne, table or bed had to be brought on stage during the action since Elizabethan plays were written to be performed without scene breaks or intermissions. When the stage directions for *Macbeth* indicate that “a banquet is prepared,” the stage keepers prepared the banquet in full view of the audience. From what scholars can best reconstruct about performance conventions,

Shakespeare's plays were performed in “modern” dress—that is, the clothes of Shakespeare's time—regardless of their historical setting. The actors wore the same clothes on the stage as their contemporaries wore on the street. Hand-me-downs from the English aristocracy provided the elegant costumes for the play's royalty.



An Elizabethan traveler's sketch of the Swan.

Most new plays were short runs and seldom revived. The acting companies were always in rehearsal for new shows but, due to the number of productions, most plays were rehearsed for just a day or two. It was not until 1660 that women would be permitted to act on the English stage. Female roles were performed by boys or young men. Elaborate Elizabethan and Jacobean dresses disguised a man's shape and the young actors were readily accepted as “women” by the audience.

In 1642, the Puritans succeeded in closing the theaters altogether. They did not reopen until Charles II came to the throne 18 years later. A number of theaters, including the Globe, were not open very long before the Great Fire of London destroyed them in 1666. During these years when the English theaters were closed, many of the traditions of playing Shakespeare were lost. The new theater of the Restoration approached Shakespeare's plays very differently, rewriting and adapting his original scripts to suit Restoration tastes. It is left to contemporary scholars to reconstruct the traditions of Elizabethan theater from clues left behind.

Chicago Shakespeare's Courtyard-style Theater



Photo: Shutterstock/Ballogg/Chicago

Theater

David Taylor of Theatre Projects Consultants has devoted a great deal of energy and imagination to the question of what kind of space is best suited to presenting Shakespeare's plays. Taylor, who worked as one of the primary consultants on the design of the new Chicago Shakespeare Theater, feels that this unique performance space reflects elements of both the

Globe playhouse and the courtyards-turned-theaters, in which the young Shakespeare might first have acquired his love of the stage.

The interior of the Globe playhouse, opened in 1599, was simple and similar to that of Chicago Shakespeare Theater—a raised platform for the stage surrounded by an open, circular area with three galleries, one above the other. Both theaters use a thrust stage with an open performance area upstage; basically, the entire performance space is in the shape of a capital “T.” The audience sits on three sides of the thrust stage, so the play is staged in the middle of the audience—much like the Elizabethan Swan Theatre’s design, for which a traveler’s careful sketch still remains. This immersion of the stage and the action performed on it into the audience creates a three-dimensional theater that demands three-dimensional directing and acting.

The people sitting in the side seats have the closest interaction with the performers, and the performers with them. The play unfolds between the audience members seated on the sides, and the actors draw upon the responses of the audience (laughter, gasps, nervous shifting in chairs when tension mounts) as they perform. “The backdrop and the scenery for Shakespeare is the human race,” Taylor notes, “so we’re putting Shakespeare into its proper context by making human faces the backdrop for those sitting in any seat in the theater.”

“This close, close relationship with the performers on stage is the very essence of the courtyard experience,” according to Taylor. “The courtyard experience was about leaning out of windows. It was about throwing open the windows in the courtyard when the stage was brought through on a cart and leaning out and interacting.” Audience members seated in the galleries at Chicago Shakespeare Theater are encouraged to use the “leaning rails” to watch the players below—much like those watching from courtyard balconies might have done centuries ago when a traveling troupe set up their temporary stage.

The actors and the audience share the experience of seeing and interacting with one another. Taylor thinks that actors benefit tremendously from the courtyard design: “They’re not looking at people sitting in straight rows, disconnected from everybody around them in big seats. There’s a sense of community in the space, a sense

of embracing the performer on stage.” Actors are always “fed” by the energy generated from their audience. The design of Chicago Shakespeare Theater offers a feast of feedback to the actors on its stage.



Chicago Shakespeare Theater

Photo: Shankar-Ballogh/Chicago

As an audience member, your facial expressions and body language serve both as the focal point of the actors’ energy and the backdrop for the other audience members seated across from you. “It’s important that we don’t lose the performer among the faces, but it’s essential to understand that every single face is a live piece of scenery reflecting and framing what’s going on,” Taylor reflects. “That’s the reason why the courtyard theater shape is such a wonderful historical springboard for modern theater design.”

Speaking of his experience directing on the open stage in Stratford, Ontario, Tyrone Guthrie once said: “Theatrical performance is a form of ritual; the audience is not asked to subscribe to an illusion but to participate in the ritual . . . The attraction for me of the ‘open stage’ as opposed to the proscenium is primarily this: that it stresses the ritual as opposed to the illusionary quality of performance.”

Other theaters have been modeled upon the Elizabethan experience of courtyard theater, perhaps most notably the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. The Swan served as an important model for Chicago Shakespeare Theater. An important element in both theaters are the brick walls that surround the audience. Brick is an aesthetic choice, but, due to its particular design, it also serves as an acoustical choice. The angle of the bricks in the side walls help diffuse sound, sending it in different directions throughout the theater. The sound, lighting and rigging systems are all state-of-the art. Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s design allows for a wide array of possibilities for structuring and using the performance space. Performers will enter from surprising places, set pieces will emerge seemingly from nowhere, and parts of the stage that seem permanent and solid may prove not to be so!

Leaning out of your courtyard “window,” you can enjoy not just what is happening on stage, but also the responses of the people sitting across from you. Shakespearean theater is about people. As Taylor concludes, “You’re the scenery. You’re the special effects. And the people you see performing this play are performing it in front of, and out of, you.”

Timelines

1300

- 1326 Founding of universities at Oxford and Cambridge
- 1348 Boccaccio's *Decameron*
- 1349 Bubonic Plague kills one-third of England's population
- 1387 Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*
- c.1440 Johannes Gutenberg invents printing press
- 1472 Dante's *Divine Comedy* first printed
- 1492 Christopher Columbus lands at Cuba
- 1497 Vasco da Gama sails around Cape of Good Hope

1500

- 1501-04 Michelangelo's "David" sculpture
- 1503 Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*
- 1512 Copernicus' *Commentariolus* published, theorizing that earth and other planets revolve around sun
- 1518 License to import 4,000 African slaves to Spanish American colonies granted to Lorens de Gominzot
- 1519 Ferdinand Magellan's trip around the world
- 1519 Conquest of Mexico by Cortez
- 1522 Luther's translation of the New Testament

1525

- 1531 Henry VIII recognized as Supreme Head of the Church of England
- 1533 Henry VIII secretly marries Anne Boleyn, and is excommunicated by Pope
- 1539 Hernando de Soto explores Florida
- 1540 G.L. de Cardenas "discovers" Grand Canyon
- 1541 Hernando de Soto "discovers" the Mississippi

1550

- 1558 Ascension of Queen Elizabeth I
- 1562 John Hawkins begins slave trade between Guinea and West Indies
- 1564 Birth of William Shakespeare and Galileo
- 1565 Pencils first manufactured in England
- 1570 Pope Pius V excommunicates Queen Elizabeth
- Mayor of London forbids theatrical performances in the City
- 1573 Francis Drake sees the Pacific Ocean

1575

- 1576 Burbage erects first public theater in (the "Theater" in Shoreditch)
- 1577 Drake's trip around the world
- 1580 *Essays* of Montaigne published
- 1582 Marriage license issue for William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway
- Daughter Susanna Shakespeare christened
- 1585 Christening of son Hamnet and twin Judith
- 1587 Mary Queen of Scots executed
- 1588 Destruction of the Spanish Armada

Shakespeare's Plays

c. 1592-1595

COMEDIES

- Love's Labor's Lost
- The Comedy of Errors
- The Two Gentlemen of Verona
- A Midsummer Night's Dream
- The Taming of the Shrew

HISTORIES

- 1, 2, 3 Henry VI
- Richard III
- King John

TRAGEDIES

- Titus Andronicus
- Romeo and Juliet

SONNETS

- probably written
in this period

Timelines

- 1592 Shakespeare listed with the Lord Chamberlain's Men
- 1593-94 Plague closes London playhouses for 20 months
- 1595 Coat of arms granted to Shakespeare's father, John
- 1596 Death of son Hamnet, age 11
Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*
- 1597 Shakespeare, one of London's most successful playwrights, buys New Place, one of the grandest houses in Stratford-upon-Avon
- 1599 Globe Theatre opens, as home to the Lord Chamberlain's Men, with Shakespeare part-owner

1600

- 1602 Oxford University's Bodleian Library opens
- 1603 Death of Queen Elizabeth, coronation of James I;
Lord Chamberlain's Men become the King's Men upon endorsement of James I
- 1603-11 Plague closes London playhouses for at least 68 months (nearly 6 years)
- 1605 Cervantes' *Don Quixote Part 1* published
- 1607 Marriage of Susanna Shakespeare to Dr. John Hall;
Founding of Jamestown, Virginia, first English settlement on American mainland
- 1608 *A true relation of such Occurances and Accidents of Note as hath passed in Virginia* by John Smith
Galileo constructs astronomical telescope
- 1609 Blackfriars Theatre, London's first commercial indoor theater, becomes winter home of the King's Men
- 1611 *The Authorized Version* "King James Version" of the Bible published
- 1613 Globe Theatre destroyed by fire
- 1614 Globe Theatre rebuilt
- 1615 Galileo faces the Inquisition for the first time
- 1616 Judith Shakespeare marries Thomas Quinney
Death of William Shakespeare, age 52
- 1618 Copernican system condemned by Roman Catholic Church
- 1619 First African slaves arrive in Virginia
- 1623 The first Folio, the first compiled text of Shakespeare's complete works published

1625

- 1625 James I dies, succeeded by Charles I
- 1632 *Ai due massimi sistemi* of Galileo
- 1633 Galileo recants before the Inquisition
- 1636 Harvard College founded at Cambridge, Massachusetts
- 1642 Civil War in England begins
- 1642 Puritans close theaters throughout England until the Restoration of Charles II, 18 years later
- 1649 Charles I beheaded
- 1649 Commonwealth declared

c. 1596-1600

COMEDIES

- The Merchant of Venice
- Much Ado About Nothing
- The Merry Wives of Windsor
- As You Like It
- Twelfth Night

HISTORIES

- Richard II
- 1,2 Henry IV
- Henry V

TRAGEDIES

- Julius Caesar

c. 1601-1609

COMEDIES

- Troilus and Cressida
- All's Well That Ends Well
- Measure for Measure

TRAGEDIES

- Hamlet
- Othello
- King Lear
- Macbeth
- Antony and Cleopatra
- Timon of Athens
- Coriolanus

c. 1609-1613

HISTORIES

- Henry VIII

ROMANCES

- Pericles
- Cymbeline
- The Winter's Tale
- The Tempest

The Merry Wives of Windsor

Dramatis Personae

Residents of Windsor

MISTRESS MARGARET PAGE, a wife of Windsor
MASTER GEORGE PAGE, her husband
ANNE PAGE, their daughter
WILLIAM PAGE, their son

MISTRESS ALICE FORD, a wife of Windsor
MASTER FRANK FORD, her husband
JOHN, their servant
ROBERT, their servant

SIR HUGH EVANS, a Welsh parson
DOCTOR CAIUS, a French physician
MISTRESS QUICKLY, Dr. Caius' housekeeper
JOHN RUGBY, Dr. Caius' servant

ROBERT SHALLOW, a country justice of the peace
ABRAHAM SLENDER, his nephew
PETER SIMPLE, Slender's servant

HOST of the Garter Inn
FENTON, a gentleman in love with Anne Page

Children of Windsor, disguised as fairies

Vistors from London

SIR JOHN FALSTAFF, a down-and-out knight of the Court
ROBIN, his page
BARDOLPH, Falstaff's follower
NYM, another follower
PISTOL, another follower

Scene: Windsor. Main in the 1740s (or thereabouts) and the neighborhood

The Story

The citizens of Windsor lead decidedly traditional lives. The men go to work, the children go to school, and the women go...to take care of everything else. Masters Page and Ford are two well-to-do citizens of this provincial town, whose lives convivially converge each day.

Then Sir John Falstaff blows into town and, in a last-ditch effort to bolster his sagging finances, schemes to seduce not one wealthy Windsor wife, but two—the Mistresses Page and Ford, as it happens. The wives step forward to take matters into their own capable hands. And so does Master Ford, as he falls hook, line, and sinker for scandal spread by Pistol and Nym, dismissed from Falstaff's service and out for revenge.

But Sir John is not alone in Windsor coveting the cash of others, and as the wives deflect the knight's advances, the Pages' daughter is pursued by several more—and less—desirable bachelors: Slender, the innocent nephew of a local justice; Dr. Caius, a Frenchman whose emotions run counter to reason; and Master Fenton, a young nobleman whose life is changed by the simple act of falling in love. Enter Mistress Quickly, who serves as go-between for any soul in need of assistance.

Scandal, suspicion and sweet revenge rule for now in Windsor—until order can once more be restored, and life in merry fashion just go on. ♣*

Renderings by Costume Designer Mariann Verheyen

The Merry Wives of Windsor

Act-by-Act



photo: Peter Bosy

Synopsis

Act 1

Justice Shallow complains to his nephew, Abraham Slender, and Sir Hugh Evans, a Welsh clergyman, of his injuries at the hands of Sir John Falstaff. Evans counsels Shallow to put aside his grievances and seek the hand of Anne Page on behalf of his nephew Slender. At Page's house, they find Falstaff, who unabashedly admits the wrongs he has done Justice Shallow.

Attempting to assist Slender's courtship of Anne Page, Evans sends Slender's man, Peter Simple, with a message to Mistress Quickly, enlisting her support. Meanwhile, Falstaff tells the Host of the Garter Inn that because his expenses are too heavy, he must discharge some of his followers. Seeking to improve his financial situation, Falstaff discloses his plans to seduce both Mistresses Ford and Page, two prosperous Windsor housewives. Falstaff's dismissed followers, Pistol and Nym, resolve to warn Ford and Page of Falstaff's designs on their wives.

Simple's visit to Mistress Quickly is interrupted by the return of her master, Dr. Caius, a French physician living in Windsor. When Caius learns why Evans has sent Simple to see Mistress Quickly, Caius (who also loves Anne Page) resolves to challenge Evans, his rival's staunch supporter, to a duel. After Caius departs, Fenton, a poor English nobleman, enters and reveals himself to Mistress Quickly as yet a third suitor to Anne Page.

Act 2

Both Mistresses Page and Ford are outraged at receiving identical love letters from Sir John and decide to teach him a lesson by leading him on and making a fool of him. Pistol and Nym warn Ford and Page of Falstaff's intentions upon their wives. When Mistress Quickly, acting as go-between for Fenton, arrives to see Anne Page, the two wives enlist her help in delivering messages to Falstaff. Shallow and the Host appear to report the plans of a duel between Evans and Caius. Unlike Page, Ford is overcome by jealousy and decides to put his wife's fidelity to the test.

Ford asks the Host to arrange for him to be introduced to Falstaff as a "Mr. Brook." Mistress Quickly informs Falstaff when Mistress Ford expects her husband to be away from home. Delivering an encouraging message from Mistress Page, Mistress Quickly insists that neither woman knows of the other's love for him. Ford, disguised as Brook, meets with Falstaff and offers to finance him if he will seduce Mistress Ford so that she can no longer claim chastity as her reason for denying him.

In the meantime, Caius looks for Evans at the designated meeting place. The Host (who knows that Evans, trying to avoid a duel, is in the neighboring village of Frogmore) persuades Caius to go with him to Frogmore, where he will find Anne Page.

Act 3

Evans waits for Caius at Frogmore. When the others finally arrive with Caius, they urge the pair into verbal rather than physical combat. Evans and Caius, perceiving that they are being mocked, agree to get even with the Host.

Ford, disguised as Brook, has learned of the knight's assignation with his wife and makes plans to surprise the pair. He persuades Caius, Evans and Page to accompany him home, where he promises to reveal a monster. Mistress Page reports their imminent arrival, and Falstaff, in an attempt to hide, is hustled into a clothes basket and carried from the house. Ford intercepts and questions the servants about the basket but accepts their explanation that they are taking the dirty laundry to be



Renderings by Costume Designer Mariann Verheyen

The Merry Wives of Windsor

washed. In vain, he searches the house with his friends, who chide him for his unreasonable jealousy.

Fenton expresses to Anne Page his despair of not gaining her father's favor. Mistress Quickly and Shallow escort Slender to court Anne. When the Pages enter, Master Page orders Fenton to keep away from his daughter. Fenton appeals to Mistress Page, who pretends to be impartial and agreeable to the gentleman most pleasing to her daughter.

Falstaff reveals his humiliation at being dumped from a clothes basket into the river. But when Mistress Quickly brings a second invitation from Mistress Ford, Falstaff agrees to visit her again. Ford, once again disguised as Brook, learns from Falstaff of the new assignation and is certain that this time he will catch the pair.

Act 4

According to plan, Mistress Page interrupts Falstaff and Mistress Ford to warn them that Ford is returning to surprise her. To conceal his identity—and humiliate him further—the wives dress Falstaff as an old woman. Ford, believing the old woman to be a witch, beats her out of the house. Feeling that Falstaff should have learned his lesson by this time, the two wives resolve to tell their husbands the whole story and let them decide whether to torment Sir John any further.



Rendering by Costume Designer Mariann Verheyen

Ford and Page feel that more sport can be made of Falstaff—this time, in the sight of the entire community. The women propose another rendezvous with Falstaff, whom they will instruct to dress as the mythical Herne the Hunter and meet them in Windsor Forest. Anne Page and the children of the town will pretend to be fairies. Privately, Master Page arranges for Slender to elope with Anne during the masquerade, while Mistress Page tells Caius that this will be his chance to steal her daughter.

In the meantime, Bardolph reports to the Host that a German duke and his party seek horses. When Bardolph later reports that the Germans have made off with the horses, Evans and Caius delight in convincing the Host that the alleged German Duke never existed. Mistress Quickly delivers the letter with his instructions to Falstaff from Mistresses Ford and Page.

Page has arranged with Slender, and Mistress Page with Caius, how each suitor shall recognize their daughter during the masquerade. Fenton, who has already secured Anne's promise to elope with him, enlists the Host to arrange for the vicar to marry them that night.

Act 5

Falstaff has agreed to meet the two wives in Windsor Forest at midnight. Wearing a buck's head, he seeks his mistresses at the appointed time and place. As he embraces them, Anne Page as the fairy queen orders the company to pinch and torment him. Slender and Caius each steal away with a fairy whom they believe to be Anne, who in the meantime has stolen away with Fenton.

As the tricks are exposed and the masks shed, Falstaff finally realizes that he has been bested by the two wives of Windsor, Master Ford gives up his irrational jealousies and promises to trust his wife, Master Page accepts and blesses his daughter's marriage to Fenton, and all rejoice as Mistress Page invites everyone to the Page home to laugh over the complicated intrigues that have finally been resolved. ✨

The Merry Wives of Windsor

Something Borrowed



photo: Jennifer Girard

Something New... Shakespeare's Sources

Shakespeare spun his tales from a fabric of old—and sometimes not-so-old—stories well known to Elizabethan audiences. However, the search for the definitive work or works on which Shakespeare presumably based *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has been largely unsuccessful.

According to an early eighteenth-century tradition (and therefore about a hundred years after the playwright's death), Shakespeare composed *The Merry Wives* at the insistence of Queen Elizabeth, who longed to see Falstaff come back—this time in love—after Shakespeare introduced him to an adoring public in the two parts of *Henry IV*. The Queen in fact was so insistent to see the play acted, she commanded that it be finished in fourteen days. If the story of the royal command is true (and many scholars question its authenticity), then the dramatist would most likely have made use of any materials that were at hand. The fact remains that for nearly every incident and situation in the plot of *The Merry Wives*, an analogue or possible source can be found in earlier European literature or in English stories and translations.

The Falstaff-Ford/Brook sequence belongs to a group of tales in which a lover unwittingly tells a husband of the progress of an affair with the jealous man's wife. The closest source is probably the second "novella" of Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone*. In the Italian tale, Buccivolo, a student in Bologna, consults a professor about the science of love. Like Falstaff's meeting with Ford/Brook, the student follows the professor's advice and reports his progress until the assignation is made with the woman who is, of course, the professor's wife. The husband suspects the truth and follows the student-lover who, like Falstaff, is concealed under a heap of laundry. In the Italian version, the young lover begins to win the wife's affections and tells the professor that he and the wife will meet again.

Interrupting the second meeting, the professor stabs the pile of clothes—much as Ford searches in vain through the clothes basket for Falstaff—and is similarly considered mad and treated accordingly, just as Ford's cronies mock him for his unreasonable jealousy. No English translation of this Italian story is known to have been available to Shakespeare. However, Barnaby Riche, a writer whose tale "Of Two Brethren and Their Wives" has been cited as a possible direct source for *The Merry Wives*, is known to have based many of his stories on Italian originals, which could have come independently to Shakespeare's notice.

Like the Falstaff-Ford/Brook scenario, there also exist many analogues to the courtship of Anne Page, essentially a plot in which parents and unwelcome suitors are outwitted by resourceful young people. The Bianca-Lucentio plot of Shakespeare's own—and earlier—play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, is just one example.

The topical nature of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* indicates perhaps more than anything else that Shakespeare's primary source could easily have been local gossip. For example, the business about the German horse thieves and their Duke, which makes little sense in the play as it stands, most likely stems from an inside joke on Frederick of Wurtemberg, a German nobleman obsessively intent on being inducted into the Queen's Order of the Knights of the Garter and an object of much anti-German scorn at the time.

Other situations in the play are also not uncommon. The story of Herne the Hunter probably originates from local folklore. Many years after the play was written, an oak called Herne's Oak was singled out in Windsor Park, the site of Act 5's masquerade. In the later eighteenth century, two Windsor houses were subsequently assigned to Shakespeare's Page and Ford. Alas, no one has yet come forward with Falstaff's buck basket.

The essential plot in *The Merry Wives*—a would-be lover outwitted and tricked by his intended conquest—is an ancient literary convention exemplified in numerous French fables and in Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale." Shakespeare, utilizing a conventional situation, adds the spark of local color and deft characterization. It seems likely then that *The Merry Wives* is indebted to no single source that combines the most significant elements in the play—the courtship of Anne Page and the tricking of Falstaff by the two wives.

The Merry Wives of Windsor

What is perhaps most interesting is the fact that in *The Merry Wives* Shakespeare departs significantly from older tales like the Italian *Il Pecorone*. For Shakespeare, Falstaff's plans to seduce the women are never realized because the English wives, in fact, are virtuous. Why such an essential change? Was there a possible motive behind the playwright's decision to have the two wives deflect every seductive move that Falstaff makes? How might the tale have been different if Falstaff had been successful in his attempts? Questions like these lead us into interesting discussions not only about Shakespeare's intentions (which we will never really know), but also about why and how the story of two chaste women fooling a presumptuous knight and a jealous husband captured Shakespeare's attention and our own.

We will probably never know the answers to these questions, just as we will probably never know whether Shakespeare in fact wrote the play in a fortnight. And perhaps it's not important that we do. What is important, however, is that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* stands as a brilliant dramatic improvisation by the English-speaking world's most renowned playwright. ✧*

“If Shakespeare Was Such a Good Writer...”



photo: Peter Bosy

If Shakespeare was such a good writer, why did he use others' stories so freely? In the

Renaissance, when Shakespeare wrote, stories did not “belong” to an individual. There were no copyright laws and material was borrowed freely. But more important was the fact that stories were meant to be told and retold—as they had been for centuries and centuries before. Because so few people were yet literate (the printing press was invented only a century before Shakespeare's lifetime), much of history and the tales that people knew were communicated in speech, and passed from one generation to another. Stories belonged, in a sense, to a common pool for all to reach into and create their own stories. Creativity was based not upon new stories but on new tellings and reworkings of the old stories.

Shakespeare's plays have been compared at times to symphonies—music that weaves many instruments and many themes into a single piece of art. Shakespeare creates his “symphony,” his single piece of art, by weaving many characters and many different plots into one unified story. He never hesitates to alter a source—even the “facts” of history—to tell the story he wants to tell. And while his “instruments” are the characters borrowed from ancient and not-so-ancient sources, his “music” is his poetry and drama—and his creation uniquely and masterfully his own. ✧*

What's in a Genre?



photo: Jennifer Girard

Comedy—the word conjures up all sorts of images, from the wildly physical antics of the Three Stooges to the tongue-in-cheek posturing of Batman and his arch rivals; from the in-your-face stand-up routine of a Chris Rock

to the introspective observations of a Steven Wright. And each type of comedy, depending on how we as viewers and listeners approach it, produces a unique set of responses and reactions—from a simple, knowing smile to side-splitting laughter. Whatever our reactions may be, comedy, more than anything else, is meant to delight us, to force us to see that, from time to time, we probably take ourselves a little more seriously than we need to. Comedy allows us to laugh at our own humanity—the shortcomings, the bad judgment calls, the mess-ups—in short, those moments of human weakness that each of us has experienced.

Among Shakespeare's comedies, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* maintains a unique position. Not strictly a romantic comedy in the vein of *Much Ado About Nothing* or *As You Like It*, and far removed from the disturbing “problem” comedies, such as *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, *The Merry Wives* is more a domestic, or as H. J. Oliver contends, a “citizen comedy” that grounds itself squarely in the everyday life of middle-class culture (as opposed to life at court).

The most bourgeois of Shakespeare's comedies, *The Merry Wives* is also Shakespeare's only indigenous comedy. Set in the English countryside, the play occupies a world apart from the foreign locales of comedies such as

The Merry Wives of Windsor

The Taming of the Shrew, *Twelfth Night*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and takes instead as its cue the idiosyncrasies of the citizens of Windsor, a small town near London, and much like Shakespeare's own native Stratford in character. At first glance, this cast of Windsor comics appears to be composed of the standard cardboard cut-outs: the lusty gallant, the jealous husband, the town fool, the busybody housekeeper. But these inhabitants of Windsor, as Shakespeare dramatizes them, exhibit a sense of "character" that runs far deeper than surface appearances or behavior.

Most of the comedy in *The Merry Wives* is at the expense of "outsiders"—those characters not native to Windsor. The non-English residents of the town, Sir Hugh Evans, the Welsh parson, and Dr. Caius, the French physician, are at the receiving end of many of Shakespeare's comic jabs. The English visitors, Sir John Falstaff and his band of followers—Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol—comprise a quartet of comics at the center of much of the deception and scheming that occur in the play.

Falstaff, the leader of this merry quartet, has perhaps generated more scholarly controversy than any Shakespearean character apart from Hamlet. Revived from the *Henry IV* plays, Falstaff, in H. J. Oliver's view, was "the finest comic character the English stage had yet known or was perhaps ever to know" (Oliver LXV). And why the controversy? Numerous critics, citing Falstaff's seemingly untouchable wit and his never-having-been-bested status in the history plays, have written extensively over the years of Shakespeare's "mishandling" of the character in *The Merry Wives*. H. B. Charlton, in his condemning of Shakespeare's Falstaff of *The Merry Wives*, said it perhaps most strongly when he wrote that Shakespeare's treatment of Falstaff was "a crime worse than parricide—the slaughter of one's own offspring" (Charlton 192-3).

Whether much of Shakespeare's comedic focus in *The Merry Wives* is at the expense of one of his most popular characters is, of course, a matter of opinion. What is clear, however, is that for all the humor brought about by the knight's scheming to make some money by seducing Mistresses Ford and Page, the Falstaff of *The Merry Wives* is a character who spends as much time deprecating himself as he does boosting his own ego, especially when he is speaking of his obvious girth. References to his "portly belly" and the "swelling" that can occur when someone his size is thrown into the Thames indicate a

character who, despite his seemingly untouchable ego, knows in truth exactly who and what he is.

Even though it is the outsiders who provide much of the humor in *The Merry Wives*, some of Windsor's native inhabitants do not escape Shakespeare's razor-sharp pen. We are moved to laugh at a character such as Frank Ford because of his petty and, as his cronies tell him, unreasonable jealousy. But again, Shakespeare has created a far more complex character than a cursory look might indicate. Master Ford is a character who is convinced that it would be foolish not to be jealous—that jealousy is a "reasonable" stance since faith in his wife would leave him vulnerable to being made a cuck-



Rendering by Costume Designer Mariann Verheyen

The Merry Wives of Windsor

old. In other words, Ford rationalizes that it is better to be jealous and wrong than not to be jealous and cuckolded. This stance, as ludicrous and presumptuous as it is, does have a curious logic of its own, a logic that enables men like Ford to protect their own masculinity and self-esteem by assuming the worst about all women—even their own wives. Again, Shakespeare creates a character whose conduct generates our laughter, but whose complexities may touch home in the observant viewer and reflect the subtleties of an inspired comic form.

A character like Abraham Slender, who often appears to be little more than an inept fool, especially when it comes to courting Anne Page, is a potent comic character in *The Merry Wives*. With an ability to disappear into the woodwork, Slender moves through the play almost a nonentity, yet his proposal to Anne Page is perhaps the funniest marriage proposal in English literature.

With such a richly textured cast of characters, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* stands as one of Shakespeare's most beloved comedies, a favorite on stage every century since it was first performed four hundred years ago. More than in any other of his comedies, the clash of classes and cultures in an English setting, the inclusion of familiar place names—even the fond portrait of a schoolboy's terror in coping with Latin—all suggest a kind of loving and nostalgic return to a world much like Stratford, the small country town where Shakespeare himself grew up. ✨*

An Inside-Outside Look at the World of Windsor



The world of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a world where cultures clash: men challenge women; women confound men; the old test the young; the young outwit the old; and members of all socioeconomic classes and positions live, not always entirely harmoniously, within the same municipal boundaries. Perhaps the most significant and humorous cultural contests in *The Merry Wives* involve the outsiders, residing in or passing through Windsor, and this is perhaps most

true of the two non-Englishmen in the play: Sir Hugh Evans, the Welsh parson who encourages Abraham Slender to pursue the young Anne Page, and Dr. Caius, the French physician whose love for Anne Page leads him to challenge Evans to a duel. Beyond the world of make-believe, however, the foreign challenge to a traditional English point of view was a very real concern to many native Englishmen in Shakespeare's time.

During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the gap between the once-isolated island of England and the continent was steadily narrowing. With the onset of merchant trade and exploration, the English boundaries became more permeable, not only to commerce and outside invasion, but also to foreign influence upon ideas, ways of life and culture. Such intrusions (as many English considered them) on English culture posed a real and grave threat to those who feared the destruction of traditional English values. Anti-Italian scorn was particularly evident in England at the time. As home of the Catholic church, Italy was perceived by Protestant England to be a source of decadence and corruption. Many of Shakespeare's contemporaries wrote plays featuring or depicting Italian vice and political corruption. The word Italianate conjured up a wide range of diabolical practices in the minds of many imaginative English: poisoned books of devotion that would kill the unsuspecting victim who kissed them and chairs designed to trap the person who sat in them. France, too, was considered by many English to be a hotbed of negative influence, especially in the area of fashion. Outlandishly ornamented headdresses, pleated ruffs, padded doublets, puffed sleeves and richly decorated hose, all imported from France, added to the Englishman's expense of being fashionable.

While those who considered themselves sophisticated welcomed the new styles, many from the more conservative ranks spoke out loudly against what they considered vanity. The use of cosmetics, the smoking of tobacco, the drinking of imported wine, and every other known "vice" were attributed by angry moralists to the corrupting influences from abroad. The moral debate over traditional English values and the newly-imported styles from the continent was a bitter one and had strong religious overtones. The attack on fashion, in fact, became an integral part of the Puritan movement, which stressed the sinfulness of extravagant clothing, lavish living and other such worldly pursuits.

The Merry Wives of Windsor

As potentially volatile as these issues were in Renaissance society, the cultural contests which make up so much of *The Merry Wives* are all humorously treated. Never for a moment does Shakespeare put the citizens of Windsor or the outsiders in serious jeopardy. As an out-of-town and more worldly-wise visitor from London, Falstaff represents a different set of cultural values and assumptions. But Falstaff's threat to the integrity and virtue of these two English housewives is never really serious. Mistresses Page and Ford are on to him from the first. Dr. Caius and Sir Hugh Evans never do fight their duel and Falstaff's attempts to disrupt the middle-class order of Windsor society with his amoral schemes are entirely in vain. We are, after all, in the world of comedy.

But all of the playful ridicule of the "outsiders" might suggest the ways that a culture—any culture—protects and maintains itself and its values at the expense of those who speak, act, and think differently from the "natives." Ultimately, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* ends with a joyous celebration and invitation to all to "laugh this sport o'er" at the Pages' house. In the world of this play, at least, there is ultimately room for everybody at the table, but this cultural reconciliation is clearly on Windsor's terms. ❦*

1597, or 1601— and All That



photo: Jennifer Girard

As a much-debated legend goes, Shakespeare wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at the command of Queen Elizabeth, who wanted to see Falstaff return to the stage—this time in love. If the story has any truth (though many scholars challenge its plausibility), then the first performance of *The Merry Wives* was possibly presented at Court around 1597, either for some sort of private showing or as part of a royal function, such as the ceremony inducting knights into the Queen's Order of the Garter (which convened, according to records, in 1597). However, the Stationer's Register of 1602, which contains the earliest known record of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, shows the first performance of the play to have occurred sometime in 1601. Despite the lack of agreement on the precise date, the years 1597 to 1601 in the view of many scholars and historians reflect an England in the midst of profound social debate.

The traditional picture of a highly ordered, stable society—for centuries a romanticized view looking back upon Elizabethan England—is one that modern scholarship has essentially overturned. Instead, the turn of the seventeenth century is now understood to have been a time when old certainties and assumptions were constantly called into question by a "new philosophy" that perceived values as no longer absolute, but relative and in flux. Fundamentally incompatible social thoughts stood uneasily side by side. One of the primary functions of drama has always been to mediate between such divergent and incompatible points of view within society.

A significant part of this debate involved the status of women in Elizabethan society. And while there was no unified activity in the sixteenth century that could be compared in any way to the present-day women's rights



Rendering by Costume Designer Mariann Verheyen

The Merry Wives of Windsor

movement, there were women whose comments focused specifically on the role of women in marriage, the rights of women in the home, the education of women, and the laws and statutes that governed, in general, a woman's behavior.

At this time in English history, many marriages were still arranged, and husbands exerted a near-absolute authority over their wives. The woman's legal right to hold and dispose of her own property was limited to what she could lay claim to in the pre-arranged marriage contract. In the eyes of the law, the man and woman at the time of their marriage became one person, and that person was the husband. He acquired absolute control over all his wife's property, which he could sell, give away, or even destroy at will. In a very real sense, a wife surrendered to her husband her liberty, her estate, and her authority.



Renderings by Costume Designer Mariann Verheyen

Nevertheless, during this same time in English history, there was an increasing emphasis by both Church and State on the importance of genuine emotional and intellectual companionship in marriage. Largely the result of the Protestant Reformation, "companionate marriage" stressed the emotional tie between husband and wife and underscored the importance of partnership in child-rearing and household management. As you might expect, there was considerable tension between this egalitarian ideology and the rigidly hierarchical marital traditions, a tension that can clearly be seen in marriage conduct books of the time. How things played out in individual English households we can never know for certain, but as *The Merry Wives* might suggest, no ideology can effectively simplify or resolve the complexity and variety of marital roles and relationships—any more than our ideologies do today. What is certain is that this was a time of heated cultural debate, as England adjusted to vast and rapid religious, social and economic changes. And gender roles, which for centuries had been dictated by medieval tradition, like so much else became the subject of debate and revision.

Of greatest impact during the mid-sixteenth century, in the sense that it probably reached the widest audience, was the "Homily on Marriage," which all parsons were ordered by the Crown from 1562 onwards to read in church every Sunday. This sermon left no doubt as to the inferior status, rights, and character of a wife. A weak creature not infused with strength and constancy of mind, a woman was more prone to weak affections and vain fantasies and opinions. The ideal woman was submissive, charitable, virtuous, and modest. This set of ideals, laid down by men, resulted from a widespread fear that a woman by nature was just the opposite—strong, assertive, malevolent, disreputable, and immodest—and therefore needing to be controlled. Some Elizabethans went so far as to revive the Platonic doubts whether a woman could even be considered a reasoning creature; others questioned whether she had a soul.

Despite such negative attitudes, the sixteenth century also saw a steady stream of books that praised women; even so, most men remained doubtful as to a woman's ultimate worth, beyond child-bearing, child-rearing, and household maintenance. As Lawrence Stone points out in *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, Bishop Aylmer, in a sermon before Queen Elizabeth, steps very cautiously between the two opinions of women:

The Merry Wives of Windsor

Women are of two sorts: some of them are wiser, better learned, discreeter, and more constant than a number of men; but another and worse sort of them are fond, foolish, wanton, flibbergibs, tattlers, triflers, wavering, witless, without council, feeble, careless, rash, proud, dainty, talebearers, eavesdroppers, rumour-raisers, evil-tongued, worse-minded, and in everyway doltified with the dregs of the devil's dunghill. (Stone 197)

Despite the Bishop's soft-stepping at the beginning of his proclamation, his words reflect the prevailing attitude that existed in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Of course, what is perhaps the greatest irony of the century was the fact that despite the overwhelming male belief in the inferior status of women, the sixteenth century probably saw more powerful queens on the throne than at any other time in English history—Henry VIII's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, was a favorite of the Pope and the spiritual guardian of English Catholicism; his two daughters, Mary I and Elizabeth I, ruled in succession for fifty years from 1553 until 1603.

The sixteenth century also saw a heated debate about the education of women. For a brief period, during the middle third of the century, there was a vigorous drive by Renaissance humanists for female classical education. Encouraged perhaps by Queen Catherine, a handful of aristocratic women, such as Lady Jane Grey and Queen Elizabeth, were as expert as men in classical grammar and language. Nevertheless, among all classes of women, domestic skills were still the staples of an Elizabethan girl's education; all the rest was ornamentation. In a widely-told story, King James I, who succeeded Queen Elizabeth to the throne in 1603, made perfectly clear the prevailing attitude toward a woman's education: when he was introduced to an accomplished young woman praised for her knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, his comment was, "But can she spin?"

In 1561, a translation of Castiglione's *The Courtier* introduced a very different ideal of womanhood, one whose primary qualities were the social graces—skill in music, painting, drawing, dancing, and needlework. Again, while many women outside the upper classes were not given the opportunity to partake of what might be considered early "charm school" training, this new courtly ideal nevertheless touched women of all classes. Education in the social graces did nothing to violate the Protestant, and especially Puritan, ethic of the woman as the dutiful daughter or wife, since skill in such "womanly" graces posed no threat to the perceived male superi-

ority. In a sense, this controlling of women—whether in the father-daughter or husband-wife relationship—was seen as a subservience to authority that served both Church and State. A woman's subservience to her father or to her husband was symbolically equivalent to both her subservience to the Crown and her subservience to the authority of God, the spiritual Father. These analogies between family-church-state were extremely commonplace in marriage literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus changes in the role and status of women were believed to imply a challenge to traditional authority on all levels of society. If a wife could challenge her husband, why could not a Parliament challenge the Crown?

Henry VIII's conversion of the official religion of the English state, from Roman Catholic to Protestant, meant



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additional changes for women. When England was a Catholic state, women of all classes could leave the home to make confession to their priests, an activity that many women, consciously or otherwise, used as a kind of emotional venting of their problems and frustrations. But when these same women could no longer confess outside the home, the opportunity to express their feelings to an "objective outsider" was no longer available to them. The result was an even greater confinement to the home than had been realized previously.

Interestingly, among all classes, the control over women was generally the least pervasive in working-class families since the mobility and fluidity of the family as a nuclear unit were greater. For purely economic reasons, members of working-class families were less bound to the home. Fathers often went off for long periods of time seeking work, which meant greater power in the home for the wife. In addition, both male and female children were often apprenticed to wealthier families for purposes of learning a marketable trade. Consequently, among the working classes, husbands often had less absolute control over their wives, and parents, in general, less control over their children. Driven by practical concerns rather than pure ideology, the average English family was probably much more flexible in its configuration of relationships than was previously believed by scholars and historians.

But misogynistic public rhetoric and sentiment did not always match private reality. Among all socioeconomic classes, many wives were true partners with their husbands and had considerable control over household life, including responsibility for the servants, children and the household finances. (It is significantly the fact that Mistress Ford "has all the rule of her husband's purse" that leads Falstaff to his plan of seduction.) During the latter part of the sixteenth century, women were increasingly visible outside the home, a reality that ran counter to Puritan thinking and ultimately threatened some of the control exercised by fathers and husbands. Yet despite the gradual emergence of women into English public life, the prevailing attitude remained: women's primary contribution to English culture was confined to child-bearing, child-rearing, and household maintenance.

The Merry Wives of Windsor provocatively reflects some of the most negative Renaissance stereotypes of women—and their utter failure to describe Shakespeare's merry English wives. Indeed, both Falstaff, confident that he can seduce Mistresses Ford and Page

and thus restore his fortunes, and Frank Ford, convinced of his wife's predilection for infidelity, reflect the conventional attitudes of late sixteenth-century English culture. However, for Shakespeare in *The Merry Wives*, it is the women who stand as protectors of traditional values. It is the women whose virtue and integrity we never doubt. And it is the women who never once falter in the strength of their convictions and the choices they make.

If the logic of the play proves that women can be both "merry" and virtuous, then was Shakespeare questioning some of the dominant beliefs of the time? Is *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, as many scholars believe, Shakespeare's nostalgic return to the setting of his childhood, or is it a veiled but pointed comment on many of the more conservative and traditional values upheld by late sixteenth-century English culture? Although we may never be able to answer these questions with any certainty, it seems clear that Shakespeare was acutely aware of the issues that affected women and the culture they inhabited as England moved into the seventeenth century. ✧*

Playnotes: Windsor Washing



photo: Peter Bosy

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We don't often think about high art as concerning itself with things like grease and dirt: these are the realities of daily life, not the subject of Shakespearean drama. But *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is an extraordinary play because it makes us reconsider the importance of what we deem trivial. Shakespeare's only comedy set in an English small town is also the comedy boasting the most prose and the most references to household life. The play explores social standing, jealousy, civic order, and the struggles of courtship. These issues are worked out in a plot rife with attention to practices and objects that are strikingly familiar: brewing, baking, dressing meat, mending clothes, canning preservatives, puddings, pip-

The Merry Wives of Windsor

pins, cheese, and most importantly, laundry; for laundering becomes an important metaphor for the baptismal cleansing that needs to take place in the town.

The play was probably written in 1597-98, after Shakespeare had created the character of Falstaff for his *Henry IV* history plays. If banished from the world of politics and history, Falstaff emerges resurrected in the most unlikely place: the bourgeois town of Windsor, where he is up to his old tricks of creative scamming. Here he comes up against the formidable power of both shrewd wives and a middle class citizenry sensitive to aristocratic intrusion.

When the jealous Mr. Ford intrudes upon his own home to search for his wife's presumed lover, he turns an everyday chore into a nightmarish confusion of tricked husbands, thanks to the women's handiwork. Spying a "buckbasket" (laundry basket), he rants, "Buck? I would I could wash myself of the buck..." Playing on the word "buck" as a symbol of a horned, cuckolded husband, as well as a lustful animal, Ford hilariously misses the fact that the wives have secured Falstaff within their own goods—in that same buckbasket.

The battle of the sexes surfaces in many of Shakespeare's plays, but never are women so clearly victorious over their male counterparts. "I'll exhibit a bill in the parliament for the putting down of men," says Mrs. Page upon receiving Falstaff's insulting duplicated love letter. Yet Mrs. Page and Mrs. Ford turn to domestic rather than political action, as the play shows the women, using their housewifely authority to straighten out matters in the community at large.

The play deflates Falstaff's pretensions by making him into gross fat puddings, whale oil and cooking grease. The wives' attempts to purge him of lust consolidate their role as cooks, home doctors, and housecleaners. Imagining themselves as almost supernatural launderers, they punish seducers and jealous husbands by becoming clever playwright figures: most tellingly they script Falstaff as dirty laundry; dress him as a gossiping woman, and finally have him pinched by fairies who set out to scour literal and moral filth. One character commands the fairies, "to Windsor chimneys shalt thou leap;/ Where fires thou find'st unrak'd and hearths unswept." The dirt of the community can only be swept away, it seems, by attentive houseworkers; and the wives lead the men in creating order in Windsor where official

authorities fail. As illusory projections, the fairies extend the merry wives' domestic power beyond the household into the reach of the court, forest and myth.

On the perimeters of the play, pushed to the margins, is the majestic court at Windsor, reminding the audience of another powerful woman in the period—Queen Elizabeth. But the citizens don't directly pay homage to the crown; they readily nominate the comic mis-speaker Mistress Quickly as their own workaday "fairy queen."

Merry Wives suggests that people's deepest emotions and fears are expressed in relation to the concrete things that they know best. If the play is successful, we not only laugh at Falstaff's woes, Ford's doubts, and the women's victory, but we also start to contemplate the reassuring if trivial features of our own lives that allow us to forge order out of disorder. At the end, everyone in Windsor joins by the fire to laugh at their "sport" and share a moment where differences in the community (marked by foreign accents as well as by gender and generation) fade in the spirit of merry England. We close immersed in powerful myth of the nation, a fantasy world that never strays far from the joys of home. ✱



Renderings by Costume Designer Mariann Verheyen

The Merry Wives of Windsor

Playnotes: Winning Wives



photo: Jennifer Girard

David Brailow, who contributes this essay, is the Vice-President for Academic Affairs at Franklin College in Indiana.

An old tale runs that Elizabeth I, having enjoyed the fat, degenerate, witty Sir John Falstaff in *Henry IV*, wished to see him in love and asked for a play to be written in two weeks' time. As a result of this story, probably invented over a hundred years after the first performance, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has often been condemned unjustly as a piece of hack work unworthy of its author or its hero.

The truth is, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, probably written in 1597, is unique among Shakespeare's comedies. It borrows a large number of its characters directly from two other plays, not comedies but histories. Alone among Shakespeare's comedies and romances, it is set in England rather than in an exotic locale, and has the feel of Elizabethan England. Finally, this play has as its central focus not a single character or a pair of lovers but an entire town, a community which includes nearly all ages, and whose denizens maintain the various occupations of provincial life.

But in two important respects, Shakespeare's Windsor challenges our sense of what an Elizabethan town might have been like. First, it accommodates diversity with surprising ease. Second, the women rather than the men prove the most effective defenders of Windsor values.

On the first count, Windsor has a Welsh parson and a French doctor, both of whom stand with the solid English householders of the town, the Pages and Fords, against the invasion, not of foreigners, but of the dissolute English upper classes and their hangers-on. Sir John Falstaff and Fenton, both disreputable former companions of the madcap Prince Hal (the prodigal son turned hero-king of the history plays), come to Windsor to woo its women for financial gain. Yet by the end of the play, Fenton has married into Windsor's most representative family, and old Sir John himself is welcomed into its cozy embrace. Falstaff's attempts to subvert the town's comfortable bourgeois values fail miserably, easily neutralized by the witty plotting of Mistress Ford and Mistress

Page. The farcical high points of the play thrust Falstaff first into a basket of dirty laundry and subsequently into disguise as an old aunt, fitting signs of his defeat at the hands of a pair of housewives.

And this is the second anomaly. We have come to think of married women in the Renaissance as silent, subservient, and wholly oppressed by men. Yet Mistress Ford and Mistress Page do not feel themselves bound to silence and submission. Resourceful, witty, and assertive, the wives resemble other Shakespearean comic heroines like Portia, Beatrice, or Viola; but in contrast to those women, the wives operate from a firmly established domestic base and thus demonstrate that marriage does not necessarily put an end to all feminine independence. Far from fearing their husbands, they challenge them confidently both in word and action.

However, the wives always act in defense of the safe, bourgeois values of their community. They take great pride in their "honesty," their fidelity to their husbands. The play reeks of simmering male doubts and fears concerning female sexuality, signalled by repeated references to horns and foreheads, cuckold and stags. But when Mistress Page asserts that "Wives may be merry and yet honest too," she reassures her audience that witty and assertive women are really no threat to male honor.

Windsor's tolerance of diversity and of wifely independence makes possible the two chief pleasures of this play. By giving so many characters distinct linguistic quirks, Shakespeare creates a smorgasbord of verbal delights. Hilarious violence is done to the Queen's English, from matchmaker Mistress Quickly's memorable description of Mistress Page as a "fartuous" wife to the epic ravings of Falstaff's man, Pistol. Falstaff, as always, speaks the richest, wittiest prose of any character on the English stage. And by creating his merry wives with gumption, ingenuity, and good humor enough to fight the greed, lust, and jealousy of men with ridicule, not rancor, Shakespeare entertains us with some of the most superbly comical moments in all drama. ♣*

The 20th Century Looks Back at The Merry Wives of Windsor

The Merry Wives is a woman's play, written for a woman and emanating from a genius that knew as much of the womanhood of the world as he knew of its manhood. Falstaff's personality looms large on the horizon, and some can see nothing but Falstaff. The ton of corn that lies behind his ton of chaff may need looking for but it will still be there when the chaff has been all blown away, and the tact and integrity of these merry wives will take firm hold as the years go by.

—Rosa Leo Grindon, 1902

[Falstaff] was ruthlessly trampled into extinction by Henry V: casting him off, the King killed his heart. Even more cruelly, so too did Shakespeare. It was murder in Hal; in Shakespeare, the crime worse than parricide—the slaughter of one's own offspring.

—HB Charlton, 1938

The old man who once had missed nothing now misses everything; he has toppled from his balance, he is unintelligent...His dignity was never touched in Henry IV. In *The Merry Wives* he has none to lose...Shakespeare has written the part with great talent but without love.

—Mark Van Doren, 1938

The Merry Wives of Windsor is a very dull play indeed. We can be grateful for its having been written, because it provided the occasion of Verdi's Falstaff, a very great operatic masterpiece. Mr. Page, Shallow, Slender, and the Host disappear. I have nothing to say about Shakespeare's play, so let's hear Verdi.

—W.H. Auden, 1947

Falstaff's principal fault at the time of the play, aside from some petty poaching and keeping of disreputable company, is that age has caught up with him...His instincts are now for survival only, and the objective of his assault on the wives of Windsor is not the satisfaction of lust but satisfaction of the belly.

—J.A. Bryant, Jr., 1974

[Falstaff] is the spirit of festive inconsequence: self-indulgent, amoral anarchic, a reveler who is out to disrupt the everyday social order. This order refuses, however, to capitulate or be changed by him in the slightest. It simply closes ranks and reaffirms its original values against an outsider who, like Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, is made ridiculous...

—Anne Barton, 1974

The Windsorites consider themselves accomplished stylists, working imaginative effects with words. But words more often work against them. Language escapes the speakers' intended meaning and breaks free to lead a wayward life of its own. Punning is endemic in Windsor because words are slippery.

—William Carroll, 1977

We must recognize that one of the major subjects of *Merry Wives* is the use and abuse of imagination. In its relation of Ford to Falstaff, in its inventive verbal style, and in its metaphors of play-acting, the play first qualifies and then vindicates the power of the imagination to shape, even to transform 'reality,' and identifies this power with the more obvious power that every dramatist wields.

—William Carroll, 1977

In this play, and this play alone, we meet Shakespeare at home...The play is solidly and comfortably bourgeois; it belongs to the new society of late Elizabethan times. The scene at Windsor is very close to the scene at Stratford."

—Muriel C. Bradbrook, 1979

[*The Merry Wives is*]...a true domestic drama, focused on marriage—the problems of achieving it and the perils of maintaining it. The enemies of good marriage which he singles out are greed, lust, jealousy, and stupidity.

—Jeanne Addison Roberts, 1979

...farce is the exploitation of fears and resentments, conscious and unconscious—the fear that man is essentially only an animal and that chance totally controls the universe; the resentment of the



Rendering by Costume Designer Marianne Verheyen



repressions and frustrations of a social order. Comedy, on the other hand, is the literary equivalent of the theology of hope. It reinforces our confidence in social forms and asserts that there are orderly and beneficent forces at work in them however weak, imperfect, and absurd or cruel to the individual parts. The latter is an exact description of the tone of *The Merry Wives*.

—Jeanne Addison Roberts, 1979

In terms of Policy, Falstaff must go. He is a demon of jest, subversive to the State. No custom, no institution is safe from him. He will absorb or undermine all. The commonwealth casts its scapegoat Forth... Shakespeare who understands Hal, politics and reality, understands that his Falstaff is leading him along a royal road to a radical and anarchic non-conformism; he is nevertheless (or possibly therefore) reluctant to let him go...

—Ruth Nevo, 1980

Shakespeare's New Comedy inverts traditional feminine roles, thus transforming a male-oriented, male-dominated perspective into its antithetical opposite. And it is this transformation...that yields in place of the disjunctive alternatives of polarization, new sexual identities, new resolutions and new horizons.

—Ruth Nevo, 1980

The setting is bourgeois, settled, prosperous and imbued with a moral complacency...The major themes of the play are the cornerstones of bourgeois life: possession of property, possession of women, and fear of theft...The host is jealous and possessive about his property; Caius is jealous and possessive about his house and closets; Ford is jealous and possessive about his wife; Page is jealous and possessive about his daughter, whom he sees as property to be disposed of as he chooses.

—Marilyn French, 1981

To be very specific about the setting could limit [*King Lear's*] universality, its message. You cannot say the same thing about *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which is essentially a comedy of social and sexual manners, which I believe needs the specific containment of a society. You have to perceive the way people interact with each other, their little habits, their manner of walking, their manner of speech, the places where they live, the things they do, the kind of society they had, in order to make that play work. It's hopeless to conceive of some vaguely universal version of *The Merry Wives*...

—Bill Alexander, 1981

Falstaff's intended 'misuse' of Mistress Ford seems almost lighthearted when compared to her husband's self-centered hysteria.

—Jan Lawson Hinely, 1982

The Merry Wives, is, in fact, not merely concerned with revenge: it is obsessed with it. Nearly every character in the play vows revenge on another, three separate revenge plots are carried out, and those who are not practicing their own revenges are frequently aiding others'. This alone would seem enough to create interest in a play whose author was soon to deal with the same them in tragedy; but for the most part critics have been unable to see beyond the bulk of the play's central character...Revenge in Shakespeare's comedies becomes a positive force, providing entertainment while restoring social harmony.

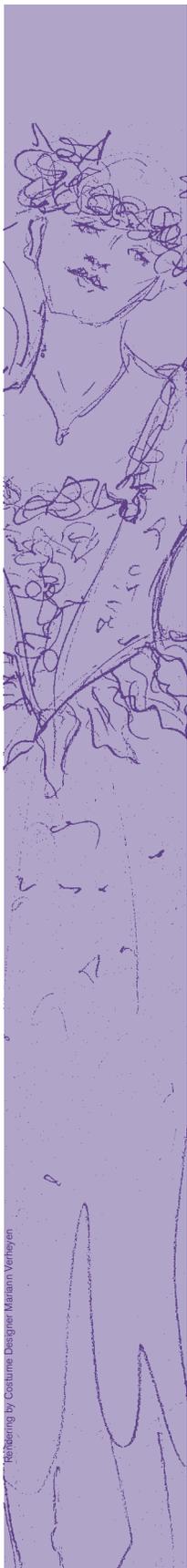
—Linda Anderson, 1987

And yet, as germs can be most threatening because their genetic make-up mirrors something in the organism they attack, so Falstaff...simply clarifies, parodies and exaggerates tendencies already existent in Windsor. Ford is just as culpable as Falstaff in equating love with possession. His jealousy is simply the other side of Falstaff's desire to possess women in both sexual and commercial senses....

—R.S. White, 1991

The real danger of Falstaff is that he represents traits that already lie within the society of Windsor and must be kept under close control. His worst crime is to display in a kind of distorting mirror what all are like beneath the carefully maintained façade. This, more than his 'outsider' status, leads to his firm ejection from the society...

—R.S. White, 1991



THE SAME SIR JOHN STILL. If Falstaff is defeated in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, he is the same Sir John still, unsinkable in any water, irrepressible in any difficulty, impervious to discouragement because he knows and loves his own ability to slip from the grip of any adversity. He is a scapegoat whose own weight of sin is so great that he can bear all of Windsor's in addition without noticing the difference.
—Ace G. Pilkington, 1992

The Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is not, of course, in love. It that is what Elizabeth demanded, she was not obeyed.
—Anne Barton, 1994

Falstaff fares as badly as he does in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* partly because the Shakespearean heroine is a phenomenon not dreamed of in his philosophy.
—Anne Barton, 1994

The community at Windsor has its flaws and delusions...but at heart it is sound, stable, and remarkable well defined...it represents the polar opposite of Falstaff's Eastcheap world, which is one of rootless individuals, separated from their family contexts and sometimes, like Prince Hal, in active rebellion against them.
—Anne Barton, 1994

The Merry Wives of Windsor is about love as it relates to the practicalities of life. The play exists within the mores of a social environment, not a poetic one like the woods of a *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It*. Those woods are magical, mystical, murky, libidinous and Jungian. Windsor is quite different: it's a town, with tap water and mil and wine and chickens and buck-baskets. Love here is seen the way most of us experience it after the age of *Romeo and Juliet*: as something negotiable. It's part of a bourgeois barter, not a great mystical soul-bonding.
—Richard Monette, 1995

Shakespeare is always concerned with what is irrepressible in human nature. In the case of *Merry Wives*, it's jealousy, love and lust. They're the same ideas we see in *Othello*, told from a comedic point of view.
—Daniel Fish, 1998

And another millennium of views...

Falstaff is the embodiment (and a very large body it is) of the hope and pleasure that make life worthwhile. It is hard to imagine anyone of Falstaff's obvious intelligence and sophistication being deceived not once but three times. Harold Bloom, who can't imagine it, calls the Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 'a nameless imposter.' However, Falstaff is not taken in by the deceptions of the merry wives so much as he is lifted up by his own imaginations. He hopes and believes that some good, some great pleasure will come to him today, tomorrow, or the day after.

—Ace G. Pilkington and Angel M. Pilkington, 2000

If Mistress Page had been born in another era, she would have made a perfect suffragette: her unshakable adherence to traditional values is no obstacle to her forthright and energetic determination to avenge herself and her sex for wrongs done by men...

—Rhona Siverbush and Sami Plotkin, 2002

We don't often think about high art as concerning itself with things like grease and dirt: these are the realities of daily life, not the subject of Shakespearean drama. But *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is an extraordinary play because it makes us reconsider the importance of what we deem trivial.

—Wendy Wall, 2004

The battle of the sexes surfaces in many of Shakespeare's plays, but never are women so clearly victorious over their male counterparts. 'Ill exhibit a bill in the parliament for the putting down of men,' says Mrs. Page upon receiving Falstaff's insulting duplicated love letter. Yet Mrs. Page and Mrs. Ford turn to domestic rather than political action, as the play shows the women using their housewifely authority to straighten out matters in the community at large."

—Wendy Wall, 2004

A Play Comes to Life

A Look Back at "The Merry Wives of Windsor" on Stage



photo: Peter Bosy

Whether his dramas should be taken as plays or as literature has been disputed. But surely they should be taken as both. Acted, or seen on the stage, they disclose things hidden to the reader. Read, they reveal what no actor or theater can convey.

—Harold C. Goddard 1951

The Merry Wives of Windsor, because of its rich humor—especially its comic portrayal of Falstaff as a tireless wooer—has always been a favorite of both theatrical producers and audiences. However, the comedy has also invited numerous revisions and adaptations. In fact, after Shakespeare's death, his plays were frequently adapted and most often to fit the tastes of the times.

Although little specific information is known about the first performances of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, we do know that the play was presented by Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, sometime between 1597 and 1601, either at the Globe Theatre or at the court of Queen Elizabeth, or both, presumably using Shakespeare's script as he wrote it. We also know that the play was revived at court for King James I in 1604 and for Charles I in 1638 at London's Cockpit Theatre. This revival at the Cockpit was most likely the final production of *The Merry Wives* prior to the Restoration, for the Puritans' rise to power—and their anti-theater stance—forced a closing of the theaters for eighteen years from 1642 to 1660.

During these years, many actors fled to France, where they witnessed the theatrical ideas in practice on the Continent. Consequently, when the crown was restored to Charles II and the theaters reopened in 1660, English actors returned home from the continent and brought with them many of the practices of the French theater (it was not until 1660, for example, that the first woman appeared on the professional English

stage). At the same time, English tastes, rejecting the strict Puritanism of the Commonwealth (the English government from 1642 to 1660), embraced the permissive. An appetite for lighter dramas now influenced the English stage. The comedy of manners became a staple of Restoration drama, as did heroic love stories with happy endings. And as a result, many of Shakespeare's plays were rewritten to satisfy Restoration tastes. Even *King Lear*, perhaps Shakespeare's greatest tragedy, was rewritten with a happy ending—an adaptation that was performed on English stages for more than a century.

We know little of what sort of version of the play emerged in 1660 after the reopening of theaters when Thomas Killigrew selected *The Merry Wives* for the repertory of the King's company. Diarist Samuel Pepys, who saw the play three times, in 1660, 1661 and 1667, commented that the country gentlemen and the French doctor were very well done but that the rest went "but very poorly, and Sir J. Falstaff as bad as any." It is likely that Restoration audiences, having developed a taste for the more elevated style of French theater, would have thought rather "rustic" a play in which country virtue triumphed so easily over the worldly sophistication of a character like Sir John Falstaff. Whatever the reasons for the less-than-enthusiastic responses, *The Merry Wives* was, like so many other Elizabethan plays, now considered "old-fashioned" and ripe for adaptation. The result was John Dennis' *The Comical Gallant or the Amours of Sir John Falstaff*, which opened in 1702 at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane.

Dennis' reshaping of the original text illustrated the kind of comedic "unity" that the rational, enlightened eighteenth-century audiences would have thought lacking in Shakespeare's original text. Dennis centered his plot on young Fenton and the love interest with Anne Page. Mistress Ford became Fenton's aunt, as well as the go-between in his attempts to win Anne's hand, thereby eliminating the need for Mistress Quickly. In Dennis' version, it is Fenton who encourages Falstaff to pursue the merry wives, and it is Fenton who enlists the aid of the Host of the Garter Inn to instigate a quarrel between Sir Hugh Evans and Dr. Caius, thus hoping to deflect Ford's plans to marry Anne to Slender and Mistress Ford's plans to marry her to Caius. Every turn and twist of plot in Dennis' adaptation depended on Fenton's romantic motivations.

A Play Comes to Life

In 1721, the theater in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, revived something closer to Shakespeare's original play, and it enjoyed considerable success in its own right for some time. The eighteenth century, a period of Shakespearean revival, seemed to be comfortable with the bawdiness of Shakespeare's text. An acting version published in 1773 omitted the Latin grammar lesson, much of the fourth act, and part of the fifth, but what remained was essentially Shakespeare's original script. The play was also performed in the United States as early as 1770, in Philadelphia, and as early as 1773 in New York, and has remained a staple of American theater ever since.

In the nineteenth century, when Victorian sensibilities found the Falstaff of *The Merry Wives* too gross for their tastes, the play actually had its greatest success as an opera. The first, by Frederic Reynolds and H. P. Bishop, opened at Drury Lane in 1824. Composer Arthur Sullivan wrote the music for another operatic version that had numerous stagings on both sides of the Atlantic through the end of the century.

Interestingly, the major musical adaptations of the nineteenth century were not British, but German and Italian. Nicolai's 1849 *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Verdi's 1893 *Falstaff* both reflect the aesthetic concerns that had motivated John Dennis in his adaptation in the previous century. Both underscore the love interest between Fenton and Anne Page, and both reduce the number of episodes. The fact that Shakespeare's comedy translates so successfully into musical versions attests to the play's ability to speak to successive generations as well as its adaptability to a variety of theatrical forms.

Compared to the attention usually given to Shakespeare's tragedies and romantic comedies, *The Merry Wives* has not been the focus of much critical study in the twentieth century, nor have there been interpretations that have challenged or revolutionized theatrical form, but there have been some memorable productions. Taking his cue from elements of the text, such as William Page's remark that it is a "raw rheumatic day" (3.1.44) and Mistress Page's invitation to "laugh this sport over by a country fire" (5.5.236), Oscar Asche produced a "wintery" *Merry Wives* at the Garrick Theatre in 1911, with characters dressed in mittens and mufflers and the stage covered in four inches of salt to represent snow. Asche returned to the play in 1929, directing and playing Falstaff in a modern-dress production which

included Anne Page "riding pillion (that is, as passenger) on Fenton's motor-bicycle." Komisarjevsky, in a 1935 production at Stratford, England, abandoned the traditional timber houses and the trees of Windsor for a set that he described as "a highly decorated birthday cake of many tiers." Forty-four years after Oscar Asche, Glen Byam Shaw created, also at Stratford, a robust and wintery *Merry Wives* with icicles and wood fires, and like Asche, was uniformly criticized for his wintry setting.

More recently, Trevor Nunn and John Caird, the creative team behind the internationally successful *Cats*, mounted *The Merry Wives* in 1979 at Stratford. Bill Alexander's 1985 production, also at Stratford, set the play in the 1950's, with Mistresses Ford and Page comparing love letters while sitting under hair dryers at the beauty parlor. It was a witty production, according to the London Times, of a "new powerful bourgeois class that was emerging in a time of upward mobility."

Chicago Shakespeare Artistic Director first directed *The Merry Wives* in 1997. Setting the production in the late 1600s, she and her design team clothed the citizens of Windsor and its in the romantic, just over-the-top fashions of *The Three Musketeers*: lace collars, petticoats and cuffs abounded and broad-rimmed hats sat atop the men's lavish, shoulder-length wigs. That same period afforded Ford, in contrast, to be unadorned as a plain-clothed Puritan, in brown, with a hat reminiscent of our Pilgrim forefathers. Laundry hung outside to dry—providing the perfect screen for Falstaff's formidable form. Mr. Ford was played by Greg Vinkler, who in CST's current production, will take on Ford's nemesis, Sir John Falstaff. Gaines and set designer James Noone (see "How Do You Get To Windsor, Maine," page 30).

Why such variations in staging? In bringing his or her vision of a play to the stage, a director hopes to illuminate the text in such a way so as to engage audiences in, what the director feels, are the essentials of the script. The production history of *The Merry Wives* suggests that whether the interpretation embraces traditional Elizabethan costuming and setting or whether it locates itself in the English suburbs of the 1950's, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* maintains an energy and vitality that is almost irresistible on the stage. ❄️

A Play Comes to Life

An Interview



with the Director

Barbara Gaines, Artistic Director and founder of Chicago Shakespeare Theater, talks with Chicago Shakespeare Director of Education Marilyn Halperin and Literary

Associate Beth Charlebois about her production of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Q: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is one of Shakespeare's plays which has had the least ink spent on it over the past four centuries. It's hard to find a scholar who takes the play seriously. What should matter to us as an audience watching this play?

A: For me, it's all about forgiveness. I would never have chosen this play if the lines at the end weren't about, "Come on, Sir John, come home and have dinner with us and we'll talk and we'll laugh and we'll eat." That's grace. That's the kind of grace that all of us need in our lives in forgiving the people that have hurt us or deceived us. Is your heart big enough to say, "I forgive you—come on, let's meet on a whole different level now. Can we forget the past and just go on?" That's what it says to me, and I think that state of grace which the



play comes to is reason enough to do it—besides for the fun of the characters!

Q: Do you think there's anything to the old folklore that it was Queen Elizabeth who wished Falstaff to return to Shakespeare's stage—and in love?

A: It's a great story. But Falstaff isn't someone who can fall in love because he is much too much of a narcissist to be able to give over his soul to someone else. But he can pretend to fall in love, and then the women get the better of him. I can't imagine that a queen, who had successfully fended off every ambitious suitor throughout her reign, would not have thought that was quite delicious!

Q: Is this the same Falstaff we came to know in Shakespeare's History plays?

A: His language isn't as clever, but his spirit is the same. It's true that he doesn't have the brilliant speeches that he has in the other plays. They seem to lack the depth. But since that Sir John is our Sir John, we will use the character who Shakespeare created in the *Henry IV's*, and put that character in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. He's just not the same when confronted with the supremacy of the female sex. He doesn't stand a chance. It was one thing to make fun of Hal. But don't make fun of women!

Q: And your view of the women in this play?

A: a) Flawed. b) Fun. c) Fun and flawed. A great sense of spirit, and I love their energy.

Q: Like so many of Shakespeare's plays, we're back to a story of unfounded, irrational jealousy. But this time, we're inhabiting a world of comedy, not the tragedy of *Othello* or the romance of *Cymbeline*.

A: Since it's a comedy, the ramifications are not profound. Right away, you're taken into a different world. Even the jealous couple ends up healthier in the end because the guy learns a lesson. I see it as such a paper-thin jealousy. One that makes people laugh. One that will not kill. I think at the root of all jealousy is self-hatred and self-doubt. Carried to an

A Play Comes to Life

extreme, these very human qualities are very dangerous to us.

Q: Do we end up identifying with the jealous husband of comedy in a different way?

A: Comedy has to come from the most intimate, true place, or it will not be comedy and no one will laugh. The reason that Greg Vinkler's *Malvolio* was such a success was that the Puritan turned into Romeo. He got on his knees, he started reading the letter, his legs started moving, and he was Romeo—the Romeo in each of us. Our first love.

It's essential that we feel the pain in comedy, that we identify with the pain of jealousy. And by feeling that pain, then the actor will take us from the pain to a ridiculous moment. And we'll be able to laugh not only at him, but at ourselves. That's the joy of comedy. You have to start out in absolute truth, which means it's going to hurt a little bit. And then we flip over to the other side, "I can't believe it. That was hilarious! I did that once..." So if you start out with comedy being truth, all great comedy hurts—and then it makes you laugh.

Q: Does Falstaff ever feel the kind of hurt you're talking about?

A: Well in our show he will—he can't get into his girdle! The first thing you'll see of Falstaff is Bardolph, Pistol and Nym trying to get him into his girdle because he's very self-conscious about his weight. And then he puts on his hairpiece—and he's a new man. He's very vain, and that vanity comes from enormous insecurity.

Q: How will Falstaff end up?

A: In a place of humiliation and shame. Everybody has humiliated him. And it's public humiliation. My guess is that you can't change the spots on a leopard, so we'll do something theatrical that makes you know that yes, he is feeling shame, yes he is humiliated—but it's probably not going to change him at all. He's probably just not going to choose Windsor for a summer vacation. He'll go to Cornwall next year!



Renderings by Costume Designer Mariann Verheyen

A Play Comes to Life

Q: Is Shakespeare really saying anything particularly subversive in giving these two women—who are also wives—the upper hand in his Windsor?

A: Windsor is a male-dominated society. As married women, they've already lost their power in the world, and now they're ruling their own homes. We see that their power is in their own homes. They decide they'd better make the best of a bad situation. And they do. It shows how clever they are. I don't think they are people who are going to go to parliament and start a riot for women's rights. They're going to work in the subtle ways that women for thousands of years have been working. When there's a job to be done, a woman can find her way around most any obstacle. ✧*

Up-Close-And- Personal Two cast members respond to "Merry" matters



photo: Jennifer Grand

Q: A generation after "Women's Lib," men share the top corporate spots (and corner offices) with women, and women share the kitchen with men. But in your family, is it still the woman who rules the roost?



Ora Jones
(Mistress Page)

A: My parents are and always have been equals in their marriage and in raising a family. They both served in the Air Force; they both worked outside the home; they both cooked and cleaned; and they both took turns denying responsibility for the congenital insanity of their offspring. At least four times a week one would say to the other, 'YOUR children...' And of course we got to hear rousing choruses of, 'Go ask your mother, go ask

your father,' and the ever-popular, 'Wait until your (insert other parent here) gets home.'

My parents were smart and sadistic enough to know that the only way to get past us was to double-team us. If one was mad at us, there was no sense running to the other: we'd just get it worse over there. Both sports fans, their techniques and strategies for chores, discipline, and torture were genius. The upside of this of course was, as we knew we could not divide them in times of trouble, neither could anyone or anything else in the universe. They are now, always have been, and always will be together.

Q: Has jealousy ever gotten the best of you?



Ross Lehman
(Mr. Ford)

A: Jealousy has gotten me in its grips many times. I used to write plays. I had a friend who also wrote plays. He asked me to read his and give him any feedback I could. I read

the play. It was brilliant. It was the best new play I'd ever read. It was called *Marvin's Room*, and it later became a rather famous play. I called my friend and told him that it was one of the best plays I'd read in a long while, that I thought he was a true talent and that I had nothing but admiration for the play and him.

The whole time I was talking to him I was dying inside because I knew that I'd never written anything that good. I was so jealous of him because he was a witty, really handsome, popular, jovial, charming, and now (I was loathe to admit) a brilliant playwright. He made me feel like a loser. I wanted to live his life. A few years later he died, much too young, much too soon. I've tried very hard to not be jealous of anyone again. Now, if I feel really jealous of someone, I ask myself if I would really want to trade places with them. The answer is usually "no," because I find that I really do have what I want in life—because I've worked really hard to get it and I've taken my quests very seriously. If you do that, you usually get what you want. Nobody has it all. I don't ask for anybody else's life anymore. ✧*

A Play Comes to Life

How Do You Get to Windsor, (Maine)?



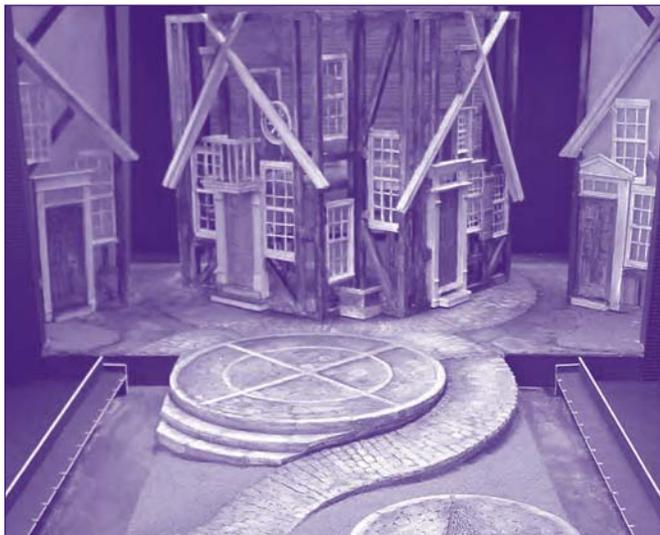
The Merry Wives of Windsor (Windsor, England, that is) cross the pond to England for CST's production. Director Barbara Gaines explains the journey.

Q: How do your ideas for the setting of a play travel from your imagination to the designer's?

A: When I read a play, images come to me as if it were a movie playing in my brain. Then the designer and I have an initial meeting with lots of books and pictures to decide what works. I try to find words to describe what's going on in my imagination. It's tricky, because "blue" may mean something different to you than to me. The key is to ignite a flame in the designer and let them discover the place for themselves.

Q: What about New England made you decide to place the story there?

A: The set designer, Jim Noone, and I both grew up in New England. We love the architecture of the coast and could imagine the life of Windsor told through images of coastal Maine. I really miss the autumns there and told Jim to incorporate the wonderful colors of a New England fall into the set.



Q: *Merry Wives* is Shakespeare's only play about ordinary people living in a small town in Elizabethan England. So why did you choose to place the story in colonial America?

A: We landed on 1750 because it's before the American Revolution when you can still talk about the king and knights. The characters are just middle-class pioneers living their everyday lives. From a costuming standpoint, the 1750s work because it's a period when people still wore wigs, and I imagine Falstaff trying on several of them to see which fits his outfit!

Q: What steps do you take after the design elements are decided to make sure your ideas work with the play?

A: I re-read the entire play very closely to be sure that our ideas, place, and setting are consistent with Shakespeare's language. There were no red flags to indicate that this couldn't work. It doesn't really matter if it's set in Elizabethan England or colonial America. It's about a small town and the people who live there, forming a community. ✨



Set model by Scenic Designer James Noone

Classroom Activities



Theater Warm-ups

A brief physical and vocal warm-up can help your students move from a “classroom mode” to a “studio mode.” It sets the tone for a student learning Shakespeare in a theatrical sense as well as a literary sense.

Every actor develops his/her own set of physical and vocal warm-ups. Warm-ups help the actor prepare for rehearsal or performance not only physically, but also mentally. The actor has the chance to focus on the work at hand, forgetting all the day-to-day distractions of life, and beginning to assume the flexibility required to create a character. The body, the voice and the imagination are the actor’s tools.

Physical Warm-ups

Getting Started

- * creates focus on the immediate moment
- * brings students to body awareness
- * helps dispel tension

Begin by asking your students to take a comfortable stance with their feet shoulder-width apart, toes pointing straight ahead, knees relaxed. Ask them to inhale deeply through their noses, filling their lungs deep into their abdomen, and exhale through their mouths. Repeat this a few times and ask them to notice how their lungs fill like a six-sided box, creating movement in all six directions.

Warm up from the Top of the Body Down

(This entire process should take about seven to ten minutes.)

- * gentle movement helps increase circulation, flexibility, and body readiness
- * increases physical and spatial awareness

(a) Begin by doing head-rolls to the left and to the right, about four times each way, very slowly. Then do a series of shoulder rolls to the back and to the front, again very slowly, and emphasizing a full range of motion.

(b) Stretch each arm toward the ceiling alternately, and try to pull all the way through the rib cage, repeating this motion six to eight times.

(c) Next, with particular care to keep knees slightly bent, twist from the waist in each direction, trying to look behind. Again, repeat six to eight times.

(d) From a standing position, starting with the top of the head, roll down with relaxed neck and arms until the body is hanging from the waist. Ask the students to shake things around, making sure their bodies are relaxed. From this position, bend at the knees, putting both hands on the floor. Stretch back up to hanging. Repeat this action about four times. Then roll back up—starting from the base of the spine, stack each vertebra until the head is the last thing to come up.

(e) Repeat the deep breathing from the beginning of the warm-up. Ask the students to bring their feet together, bend their knees, and keeping their knees together ask the students to rotate their knees in a circle parallel to the ground six to eight times. Repeat in the other direction. Return to standing.

(f) Pick up the right foot, rotate it inward six to eight times, and then do the same with the left foot. Repeat with outward rotation of the foot. Take a few moments and shake out the entire body.

Classroom Activities

Vocal Warm-ups

Your vocal warm-up should follow your physical warm-up directly

(This entire process should take about seven minutes.)

- * helps connect physicality to vocality
- * begins to open the imagination to performance possibilities

- Ask students to gently massage and pat the muscles of their faces. This will help wake up the facial muscles.
- Ask students to stick their tongues out as far as possible—repeat this with the tongue pointing up, down, and to each side. (This process will probably seem strange, but can be made silly and fun, while accomplishing the necessary vocal warm-up. When students see you going through these exercises with commitment, that’s often all they need to draw them in.) Repeat this exercise once or twice.
- Ask students to put their lips gently together and blow air through them, creating a “raspberry.”
- Next, hum, quietly, loudly, and across the entire vocal range. The vocal instrument loves to hum. Explore all the resonating spaces in the body, by moving the sound around. Humming helps to lubricate.
- Create the vowel sounds, overemphasizing each shape with the face —A, E, I, O, and U—with no break.
- Choose two or three tongue-twisters—there are some listed below. Again overemphasizing the shape of each sound with the lips, tongue, jaw, and facial muscles, begin slowly with each tongue-twister, and gradually speed up, repeating until the speed is such that the enunciation is lost.

Tongue Twisters

- red leather, yellow leather ... (focus on the vertical motion of the mouth)
- unique New York... (focus on the front to back movement of the face)
- rubber, baby, buggie, bumpers... (focus on the clear repetition of the soft plosives)
- Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers... (focus on the clear repetition of hard plosives)

One of the actors at Chicago Shakespeare Theater likes to describe the experience of acting Shakespeare as the “Olympics of Acting.” Shakespeare’s verse demands a very flexible vocal instrument, and an ability to express not only the flow of the text, but the emotional shifts which are suggested by the variations in rhythm and sound. In light of the sheer volume of words, some of which are rarely—if ever—used in modern vocabulary, the actor must also be prepared to help the audience with his body, as well. An actor acting Shakespeare must go through each word of his text, determine its meaning, and then express it clearly to his audience. This requires a very physically demanding style. The physical and vocal warm-up is the actor’s basis for each performance.

Stage Pictures

- * shows how varied interpretation is: there is no wrong answer
- * encourages the students to interpret concepts with their whole bodies
- * begins to show how the body interprets emotion

You will need a list of very strong descriptive, colorful, emotional words from the script for this activity.

Ask your actor-students to begin walking around the room. Ask them to fill up the entire space, exploring pacing, what it would feel like to be a different weight, a different height, and ask them to move the center of their body into different places. Encourage them to see if they feel any emotional differences within these changes. Giving them about three minutes to explore these changes, see if you notice any particularly interesting discoveries. Encourage these discoveries without necessarily drawing focus to individual students, as this is a self-reflective activity, but perhaps suggest

Classroom Activities

to the group they might “Try what it feels like if you slow your pace, hunch your shoulders, droop your head, and move your center into your knees.”

After a few minutes of this exploration, ask your actor-students to find a “neutral” walk. Explain that they are going to create a stage picture as an entire group. You will give them a word, and then count down from seven. After those seven beats, you will say freeze, and they must create a photograph of the word you have given them, with their entire body, collectively. Comment on the emotions you feel from their stage picture. After a couple of words, split the group in half—half will be in the space and half will be audience. Repeat the process, encouraging the audience’s reactions after each tableau. This might be a good time to discuss balance, stage direction, and the use of levels as effective variation for the audience’s visual interpretation. (*This activity should take about ten minutes.*)

Shakespeare’s characters are often very physically broad. There were crippled characters, old people, clowns, star-crossed lovers, and more. These characters call for the actors to figure out how they move. If the character is greedy, should his center be in a big fat belly? The actor must be prepared to experiment with the character’s body.

Mirroring

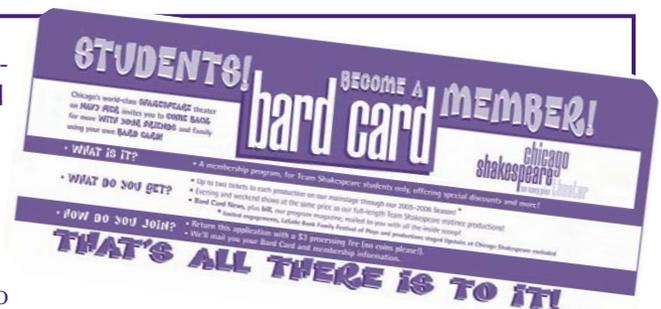
- * helps build trust within the ensemble
- * encourages the students to “listen” with all their senses
- * helps the students reach a state of “relaxed readiness,” which will encourage their impulses, and discourage their internal censors

Either ask your actor-students to partner up, or count them off in pairs. Ask them to sit, comfortably facing their partner, in fairly close proximity. Explain to them that they are mirrors of each other. One partner will begin as the leader, and the other partner will move as their reflection. Explain to the actor-students that they must begin by using smaller, slower movements, and work up to the maximum range of movement that their partner can follow. Encourage the partners to make eye-contact and see each other as a whole picture, rather than following each other’s small motions with their eyes. Switch leaders and repeat. After the second leader has had a turn, ask the actor-students to stand and increase their range of movement. Switch leaders and repeat. After the second leader has had a turn, tell them that they should keep going, but there is no leader. See what happens, and then discuss. (*This activity should last about ten minutes.*)

Many actors will tell you that learning the lines is the easy part; making it come out of their mouths as if for the first time is the hard part, especially with Shakespeare. Shakespeare can sound like a song, but how do you make it sound like real people talking to each other? Actors listen to each other, and try to respond to what they hear in the moment of the play. Listening is a very important part of acting; it keeps the moment real.

The **Bard Card Program** encourages Team Shakespeare students who first attend Chicago Shakespeare Theater on a field trip to return on their own with friends and family. Bard Card students members may purchase two tickets to each full-length, mainstage show at \$15 each for the 2004–2005 Season. The two-year membership is designed to bridge the gap between a school trip and a student’s personal life. The program’s mission is to make tickets affordable to students, so they learn how to make Shakespeare and theater a continuing part of their lives.

Your students will be receiving information and application for the Bard Card in their program book when they come to the Theater. Please encourage them to consider becoming members!



Classroom Activities



Theater Exercises

Each of these exercises is meant to open and expand your students' imaginations, increase their sense of "ensemble" or teamwork, and bring them "into the moment." These are some of the most fundamental and crucial elements of an actor's training. Their imaginations will allow them to believe the situation of the play, their sense of ensemble will bring them together with their scene partners to create the relationships necessary to the movement of the play, and their willingness to be in the moment will allow them to live in the play in such a way as to make it

believable to their audience. In each of these exercises the use of students as audience, and constructive reflection from that audience, will be helpful to the ensemble of your classroom. Remember, there is no wrong answer, only different interpretations—encourage them!

Zing! Ball

(This exercise requires a soft ball about 8-12 inches in diameter.)

- * helps the ensemble grow together
- * helps the students let go of their internal "censor" and begin tapping into their impulses
- * brings the physical and the vocal actor tools together

Ask the students to stand in a circle, facing in. Explain that the ball carries with it energy. This energy is like a feedback loop that increases the energy, speed, and focus of the entire group by the amount that each actor-student puts into the ball. The idea is to keep the ball moving in the circle without letting the energy drop. There should be no space between throw and catch. There should be no thought as to whom the actor-student will throw the ball to next. As the ball is thrown, to keep the intensity of the energy, the actor-student must make eye contact with the person he is throwing the ball to, and at the moment of release, the throwing actor-student should say "Zing!" Note: Encourage the actor-students to experiment with the way they say "Zing!" It could be loud or soft, in a character voice, or in whatever way they wish, as long as it is impulsive and with energy. *(This activity lasts about five minutes.)*

Shakespeare has love scenes, sword fights, betrayals, and all sorts of relationships in his plays. An ensemble must have the trust in each other to make a performance believable, without any of the actors getting hurt. They must be able to experiment, follow their impulses, and create character without the fear of failure. Shakespeare wrote many clues about his characters in his text, but the actor must be given license to find his character, and his relationship with the rest of the characters in the script.

Zing! Ball without a Ball

(This activity takes five to seven minutes.)

- * asks the students to make their imagination clear to the ensemble
- * focuses the students on physical detail

This exercise builds on Zing! Ball. Take the ball out of the circle and set it aside. Take an imaginary Zing! Ball out of your pocket. Grow this ball from a tiny rubber ball into a huge balloon. Using "Zing!," toss the ball to an actor-student across the circle, and as it floats down, ask the actor-student to catch it with the same weight and speed as you threw it. Then ask that actor-student to recreate the ball into a different weight and size, making it clear to the rest of the circle how they've changed it. In the same way as Zing! Ball, work around the circle.

The wide range of vocabulary in Shakespeare's plays can often be intimidating as one reads the scripts. The actor's job is to make the language clear, and this is often accomplished by very specific physical gesturing.

Classroom Activities



Before You Read the Play

(This "Before You Read" section is also helpful in preparing students who will not be reading the play.)

As a Class

1. Create the beginnings of a *Merry Wives* bulletin board that your students add to as you read through the play. Look for pictures of some of the play's predominant money, food, foreigners, a laundry basket! Look for pictures that conjure up a few of the play's main characters. As you work through the play, encourage students to add their own pictures, quotes, related phrases, articles to the board—and always use it as a kick-start for discussion.
2. (To the teacher: Select lines from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* that reflect the different social groups within the play; for example, Falstaff as a nobleman, Mistresses Ford and Page as middle-class housewives, Mistress Quickly and Peter Simple as servants, Doctor Caius and Sir Hugh Evans as foreigners. Distribute a line to each of your students on a slip of paper, not revealing the character who spoke it or the social group he or she represents. Since the students have not yet begun to read the play, the focus here is not on the characters themselves but rather on the language that the characters speak. It is not important at this point that students know the characters who speak these lines.)

Look at your line/s, and as you begin to walk around the room, say it aloud again and again without addressing anyone. Let the nature of the line and the way you say it affect the rhythm and pace at which you walk around the room. Then randomly pick up or slow down the pace of your walk and notice how it affects your reading of the line. Now regroup in a circle, each student in turn delivering his or her line to a classmate opposite him or her in the circle.

Sit down as a group and discuss the lines. Do the lines allow you to imagine anything about the characters who speak them? Are there lines that might possibly have been spoken by the same character? Do any of the lines suggest a status or occupation? Which of the lines do you think were spoken by men? By women? Remember that this is an idea or brainstorming session; none of your ideas can be wrong! Let your imagination go as you think about the world of the play you've just entered.

3. (To the teacher: In *The Merry Wives*, the characters' various verbal traits are a source of much of the play's humor. Shakespeare exploits these differences in the way characters speak—their pronunciation, word choice, and so forth—to create a lot of the "misunderstanding" and confusion that results from linguistic differences. The point of the language game is to identify varieties of speaking and to determine how these speech patterns affect the way others view us. In short, the focus is analytical, not judgmental.) This is a language game that tests students' creativity and ability to think quickly. In groups of about ten, have students stand in a large circle. One student begins the story with a line such as, "While I was at home last night, all of a sudden..." and then continues improvising the narrative. The idea is to change the "style" of the language of the story based on a specific context, which you, the teacher, call out. The narrative continues; only the style of the language changes. Some of these different styles include soap opera, western, newscast, sitcom, musical comedy, street-corner punk, melodrama, opera, talk show announcer, and so forth. As the first speaker comes to a natural "break" in the story, you call out "Newscast!" at which point the second student continues the narrative in the style of a newscaster. If the student stops or "gets stuck" in any way, the others point to him/her and yell "Die, Die, Die!!!" to which the student must "die" in the style of a newscaster. That student is then out of the game. The next student continues the narrative when you call out the next style. And so forth and so forth until everyone is "dead" except one. The narrative then ends.)

The characters in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* represent a variety of social groups: noblemen, middle-class citizens, servants and followers, and non-natives living in or visiting Windsor. Each of these groups has its own way of speaking and behaving as well as its own code of ethics.

Classroom Activities

Whenever each of us speaks English in our everyday lives, our speech patterns reflect the situation that we are involved in. That is, we speak in different "registers" depending on who our listeners are. Our ability to "switch codes" determines to a large degree whether our language is considered appropriate or inappropriate. For example, most of us would admit that we do not speak to a person of authority or respect (such as a clergyman, a family physician, or a 90-year-old grandparent) in the same way that we speak to a close friend or a kid brother or sister. Everything changes in our speech: the grammar, the vocabulary, the conversational topic, the body language.

The language game illustrates the differences in language based on the "group," which really determines the language that members of that group speak. Now think about the groups that are a part of your own lives. These groups cover a wide range of people. One may be a group based on family. Another might be the friends that you see during and after school or work. Still another is the racial or ethnic group that you belong to. There are many more that touch us on a daily basis. Some of these groups we are born into; others we choose for ourselves as we get older.

Which group do you identify with most strongly? Is there one group that seems to define who you are as a person? Is this a group that you were born into or one that you chose for yourself? What values or beliefs seem characteristic of this group? How do these different groups affect your behavior and the choices you make for yourself? Are there times when two or more of these groups seem to be in conflict with each other? Are there differences in language between one group and another? How can the language "rules" of one group violate the code of ethics of another group? Open these questions up to class brainstorming and discussion.

- 4.** *(To the teacher: The following activity works well with large groups. Using pieces of construction paper, choose two colors to represent two different social groups. Pin strips of one color on the backs of every player except five; these five become the "outsiders" on whose backs are pinned the second color. None of the players know which group he or she belongs to. As the players begin to walk around the room, they are instructed to talk to and "associate" with only the members of their own group. The object of the activity is to identify who the outsiders are and to demonstrate what it feels like.)*

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, it is the outsiders who seem to disrupt the everyday lives of Windsor's citizens. As you think about the groups that are part of your everyday lives, what happens when an "outsider" enters the group? Think about times in your life when you were perhaps an outsider; that is, did you ever find yourself among a group of people in which you were the only member of a particular ethnic, racial, or religious group? Have you ever moved from one city to another, or from one state to another? How did it feel to be the "new kid in town" or the "new kid in class"? Have you ever been teased for your "accent"? No matter what the situation, how did the role of outsider make you feel? How important is the idea of "belonging"?

- 5.** The "outsiders" who appear in *The Merry Wives* represent two distinct groups: the native Englishmen who visit Windsor and the non-Englishmen who reside there. Those who speak English as their second language are Dr. Caius, a French physician, and Sir Hugh Evans, a Welsh parson. Their use of the English language provides an abundant source of comedy in *The Merry Wives*.

But differences in dialects can be heard not only in those people who speak English as a second language, but also in those of us who speak English as our first language. People "native" to the eastern United States, for example, pronounce words differently from those who have been raised in the Midwest. Southerners speak a regional dialect that is very different from the English of the Rocky Mountain states.

In *The Merry Wives*, one of Parson Evans' most noticeable speech patterns is his use of the letter p instead of b at the beginning of words, so that the word brain becomes prain, and better becomes petter. As an exercise in language variety, take a commonly-known "speech," such as the Pledge of Allegiance, and substitute the letter "p" for the letter "f." You might want to write out the pledge first and then try reciting it in the new "dialect." Here are the first two lines to get your started:

Classroom Activities

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America,
And to the republic for which it stands...

Now try it a second time, changing all the p's to b's. Then create your own language rules and apply them to the Pledge of Allegiance once again.

6. As Shakespearean scholar David Bevington has pointed out, "Shakespeare's comic types endear themselves chiefly through their verbal traits." Can you think of characters from film or television who make us laugh by their use—or misuse—of language? What precisely is the source of the humor? What does this type of humor depend on? Do you think a foreigner would "get" the jokes in the same way a native speaker would? Imagine what it would be like for you to watch a sitcom in another country—even if you understood the language.

7. Shakespeare's characters and situations can seem far removed from our own lives in late twenty-first century Chicago. We might even wonder, "What does all this have to do with us?" But are these characters and situations really so far from what we know and experience today? *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a comedy that touches on a variety of themes: love, trust, greed, jealousy, hypocrisy, revenge, mistrust of outsiders—to name only a few. As you prepare to read the play, consider the following as questions for group discussion:

From the films and TV shows that you know, can you think of examples in which greed and revenge are exploited for comic purposes? Is there a difference between revenge that is treated comically and revenge that is treated seriously? In what ways can "hypocrisy" be funny? If you consider our modern notion of the term "romantic comedy," are there examples of sitcoms, for example, in which the notion of "love" is used to make us laugh?

Post-9/11, has our own view and treatment of foreigners as a subject changed at all? How would you compare, for example, Whoopi Goldberg's sitcom to *Windsor*?

8. Seeing and reading drama requires that we use our imaginations to fill in parts that directors and writers can't show us. Shakespeare's work is full of beautiful descriptive poetry that may be difficult to understand at first. He wrote the following sections and others to help the audience form a mental image of the scene.

- Mistress Quickly's description of the gifts Mistress Ford has received. (2.2.48–62)
- Falstaff's description of being tossed into the Thames. (3.5.77–97)
- Mistress Page's description of Herme the Hunter (4.4.25–35)

a. Have someone read one of the speeches mentioned above to the class. Listen carefully. Make a list of the words or phrases that stick in your mind. Listen to the speech again. Try drawing the images the speech conjures up.

b. Try creating some of your own descriptive language. Work with a partner. Choose a photograph or painting and don't allow your partner to see it. See if you can describe the picture to your partner. She may even want to try to draw what she is imagining from our words. Show your partner the picture. How did you both do?

c. Individually, choose a place to sit and write for ten minutes. Try to select a location that is active, such as a school hallway, cafeteria or outside. Don't stop writing until the time is up. Just write the things you see, what you hear, how the place feels, even what you smell. Make your writing as descriptive as possible. Poets like Shakespeare rely on metaphors—comparisons of seemingly dissimilar things, like love and food—to describe abstract emotions and sensory experiences. Test out your metaphorical skills. If you would like to, share your piece with the class and see if they can tell where you were.

In Small Groups

9. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Shakespeare uses language as a means of "marking" characters—that is, the language spoken by individual characters is one way of defining who they are in relation to other characters in the play.

Classroom Activities

In a small-group brainstorming session, discuss ways in which language can define us as individuals. You might consider the following: How can the way we use language generate respect? Can you think of some individuals whose spoken language demands attention? Why? Can the way we use language cause others to laugh? What is there about a person's use of language that results in humor or even perhaps in ridicule?

- 10.** The romantic entanglements that Shakespeare dramatizes in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are the source of much of the play's humor. It's the age-old story of the battle of the sexes with a few unique twists. Nevertheless, the participants in this battle feel the same kind of jealousy and the need to "get even" that are a part of many modern relationships.

In your small groups, generate ideas about whether you feel there are differences between men and women in their approaches to romantic relationships. If you heard a story about an irrationally jealous individual, would you assume that the person was male or female? Why? In terms of the idea of revenge, do you think there are differences between men and women in the ways that they "get even"?

- 11.** What's in a name? Shakespeare has given some of the minor characters in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* names that are an everyday part of our language: Quickly, Shallow, Slender, Pistol, and Simple. An actor preparing for one of these roles knows that such names usually indicate something about the character's personality or behavior. In short, the actor has to "make the word come alive."

Choose one of the five names from above. Then select a simple everyday activity, such as combing your hair, tying your shoe, or brushing your teeth. Now in your small groups, take turns making each word come alive by performing the everyday activity to illustrate "quickly," "shallow," "slender," "pistol," and "simple." Be as creative as you can. Physicalize the word so that your classmates can determine which character you are portraying.

Now in your small group, consider each word and how it was portrayed. Do any of these words have both a positive and negative connotation? If any of these terms describe people that you know, then how would the way you say these words affect how you view these people?

- 12.** In groups of 4-6: Practice aloud—at each other with feeling!—the insults below that characters from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* sling at each other. If the meaning of a word is not clear, don't get stuck! Keep repeating the insult and you'll be closer to the meaning than you might think. Stay in your group, but now take turns throwing out each insult at the others. Then as quickly as you can, imagine a contemporary situation that might have provoked such a rebuke!

You Banbury cheese!	1.1.118
[You] latten bilbo!.....	1.1.146
Froth and scum, thou liest!.....	1.1.148
I say the gentleman had drunk himself out of his five sentences!	1.1.157–58
O base Hungarian wight, wilt thou the spigot wield!	1.3.19–20
Rogues, hence, avaunt, vanish like hailstones; go.	1.3.77–78
Let vultures gripe thy guts!	1.3.81
Thou art the Mars of Malcontents!	1.3.98
His guts are made of puddings.	2.1.31
I will find you twenty lascivious turtles ere one chaste man.	2.1.77–78
King-Urinal.....	2.3.31
Monsieur Mock-water	2.3.53–54

Classroom Activities

I will knog his urinals about his knave's costard.	3.1.13–14
This same scall, scurvy, cogging companion!.....	3.1.110–11
I'd rather be set quick i'th'earth, and bowl'd to death with turnips!	3.4.84–85
If I be served such another trick, I'll have my brains ta'en out and buttered, and give them to a dog for a New Year's gift.	3.5.6–8
[You] mountain of mummy!	3.5.17
Well said, brazen-face!.....	3.5.17
He shall die a flea's death.	4.2.138–39
You witch, you rag, you baggage, you polecat, you runnion!	4.2.170–72
I'll provide you a chain, and I'll do what I can to get you a pair of horns.	5.1.5–6
I think the devil will not have [you] damned, lest the oil that's in [you] should set hell on fire.....	5.5.35–36
Vile worm, thou wast o'erlook'd even in thy birth.	5.5.84
Have I lived to stand at the taunt of one that makes fritters of English?.....	5.5.143–44
She's a great lubberly boy.	5.5.184

On Your Own

13. With the information that you exchanged during the small- and large-group brainstorming sessions, select one of the following topics and prepare a short essay. If you choose to write a multi-paragraph essay, use the introduction to set up your topic for the reader. Make sure that you include a thesis statement that indicates to the reader your point of view on the topic.

Topic #1: Does the way we use language affect our perception of those around us?

Topic #2: Are there differences in the way males and females approach the term relationship?

Topic #3: Does identification with a particular group determine our individual behavior?

NOTE: Remember that for most writers of nonfiction—essays, editorials, biographical and autobiographical works, descriptive pieces, and so forth—it is a critical question that gets the writer going. The critical questions above are designed to generate argumentative responses; that is, the questions serve as prompts to generate your opinion and point of view on the topic. You support your point of view by giving reasons why you believe, for example, that the way we use language does (or does not) affect our perception of those around us.



As You Read the Play

(Act 1)

As A Class

14. Shakespeare enriches *The Merry Wives of Windsor* by including in the play minor characters whose idiosyncrasies are a source of their humor. The play, in fact, opens with three of these minor characters: Justice Shallow, his nephew Abraham Slender, and Sir Hugh Evans.

As you read through Act 1, what about these three characters' behavior would you consider idiosyncratic? Does the way these characters speak or the way they are dressed seem unusual in any way?

Classroom Activities

Considering what is hot and what is not in contemporary fashion, discuss items of clothing that were hot five years ago and out-of-style right now. Are there fashion trends that you consider unusual or unique in any way? Can people be considered idiosyncratic or eccentric because of the way they dress? Does being "unique" in one's dress have a positive or negative connotation in terms of clothing? What exactly about present-day fashion do you consider humorous? What might an "outsider" consider funny?

- 15.** Shakespeare is a master of "word play." For example, his frequent use of homonyms (words that sound alike but have different spellings and meanings) contributes to the general confusion and misunderstandings prevalent in comedy.

Take a look at the two lines between Shallow and Falstaff (1.1.109-110) and notice Shakespeare's use of the words council and counsel. Then as a group, come up with as quickly as possible as many homonyms as you can think of. Here are a few, to get you started: aisle/I'll/isle, break/brake, and bare/bear.

Now in your small groups, write a series of two-line scenes between two characters whose use of homonyms creates confusion. Here are some other homonym pairs to add to your list: son/sun, a notion/an ocean, discussed/disgust, board/bored, and fare/fair. Have fun!

- 16.** When we read a play, it is very often beneficial to "walk in the shoes" of the playwright. That is, if we try to think as the writer might have thought, we can get some insights into the story and the characters. For example, look at the entrances of Falstaff (1.1.103) and Dr. Caius (1.4.40) in Act 1. Why do you think Shakespeare has each of these characters enter the play as they do? As a class, brainstorm ideas on how each character's entrance seems to move the story forward.

Then with a number of students as directors, stage the entrance of Falstaff or Dr. Caius as each student-director thinks is best. Were the stagings similar or different? How does the staging affect the meaning of the scene? The humor? How can different stagings change the interpretation of a scene?

- 17.** The study of character contributes much to our understanding of a play. More often than not, we learn about an individual character's personality and temperament by way of (1) what the character says about himself or herself, (2) what others say about the character, (3) what the character does, and (4) what the character says about others.

Look, for example, at the opening of Act 1, scene 4 (lines 1-14) between Mistress Quickly, Dr. Caius' housekeeper, and John Rugby, Dr. Caius' servant. Have three students read the scene aloud. What do Mistress Quickly's words about John Rugby tell us about Rugby? About Mistress Quickly herself? Try this with other characters in the play...

- 18.** (*To the teacher: Prepare copies of Ford's speech in Act 2, scene 2, lines 225-45 without punctuation.*) Read through this passage several times, and insert commas or dashes at places where you think a brief pause is needed, and periods at points where you think a single thought ends. Now, open your texts and read it through again with the punctuation Shakespeare put in. How is the speech different? Why did he punctuate it the way that he did? What effect does it produce?

In Small Groups

- 19.** Using the play's opening sequence (1.1.1-67), in groups of three read the scene aloud. Sit in a circle as you read, making sure to make as much eye contact as possible with the person that you are addressing. Then repeat the reading, each taking different roles until everyone in your group has had the opportunity to read at least two of the three roles.

Where might the conversation among these three gentlemen take place? Which of the characters seem/s to be the most humorous? Did you notice any changes in your reading as you spoke the lines of two or three different characters?

Classroom Activities

- 20.** Trace through the opening of the play up to Sir John Falstaff's entrance and uncover each reference to Falstaff. Where is Falstaff as the three gentlemen are talking? How do you think these men feel about Sir John? Pick out the lines that justify your opinions.

Playwrights decide when a character will enter a scene. However, it is the director who decides how the character will enter and where the character will enter from. Now with a student from each group serving as director, stage Falstaff's entrance in Act 1. Then come together as a large group and present each of the scenes. How does the placement of a character (during and after his entrance) change the meaning or interpretation of a scene? Which of the scenes presented do you find the most effective? Why?

- 21.** Abraham Slender and Anne Page close the first scene of Act 1 (lines 247-293). Using one student as the director and two others as actors, stage the closing of 1.1. How do these two characters behave towards each other? Where, physically, might they stand in relation to each other as they get ready to enter the house for dinner? Then after viewing the scene, how would you describe the relationship between Slender and Anne Page? If you were casting these two parts for a stage or film version of the play, what actors and actresses would you consider for the roles of Abraham Slender and Anne Page?

- 22.** One of the best ways to get at the "through-line" or dramatic progression in a play is to give each scene a name or title that captures the heart of the action. Directors often use this technique to help actors (and themselves) during the rehearsal process.

In your small groups, give each of the scenes in Act 1 a name or title that you feel gets at the essence of the scene. Be as creative as you can in naming each scene. Then share your titles with the other groups. (This is an activity you can repeat through each act as you read the play.)

- 23.** The term "malapropism" describes the substitution of a word for another word that sounds similar, but means something entirely different. Young children do this all the time when they beg you, for example, to read the "destructions" and help them assemble a new toy! Many of the characters in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* fall into a lot of malapropism and generally confused speech throughout the play. In Act 1, Scene 1, Slender mangles a speech about his potential marriage to Anne Page. Work through that speech in small groups and identify as many malapropisms and general absurdities as you can. Then discuss how you would direct the actor performing this part to deliver such lines. Stage the results for the class and discuss. How does the scene change if the actors play the scene for laughs as opposed to trying to deliver these silly lines in a completely serious manner?

On Your Own

- 24.** A true wit who is never at a loss for words, Sir John Falstaff reveals to Nym and Pistol in Scene 3 his plans to seduce both Mistresses Page and Ford. In lines 61-70, Falstaff recounts to his two followers the amorous looks that Mistress Page has directed his way and what he plans to do about it.

On a separate sheet of paper, rewrite lines 61-70 as they might be spoken today. Don't just summarize Falstaff's speech. Try as much as possible to do a word-for-word rewrite, using contemporary language. You may choose to recast his speech in either (1) modern standard English or (2) your best street-slang, or colloquial English.

Then choose several monologues to be presented to the class. Do you think the modernized versions work as well as Shakespeare's original? What about the modernized version is humorous?

Classroom Activities

(Act 2)

As A Class

- 25.** The concept of revenge is a common thread both in Shakespeare's comedies and in his tragedies. In the comedies, however, the nature of the revenge is a good deal "sweeter" than in, for example, a play such as *Hamlet*.

When Mistresses Page and Ford come together to reveal the letters that Falstaff has sent them, they resolve to get even with him. Take a look at the speeches of Mistress Page (2.1.20-31) and Mistress Ford (2.1.52-66) in which the two wives express their feelings about Falstaff and the letters. The two women are angry and want to teach Falstaff a lesson. But in a comedy, anger is often played for laughs.

With several students volunteering to read the speeches of Mistresses Page and Ford, experiment with different acting intentions. For example, you might read the speeches as young women who have just received their first love letters. Or you might read the speeches as women who are offended by such inappropriate behavior. Or you might present women who find the letters extremely humorous. Then after the readings, discuss which approach contributes more to the humor of the play.

- 26.** In an attempt to trick Falstaff, Mr. Ford dons a disguise and poses as a Mr. Brook, a gentleman in love with Mistress Ford. His plan is to pay Falstaff to act as a go-between.

With several students reading aloud the scene between Falstaff and Ford-Brook (2.2.149-275), decide on a single acting intention for each character and take this intention to its extreme. But don't share your intention beforehand with the character that you are playing opposite!

For Falstaff, you might decide, for example, to present him as a man bragging to another man about his romantic conquests. Or you could decide to present Falstaff as a humble gentleman intent on helping a fellow gentleman.

How would you play Mr. Ford, who is pretending to be Mr. Brook? Do you think that Ford would present this disguised character as a lost soul who has loved Mistress Ford from afar for a very long time, or do you think that he might present him as a lascivious old man plotting to satisfy his physical desires?

Present several of these scenes to the class as a whole. Then discuss which intentions seem to work most effectively together.

In Small Groups

- 27.** The concept of humors (or "humours" in the British spelling) really has two meanings. One is the notion of personal idiosyncrasies that help to define dramatic characters and their behavior.

In medieval and Renaissance medical thinking, the humors were believed to be the four fluids that made up the constitution of the human body. Based on their proportions to each other, these four fluids were thought to determine, to a great degree, a person's general health and temperament and thus amounted to a type of early psychology.

For Renaissance medical practitioners, the four humors, or body fluids, were blood, said to produce a "sanguine" temperament; phlegm, which was associated with a "phlegmatic" temperament; yellow bile, which gave rise to a "choleric" temperament; and black bile, which produced a "melancholic" temperament.

Look up the meanings of sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic in a modern dictionary. Now get up on your feet and strike a pose that you feel represents each of these four Renaissance temperaments or personalities. Then discuss which characters from the play you feel best represent each of the four humors. What is it about the character's actions or behavior that make him or her sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, or melancholic? Then come together as a class to compare your findings.

Classroom Activities

On Your Own

- 28.** The Renaissance humors served as a kind of early pop psychology that attempted to categorize individuals based on their personalities and temperaments, much like today's notions of Type A versus Type B personalities or those traits associated with the twelve astrological signs. Prepare an essay in which you take one or more of the four Renaissance humors and discuss how they might relate to people that you know today. This is a writing activity that really touches on two rhetorical modes of exposition: a classification piece that uses the four humors as categories, combined with illustration in the form of examples that reflect each of the categories. In your opening paragraph, try to "hook" the reader by relating a brief anecdote about a friend or public figure and how they exemplify the humor or humors that you are discussing. Bend and mold the topic to make it work for you: take ownership of your own ideas.

(Act 3)

As a Class

- 29.** In addition to the main plot—the wives' plans to teach Falstaff a lesson—*The Merry Wives of Windsor* maintains an important subplot—the wooing of Anne Page.

As a class, create a word web on the board with Anne Page in the center. Draw a circle around her name. Then connect with a straight line radiating from the center the names of characters who come into contact with Anne Page (either through direct dialogue or through what you know about the story as it unfolds). Be selective about the characters you choose. Then create a second web with Falstaff in the center. Connect with lines those characters who come into direct contact with Sir John.

Now look at the two word webs that are on the board. Are there characters included in both word webs? Are these overlapping characters important to both plots of *The Merry Wives*? If so, how?

- 30.** *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a "broad" comedy—that is, one with little subtlety—that at times approaches farce. In most comedies of this type, the notion of deception as a means of "getting even" or "pulling the wool over one's eyes" is exploited as much as possible for comic purposes.

Who deceives whom in the play and for what purpose? Is self-deception (or delusion) apparent in *The Merry Wives*? If so, which character or characters do you think delude or deceive themselves in the play?

In Small Groups

- 31.** The play contains numerous references to Falstaff's size. As you trace through your reading up to this point, compile a list of words and phrases that Shakespeare uses to describe Sir John physically.

Costume designers often begin with such words and phrases from the playwright to help them determine how characters will be dressed on stage. Such clues, in addition to their study of a character's personality and social status, become a starting point for design ideas.

In your small groups, imagine that you are the design team that will design and construct the costumes for a production of *The Merry Wives* that will be set in 2004, with actors wearing costumes appropriate to the period. In addition to considering the words and phrases that describe Falstaff, as well as his personality and social status, you must also consider how much mobility the character has in the play. In other words, does the costuming need to be designed so that the character can move easily, or is movement not an important consideration? Now keeping all this in mind, how would you costume Falstaff for a modern-day interpretation of *The Merry Wives*?

Classroom Activities

- 32.** If there is one character in *The Merry Wives* whose actions become a part of all the scheming, conniving, and deceiving in the play, it is most likely Mistress Quickly. In your small groups, sketch on paper (stick figures work!) a tableau using the main characters in the play. Put Mistress Quickly in the center of the picture. Then decide how you would place the main characters in relation to Mistress Quickly. Which characters do you position closest to her in the picture? Which stand the farthest away from her? Then come together as a large group. Choose several students to be the main characters of *The Merry Wives* and create the tableaux of each of the small groups in front of the class. Then for each tableau, discuss why the characters were placed where they were.

(Act 4)

In Small Groups

- 33.** The first scene of Act 4 is a long "schoolbook" section during which Mistress Page asks Parson Evans to test the Pages' son William on the young man's knowledge of Latin, with Mistress Quickly on hand to add to the general confusion. During Shakespeare's time, Latin was the universal language of scholarship and training in the basics of Latin grammar was a major focus of an English schoolboy's education. Even though many of the people in Shakespeare's audience perhaps knew little Latin themselves, the exchange between Sir Hugh Evans and William, which Mistress Quickly repeatedly interrupts by comically translating the Latin words into English, undoubtedly produced many laughs because it is a scene in which the language of common folk confronts the pretentious language of the scholar.

This same type of linguistic confusion exists in our own society between different generations. In your small groups, come up with examples of words and phrases that mean very different things to you than they do to your parents. Then come together as a class and share your examples with the other groups. Now as a class project, compile a brief dictionary or phrase book that is meant for adults. Give it a catchy title—something like, *Talking to Your Kid in Five Easy Lessons*. You might decide to put together an actual dictionary with everything in alphabetical order. Or you might decide to prepare a phrase book with entries arranged by category, such as "At Home," "With Friends," "The Concert Scene," and so forth. Have fun with it!

- 34.** When Mistresses Ford and Page trick Falstaff for the second time, they dress him up as the fat woman of Brainford, the aunt of Mistress Ford's maid. Believing the old woman to be a witch, Mr. Ford reacts with an almost unnatural sense of horror and beats the old woman out of his house.

Using your library's resources, look up some information about medieval and Renaissance attitudes toward witchcraft and the supernatural. Then come together as a class and determine if your findings help explain Mr. Ford's behavior when he discovers the "old woman" in his house.

- 35.** At the end of Act 4, Mistress Quickly accompanies Falstaff to his chamber where she must convince him to go to the park at midnight. Interestingly, after Falstaff's second duping at the hands of Mistresses Ford and Page, Shakespeare does not attempt to show us how exactly Mistress Quickly persuades Falstaff to "risk" a third meeting with Mistress Ford. But, in fact, she does convince him.

In your small groups, brainstorm what you think Mistress Quickly says to Falstaff to get him to Windsor Forest. Write out the dialogue between the two characters as she encourages him to meet Mistress Ford for the third time. Then present each of the short scenes to the entire class.

On Your Own

- 36.** By the end of Act 4, Mistresses Ford and Page have informed their husbands of Falstaff's letters and their plans to teach him a lesson. In a sense, the main plot is pretty much resolved. However, there remains the subplot: Who will win Anne Page's hand in marriage?

Classroom Activities

Three suitors are pursuing Anne Page: Abraham Slender, Dr. Caius, and the young Fenton. Imagine that you are Anne Page. Given what you know about these three gentlemen, compose the following as a private entry in a journal or diary: a letter to one of these three suitors in which you tell him in honest terms why you will—or will never—marry him.

- 37.** List five of the major characters in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Write a single sentence for each that begins, "What I most want is..." Take a risk—there's not just one right answer! Then write a sentence for each character that begins, "What I'm most afraid of is..." Is there ever a situation when what one most wants is also what one most fears? Now, as a class, compare your sentences. How much agreement upon their motives is there?

(Act 5)

As a Class

- 38.** With seven students reading aloud Falstaff's long speech at the end of the first scene of Act 5 (5.1.15-30), each reads a line up to the period, or end mark of punctuation. Try several readings of the speech, increasing the emotional intensity in each successive line. You might begin as an angry Falstaff, building each line until the speech ends in a fury. Then try a reading with Falstaff as a man "twice beaten," intensifying each successive line until we see Falstaff as a whimpering fool. Then identify several other possible emotional responses to his situation and read the speech using each one.

How does each reading contribute to the comedy of the play? Do any of the readings seem more appropriate than others in the context of Act 5?

- 39.** Although we never get to see the wedding of Anne Page and Fenton, a stage picture, or "tableau" of the wedding party might be an interesting curtain call for a production of *The Merry Wives*. Have several students as directors create tableaus using the entire cast as the wedding party. Then have a student with a camera "shoot" the tableaus to compare. (And if a digital camera is available, so much the better!)

Some questions to consider: Where will Falstaff be placed in the picture? Where would you put Anne's two other suitors, Dr. Caius and Abraham Slender? Where is Mistress Quickly in the picture? Have fun with this one!

In Small Groups

- 40.** In Scene 5, Mistress Quickly leads a group of characters who sing a song to Falstaff. Shakespeare gives us words (lines 93-100) that in some productions are used as lyrics, but no music remains. As a small-group project, compose the music for the lyrics that Shakespeare provides us. If someone in the class plays the piano or guitar, try setting the music to a piano or guitar accompaniment, with other students supplying the vocals. Then tape the music and lyrics to share with the entire class.



After Reading the Play

As a Class

- 41.** In *The Merry Wives*, each time that Falstaff fails in his rendezvous with Mistress Ford, Master Ford appears as Brook to find out what has happened. And each time, Falstaff assures Ford (disguised as Brook) that the meeting will take place. However, the Falstaff of Act 5, after he has been beaten "as a woman," is perhaps a different Falstaff from the one we

Classroom Activities

encounter in Act 2 (2.2.259-75), prior to his first encounter with Mistresses Page and Ford, or in Act 3 (3.5.86-113), after he is thrown from the laundry basket into the Thames.

In groups of three, chorally read the following lines of Falstaff from the scenes outlined above. Think about the journey that Falstaff takes from the beginning to the end of the play. Try different emotional intentions for each of the three lines, keeping in mind that the audience should be able to see and hear any transformation that takes place in the character. Each of the lines below is said to Mr. Ford, disguised as Brook.

Act 2: Hang him, mechanical salt-butter rogue! I will stare him out of his wits; I will awe him with my cudgel: it shall hang like a meteor o'er the cuckold's horns. Master Brook, thou shalt know I will predominate over the peasant, and thou shalt lie with his wife. Come to me soon at night.

Act 3: Nay, you shall hear, Master Brook, what I have suffered to bring this woman to evil, for your good. Being crammed in the basket, a couple of Ford's knaves, his hinds, were called forth by their mistress to carry me in the name of foul clothes to Datchet Lane...it was a miracle to 'scape suffocation. And in the height of this bath...to be thrown in the Thames and cooled, glowing hot, in that surge, like a horseshoe—think of that, Master Brook!

Act 5: I went to her, Master Brook, as you see, like a poor old man, but I came from her, Master Brook, like a poor old woman. That same knave Ford, her husband, hath the finest mad devil of jealousy in him, Master Brook, that ever governed frenzy. I will tell you he beat me grievously, in the shape of a woman; for in the shape of a man, Master Brook, I fear not Goliath with a weaver's beam...Follow me; I'll tell you strange things of this knave Ford, on whom tonight I will be revenged, and I will deliver his wife into your hand.

After listening to several trios of Falstaffs, what stands out in terms of the way the character changes as he moves through the story of the play? Can you describe the emotional responses that you saw and heard that would distinguish the Falstaff in Acts 2, 3, and 5? Do you think there is a change in the character of Falstaff from the beginning to the end of *The Merry Wives*?

In Small Groups

42. The citizens of Windsor are simple folk whose lives revolve around domestic and small-town concerns. Much of the language of Windsor's citizens centers on words, phrases, and expressions that mirror the everyday aspects of country life. For example, images of food and the kitchen appear frequently in the speech of Windsor's inhabitants.

In your small groups, choose one act from the play and, as you trace through the act, list the food and kitchen images that you discover. How are these images used by the characters? As compliments? As insults? How do you think such images help to define the character who uses them?

Now create a menu for The Windsor Inn in which you make use of each of the character names and the food or kitchen items that you have associated with that character. A good place to start: the Abraham Slender Banbury Cheese Sandwich!

43. "Why is Falstaff fat?" is a question that for a long time has intrigued scholars, many of whom have written at length on why Shakespeare made the decision to create a character of such physical proportions. In your small groups, brainstorm the question and generate some ideas on how western culture perceives the concept of body weight. You might consider the following in your brainstorming sessions: Can you think of examples of the "fat person" as a "jolly old soul"? How does our perception of food relate to the notion of happiness or unhappiness? Have American perceptions of body size and shape changed since your parents or grandparents grew up? Is there evidence to prove this? Does Falstaff's size influence the way we feel about him in the play? If so, why?

Classroom Activities

- 44.** In stage productions, music is used to set a tone or mood for the audience. This music may occur prior to curtain and between acts. Within the performance itself, a traditional Elizabethan production might include a young man accompanying himself on a stringed instrument, such as a lute, singing a romantic tune to the woman he loves. Or there could be group singing, such as a rowdy drinking song sung by the patrons of an inn or tavern.

Imagine now that your group is the sound design team that will choose and record the score for a production of *The Merry Wives*. You have spoken to your director, who at this point is not sure what kind of music he wants. What he has told you is that (1) the production will be set in 2004, (2) the casting will be multiracial, and (3) the music should reflect both an urban and rural point of view. It is your job to come up with some ideas to present to your director.

Some questions to consider: What kind of music would you include in a production of the play set in the present? Would you use contemporary music, or could you use Elizabethan music even though your production is set in 2004? Could the music be of a timeless quality so that no specific era is made obvious? Should the music score be instrumental only, or should it include some vocals as well? Would there also be music within scenes to underscore dialogue? Is there a particular instrument that you feel should be featured in the music score? Would you create a musical "theme" for one or more of the play's main characters? What would Falstaff's theme sound like?

NOTE: Be as creative as you can. But before you dive into your CD inventory, keep these two things in mind: (1) Artistically, the music should illuminate the text in some way for the audience, and (2) when you tell the director of your production that you want to use the music of Jessica Simpson, Jay-Z, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the first thing he will ask you is WHY! So be prepared with an answer!

(P.S. The production you will see at Chicago Shakespeare Theater is set in the first half of the seventeenth century in pre-Revolutionary America—along the coast, in fact, of Maine!)

- 45.** Imagine that there is a new housing development being built in Windsor. Come up with a billboard or write a radio advertisement that tells potential home buyers what type of a community Windsor is. What kinds of things are encouraged or endorsed? What kinds of things are forbidden or discouraged? Who would be the ideal target audience for this advertisement? Feel free to let your imaginations go with this exercise!

On Your Own

- 46.** Despite all the deception and scheming that occur in *The Merry Wives*, the characters that Shakespeare has created are all ordinary people, not villains. Are there characters in the play that you like? Are there characters you dislike? To put it another way, are there characters whose actions you approve of? Disapprove of? Why?

Choose two characters from the play—one who could conceivably be your friend and one that you would probably never choose. Then prepare a short essay illustrating and justifying your feelings by citing examples of each character's actions, behavior, and overall personality and temperament.

- 47.** Falstaff's followers—Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol—are a merry trio, each of whom has his own particular style and approach to life. Choose one of these three characters and imagine that he is your best friend. He comes to you and tells you that he is tired of being a bachelor. Now write a personal ad for a computer dating service in which you outline his best qualities for "the woman of his dreams."

Classroom Activities



Preparing for the Performance

Just to Think About

48. In traditional Shakespearean theater, members of the audience (unlike that in most modern auditoriums) are always in view of each other. The experience of theater is one of community. We all are present and watching together a story that has been enacted many times for many years and for many people all over the world. The thrust stage at Chicago Shakespeare Theater is much like the stages of Elizabethan theaters and situates the action of the play with members of the audience facing each other around the stage. When during the performance do you become aware of other audience members? How do others' reactions affect your experience and your own reactions?

As a Class

49. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a comedy, and all ends well for the citizens of Windsor. But according to some Shakespearean scholars, like H. J. Oliver, "The joy of the majority is never achieved without the unhappiness of one."

Who do you think might be the "unhappy" character or characters at the end of the play? Do you sympathize with the unhappy ones? Why or why not? Could your responses change depending on how the characters are portrayed on stage? If so, how?

Think back to the wedding picture that you created as your curtain call. Where were the "unhappy" characters in this picture? Was there any distance put between these characters and the others in the wedding picture? Given your thoughts about the characters who, you feel, are unhappy at the end of the play, would you now change this wedding tableau in any way?

50. *Movies of the Reader's Mind*
"The story of what goes on in readers is what writers need most: not an evaluation of the quality of the writing...but an accurate account of what the words did to readers."

—Peter Elbow, 1988

When we read, we are told to visualize the story as if a movie reel were playing in our heads. In other words, we "see" the story in our minds as it unfolds on the printed page. Experienced readers may stop, "rewind" the reel, and "watch" it again—just to see if they missed something the first time through. Arguably, the best reader-response is an indication of how the story made the reader feel as he or she was reading—in Peter Elbow's words, what the writing "did" to you as a reader. Unfortunately, we can no longer talk to Shakespeare about what he wrote, but we can talk to each other and compare our reactions and responses.

Without worrying about what you think you're "supposed" to say about the play, discuss as a class what you felt as you were reading. Some questions to consider: What exactly made you laugh as you were reading? Were there things that made you angry? Did anything in the play remind you of yourself or people that you know? Did you feel sorry for any of the characters? During your reading did you feel bored? Excited? Remember: There are no correct answers here. Your responses are yours, and yours alone.

In Small Groups

51. Put the act and scene numbers for each scene in the play on slips of paper, and mix them up in a hat. Each picks one scene out of the hat. Imagine that you are designing a production of *The Merry Wives*. What does your scenic design look like? What kinds of costumes are your characters wearing? What is the lighting like?

Classroom Activities

Some questions to get you started:

- Where does the scene take place?
- What props are helpful in setting the mood?
- What is the weather like? What time of day is it?
- What's the overall tone of the scene?
- Who's in the scene? Where are they from?

It may help to make a designer's collage—that is, a large piece of posterboard with swatches of fabric, copies of paintings or photographs that have an element of what you envision, and anything else that illustrates the scene for you. Magazines and art books are often a good source of ideas. When you've finished your collage, pick the line or lines from the scene that are essential to your design concept. As a class, do a "show and tell" in order of scenes (designers often do this for the cast on the first day of rehearsal). When you see the play, be aware of the design. Are there similar elements to some of the designs you saw in class?

52. In Shakespeare's time, the text of a play was intended for the stage and was with each performance a fluid and changing thing. Directors of Shakespeare follow in his footsteps when they modify parts of the text in an effort to make the play more understandable to its audiences. One of the main tasks of the director is to "theatricalize" a printed text—that is, to make clear visually what appears on the page. To Director Barbara Gaines, the opening lines of a play are particularly critical to theatricalize effectively, because the audience is not yet used to the world of the play or its language.

You will see in CST's production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* that Barbara Gaines introduces us—before any of Shakespeare's lines are spoken—to the atmosphere and world of the play by creating a scene without spoken words (though some might be sung!). Before you see Gaines' vision, create your own. Imagine that you want to develop a brief, wordless vignette that will help your audience sink into the world of the play before the first word of Shakespeare's is spoken. Create a scene. Who and what would it depict? What mood would it convey? (Its characters don't have to be in the first scene or even the main characters of the play.) And if you were to add a song to your opening, which one might it be?

On Your Own

53. What we conjure up in our minds while we are reading a play is very often distinct from what we eventually see on stage. As you prepare for the production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at Chicago Shakespeare Theater, compose a journal entry outlining your impressions of the play and its characters. You might begin with the following considerations:

- 1.If you were a scene designer and the director asked you to design a set that was a combination of different shades of the same color, what color would your set be?
- 2.Do any of the characters, either emotionally or physically, remind you of people in your own life?
- 3.If you were a casting director, are there famous actors and actresses that you feel are right for particular roles in *The Merry Wives*?

54. For the two to three hours that we as audience members spend in the theater watching a performance, we witness only a small part of each character's life. Actors working in a production, however, must create the whole back story of a character's life. That is, each character has a history that extends well beyond what we see on stage.

Choose a favorite character from *The Merry Wives* and imagine that you are the actor creating the role for performance. Write out a character history that will help you prepare for your role on stage. Think about the fol-

Classroom Activities

lowing as questions for you to answer for yourself: What was the character like as a child? In what kind of family did the character grow up? What does this character do in his or her free time? What is the character's favorite food? What is the character's favorite color? If the character could choose a modern-day profession (other than the one he or she has in the play), what would it be? What was the character like as a young student at school? Who in the play could be the character's best friend?

NOTE: You may be as creative as you wish in this activity. However, remember that what you decide about the character's personal history should be consistent with what Shakespeare has given us in the text of the play. For example, given what we know about Falstaff, it would probably not be true that he was a somber, quiet child who just suddenly became a great wit as an adult! In other words, use what you know from the play itself to create your character's history.

- 55.** As you get ready to see the production of *The Merry Wives*, what was the most vivid scene in your mind? How do you think it will look on stage? What might be some of the challenges associated with its staging?



Back in the Classroom

Discussion as a Class

- 56.** How did the characters that you saw on stage conform to what you thought you would see? Were there characters that were funnier on the stage than on the page? Was there a character that "surprised" you—that is, was there one (or more than one) that was very different from what you thought prior to seeing the performance? Did you have a favorite character that remained your favorite after seeing the production?

- 57.** Most of the major players in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* represent fairly typical middle-class citizens. This is perhaps most true of the two families depicted in the play—the Fords and the Pages. Discuss in your small groups some of the values and attitudes that seem to be associated with late sixteenth-century family life when Shakespeare wrote his plays. You might consider the following: What seems to be the general relationship between men and women? Are there responsibilities that men and women share or do these responsibilities seem to be gender-based? In general, who seems to be in charge? What seems to be the relationship between parents and children?

How do these values and attitudes compare with those of today? Can you think of examples of television shows or films that seem to mirror the relationships and attitudes that Shakespeare presents in *The Merry Wives*?

As a Class or in Small Groups

- 58.** As you have probably noticed, the idiosyncracies of language in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are a source of laughter and a sign of social and cultural differentiation. Dr. Caius, the French doctor, and Sir Hugh Evans, the Welsh parson, are characters that would have been recognizable to Shakespeare's audiences because Wales bordered England and France was just a trip across the English Channel (on a clear day you can see the French coast from Dover Castle!). Thus, elements of both cultures had made their way to England—and were poked fun at by the natives.

Similarly, Justice Shallow is a "country" judge who seems somewhat out of place in the more urbane town of Windsor. As we have seen, Shakespeare very carefully distinguishes characters by their use of language and creates humorous situations from a clash of cultures and social classes.

In your small groups, create twenty-first century American counterparts for the characters of Dr. Caius, Sir Hugh Evans, and Justice Shallow. How would they speak and act? Write a few lines of dialogue for each character

Classroom Activities

you create and take turns rehearsing these lines in front of your classmates, asking them to guess which character you are depicting.

Do you think that humor which pokes fun at different ethnic groups or social classes has the potential to stereotype people from these groups or classes? Think of television shows that depict a clash of cultures and/or social groups, such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *All of Us or Whoopi*. What about these shows is funny? Is there any way in which this type of humor serves as a critique of the dominant class or culture? If so, how?

In Small Groups

59. Imagine that your group is part of the marketing team whose job it is to publicize *The Merry Wives*. Brainstorm ideas and prepare an advertisement for a local newspaper for the production that you just saw.
60. Were there times during the performance that you found yourself watching other audience members rather than watching the stage action? If so, share within your groups what you saw from other members of the audience that affected your own reactions.
61. How would you describe the atmosphere of this particular production? Was it what you expected? How did the actors contribute to the overall atmosphere? Did you laugh at particular characters because of how they looked or because of what they did, or both? Was the set design what you expected? Did the props and music contribute to your impression of the production? If so, how?

On Your Own

62. Write a review of the production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* that you just saw at Chicago Shakespeare for a local newspaper. In your review, focus on the aspect or aspects of the production—the acting, scene design, costume design, lighting, sound—that you felt added to or detracted from your overall impressions.
63. Write a letter to Director Barbara Gaines and Chicago Shakespeare Theater expressing your opinions about the play. What was your favorite part? What part, if any, didn't you like? Tell us your responses especially to the following aspects:
 - Did seeing the play performed make you change your mind about any of the characters or scenes?
 - How did you feel about the choices the director and designers made about the costumes, set, and music in the play?
 - Were there any interpretations of characters or scenes with which you especially agreed or disagreed? Why?
64. Can you identify one aspect of the production that changed your understanding or appreciation of the play? If so, write a journal entry that discusses what this one aspect was, and how it changed your understanding or appreciation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

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Chicago Shakespeare Theater

Chicago Shakespeare Theater's website

<http://www.chicagoshakes.com/>

Check out our "Romeo and Juliet Multimedia Program for Teachers and Students" for a look backstage at CST and some fun activities that can readily be applied to any Shakespeare study.

Comprehensive Link Sites

William Shakespeare and the Internet

<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/>

Shakespeare in Europe Sh:in:E (Basel University)

<http://www.unibas.ch/shine/home>

Touchstone Database (University of Birmingham, UK)

<http://www.touchstone.bham.ac.uk/welcome.html>

Sher's Shakespeare Index

<http://www.websher.net/shakespeare/>

BBC1 Web Guide

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/webguide/schools/search.shtml?query=Shakespeare>

Absolute Shakespeare

<http://absoluteshakespeare.com>

Teaching Shakespeare

The Folger Shakespeare Library

<http://www.folger.edu/education/getarchive.cfm>

ShakespeareHigh.com (Amy Ulen's revamped "Surfing with the Bard" site)

<http://www.shakespearehigh.com>

Web English Teacher

<http://www.webenglishteacher.com>

Shake Sphere

<http://sites.micro-link.net/zekscrab/illustrations.html#Shakespeare%20Paintings>

Proper Elizabethan Accents

<http://www.renfaire.com/Language/index.html>

The English Renaissance in Context: Multimedia Tutorials (University of Pennsylvania)

<http://dewey.library.upenn.edu/sceti/furness/eric/teach/index.htm>

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The History of Costume by Braun and Schneider
<http://www.siue.edu/COSTUMES/history.html>

The Elizabethan Costuming Page
<http://costume.dm.net/>

The Costumer's Manifesto (University of Alaska)
<http://www.costumes.org>

Rare Map Collection (The University of Georgia)
<http://www.libs.uga.edu/darchive/hargrett/maps/maps.html>

Blue Mountain Shakespeare Sonnet eCards
<http://www.bluemountain.com/category.pd?path=34889>

Spark Notes
<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/>

Shakespeare Resource Center
<http://bardweb.net/plays/index.html>

Shakespeare and Elizabethan England

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust
<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/>

The Elizabethan Theatre
<http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/englisch/shakespeare/index.html>

Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet
<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm>

Queen Elizabeth I
<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/eliza.htm>

Shakespeare and the Globe: Then and Now (Encyclopedia Britannica)
<http://search.eb.com/shakespeare/index2.html>

Elizabeth I: Ruler and Legend (The Newberry Library's exhibit commemorating the 400th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's death)
<http://www.elizabethexhibit.org>

Shakespeare's Globe Research Database
<http://www.rdg.ac.uk./globe/>

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Texts and Early Editions

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Massachusetts Institute of Technology site)
<http://the-tech.mit.edu/Shakespeare/works.html>

The First Folio and Early Quartos of William Shakespeare (University of Virginia)
<http://etext.virginia.edu/frames/shakeframe.html>

Furness Shakespeare Library (University of Pennsylvania)
<http://dewey.lib.upenn.edu/sceti/furness/>

The Internet Shakespeare Editions (University of Victoria, British Columbia)
<http://web.uvic.ca/shakespeare/>

Shakespeare: Subject to Change (Cable in the Classroom site)
<http://www.ciconline.org>

What Is a Folio? (MIT's "Hamlet on the Ramparts" site)
<http://shea.mit.edu/ramparts/newstuff3.htm>

Words, Words, Words

Alexander Schmidt's Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary (Tufts University's Perseus Digital Library site)
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.03.0079>

Word Frequency Lists (Mt. Ararat High School)
<http://www.mta75.org/search/curriculum/english/shake/home.html>

Shakespeare in Performance

The Internet Movie Database: William Shakespeare
<http://www.us.imdb.com/find?q=Shakespeare>

Shakespeare in Art

Shakespeare Illustrated (Emory University)
http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/classes/Shakespeare_Illustrated/Shakespeare.html

The Faces of Elizabeth I
<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/elizface.htm>

Tudor England: Images
<http://www.marileecody.com/images.html>

Absolute Shakespeare
http://absoluteshakespeare.com/pictures/shakespeare_pictures.htm

Suggested Readings



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 - * Boyce, Charles. *Shakespeare A to Z*. New York, 1990.
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- French, Marilyn. *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*. New York, 1981.
- * Gibson, Rex, ed. *Cambridge School Shakespeare: The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Cambridge, 2003. (This excellent series, used extensively as a resource in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's education efforts, includes *The Merry Wives of Windsor* among its titles. Its "active Shakespeare" activities are easily adaptable to any play in the curriculum. Available in the United States through Cambridge University Press, 40 W. 20th St., New York, NY 10011. Telephone: 212.924.3900.)
 - * Goddard, Harold C. *The Meaning of Shakespeare*. Chicago, 1951.
 - * Hills and Öttchen. *Shakespeare's Insults: Educating Your Wit*. Ann Arbor, 1991.
 - * Mullaney, Steven. *The Place of the Stage*. Chicago, 1988.
- Nevo, Ruth. *Comic Transformations in Shakespeare*. London, 1980.
- * O'Brien, Peggy. *Shakespeare Set Free*. New York, 1993. (This excellent three-volume set does not include *The Merry Wives of Windsor* among its plays. But its "active Shakespeare" approach is easily adaptable to any Shakespeare play you may be teaching.)
- Oliver, H. J. "Introduction" in the Arden Shakespeare edition of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Routledge, 1994.
- Roberts, Jeanne Addison. *Shakespeare's English Comedy: "The Merry Wives of Windsor" in Context*. University of Nebraska Press, 1979.
- Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500–1800*. Harper & Row, 1979.
- White, R. S. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. New York, 1991.
- * Available as reference in our Teacher Resource Center

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