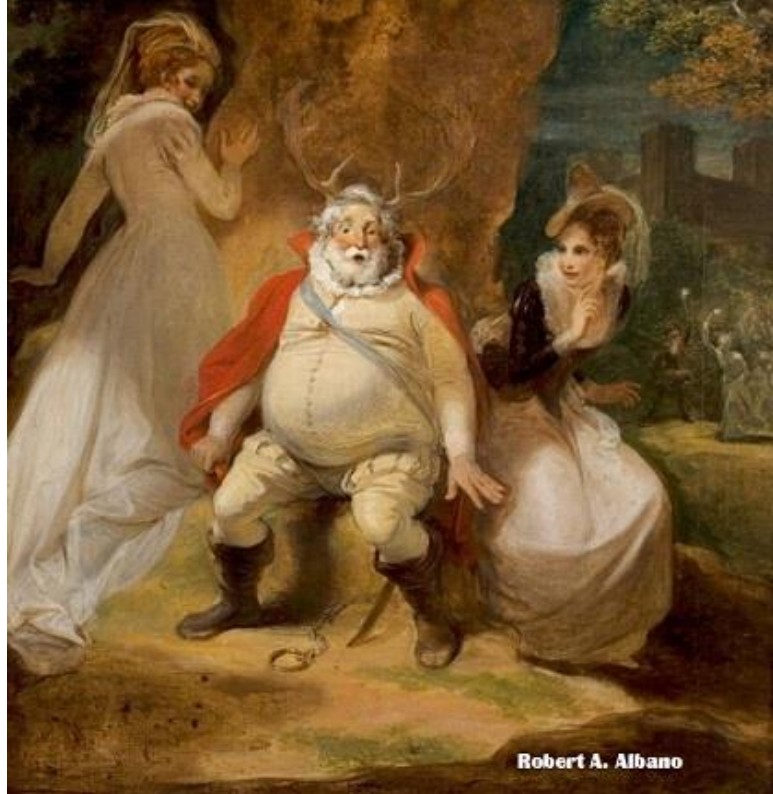


**UNDERSTANDING  
SHAKESPEARE:  
THE MERRY WIVES  
OF WINDSOR**



**Robert A. Albano**

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**MERCURY PRESS**

**Los Angeles**

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The Merry Wives of Windsor



NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

## Introduction

According to evidence discovered long after the playwright's death, Shakespeare wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at the request of Queen Elizabeth, who wanted to see **Sir John Falstaff**, one of Shakespeare's most vivid and popular characters, in love. The character of Falstaff also appears in Shakespeare's two *Henry IV* history plays. Falstaff is witty and robust. He dominates the stage both in terms of his mere physical presence (he is an extremely rotund man) and in terms of his clever and imaginative command of the English language.

Placing Falstaff in an entirely different context – placing him in a comedy instead of a history play – required some necessary changes to the character. More to the point, Shakespeare could not just write a simple comedy about this favorite character falling in love. Falstaff is not a lover except in the sense that he is a lover of food and wine. Further, he cares for only one individual – namely, himself. Shakespeare was thus presented with a challenge by his Queen, and his response was a delightful one. Rather than showing the bold rascal being in love, Shakespeare instead presented the fat knight feigning love in order to gain something much dearer to his heart: money. Thus, Shakespeare could fulfill his Queen's wishes while still maintaining the essential nature of his comic creation, the fabulous Falstaff.

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* is also unique among Shakespeare's comedies in that it is the only

one that is set in England. Shakespeare's town of Windsor is full of intriguing and fascinating characters. Mostly simple and kind-hearted, the folk of Windsor still manage to embroil themselves in the same types of social conflicts and petty wrangling that occur in the large cities. Husbands fight with wives, daughters fight with their fathers, and people often take offense where none is actually given. Yet, Shakespeare's town and the people in it are essentially charming and peaceful. One of Shakespeare's greatest attributes is that he makes his characters seem real in all of his plays, and the characters in *Merry Wives* are no exception. The audience sympathizes with them and gladly takes a passive role in their intrigues and squabbles.

The main plot of the play focuses on revenge. The characters of Windsor want and demand justice. They want to protect their honor. So, when a troublesome interloper by the name of Sir John Falstaff sweeps aside their sense of justice and threatens their sense of honor, the people take it upon themselves to take their revenge and restore justice and honor to their town and themselves. Yet, the people of Windsor are not vindictive or violent. Their methods are essentially peaceful. Thus, they strive to maintain order in their town; and, upon restoring that order, they return to their lives of peace and tranquility. Even the perpetrators of crimes suffer no lasting punishment. This is a gentle comedy, after all. No one gets permanently hurt.

Windsor, despite the minor difficulties among the populace, is rather idealized and appealing. The

town represents society not so much as it actually is, but as it should be. Shakespeare, more than likely, nostalgically and imaginatively may have had the Stratford of his boyhood in mind when he created the town of Windsor.

Despite the charm of the comedy and the great humor in it, a number of critics have taken a dislike to it; and the main reason for their dislike is the character of Falstaff. Such critics contend that the Falstaff of Windsor is only a pale reflection of the Falstaff who appears in the history plays. They feel that Shakespeare somehow had let them down. These critics, though, may be overreacting. A number of critics have fallen into the camp of deifying Shakespeare's comic character: they see aspects of his character that do not exist and that Shakespeare never intended. Indeed, there are some discrepancies between the Windsor Falstaff and the one who appears in the history plays. But Shakespeare, in all likelihood, knew what he was doing. The Falstaff of the comedy appears to be an older one than the one who appears in the history plays. Falstaff has fallen upon lean and rough times, and that has made him desperate. His desperation thus causes him to act and behave differently than he would have at an earlier time of life.

More importantly, the Falstaff character works extremely well for the context of the comedy. His essential character – the character that first appears in *1 Henry IV* – is the ideal choice for the plot of the comedy. No other comic character in literature would have worked half so well.

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a hilarious, charming, and enjoyable play; and the hilarity, charm, and joy would not have been there to anywhere near as large an extent had it not been for Shakespeare's decision to cast his fat comic rogue as his central figure.

# ACT I

## Act I, Scene 1: It Is an Old Coat

In the town of Windsor **Robert Shallow** is a Justice of the Peace (a local judge). Shallow is also the uncle of **Abraham Slender**. Shakespeare's names for these characters is intentionally meaningful and comical. The two are men of shallow thinking; they are men of slender thought.

Shallow is complaining to **Sir Hugh Evans**, a Welsh parson, about the poor treatment that he had received from **Sir John Falstaff**. Shallow specifically states his complaint later when he faces Falstaff in person: Shallow then says to him, "Knight, you have beaten my men, killed my deer, and broke open my lodge" (93-94). The lodge refers to the house of his groundskeeper.

Shallow's complaint, although dealt with comically in this play, refers to a very real and serious conflict that existed during the Renaissance – an unfair legal system. Aristocrats and Commoners were not treated as equals under the law. In any conflict between an aristocrat and a commoner, the system viewed the aristocrat as being in the right and the commoner as being in the wrong. Unscrupulous and financially strapped aristocrats at the time – symbolized by Falstaff in this play – took advantage of this double standard and often stole from commoners. And most commoners were well aware that complaining would not be of any use.

Shakespeare, a commoner himself, often presented **social criticism** under the guise of comedy or tragedy. Shakespeare realized that direct criticism or condemnation of the social system was not wise, but in his dramatic plays he could present his views and criticism about society and its faults.

Shallow, however, is not so tactful and does not realize the futility of his complaint. He tells Evans that he will complain to the “Star Chamber,” the high court, if he cannot get legal satisfaction in Windsor. Shallow adds, “If he were twenty Sir John Falstaffs, he shall not abuse Robert Shallow, Esquire” (2-3). Shallow mistakenly thinks that his rank in society puts him on an equal footing with Falstaff: Shallow mistakenly believes that he can legally defeat any number of knights if he is in the right.

The reader should note that titles before a name do not always designate rank in society. Both Hugh Evans and John Falstaff are referred to as “Sir,” but the meaning is different for these two men. Sir John Falstaff is called *Sir* because he is a knight: he is an aristocrat. Sir Hugh Evans is called *Sir* because he is a clergyman, and the word *Sir* has no more meaning than the word *Mister*. It is a term of respect, but Evans is clearly not an aristocrat.

Similarly, the word *esquire* also had more than one meaning during the Renaissance. The word could indicate (1) a person holding a rank just below that of knight, indicating that the person is a minor aristocrat. But the word could also indicate (2) a person holding an office of trust, such as a justice of the peace. In this second instance, the person is not

an aristocrat.

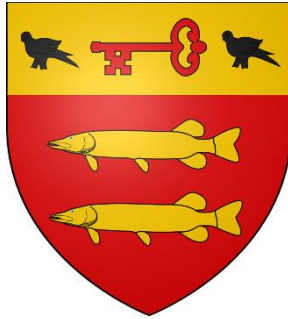
Shallow is confused. He thinks that because he is an esquire, he is a minor aristocrat. But he is not one. The term *gentleman* (used by Slender in line 7) also suggests rank in society. A gentleman was the highest rank a commoner could receive. In fact, Shakespeare himself had purchased this title for his father after achieving financial success in the theater; and when his father died, the title passed on to Shakespeare himself. In *Merry Wives* Slender does not fully understand the ranking system any more than does Shallow, his Uncle. Shallow may be a gentleman in rank, but that does not make him an aristocrat.

Slender also informs Evans that Shallow has a coat of arms: “They may give the dozen white luses in their coat” (13-14). Both a gentleman and an aristocrat could have a coat of arms, a design symbolizing a family’s heritage and often depicted on a shield.



Coat of Arms





Coat of Arms with Luce

A luce is a pike, a freshwater fish. The design for a coat of arms employed the use of animals and objects to indicate different family lines.

Slender is offering this information as evidence that Shallow is aristocratically equal to Falstaff. Shallow then adds to Slender's comment by saying, "It is an old coat" (15). Shallow means that the Coat of Arms has been in his family for generations.

Hugh Evans, who speaks with a strong Welsh accent and has more than a little difficulty in understanding and speaking the English of England, misunderstands Slender's meaning. Evans thinks that luses are louses (that is, lice, the tiny insects that get into one's hair and skin) and that a coat simply refers to a jacket. Thus, he responds, "The dozen white louses do become an old coad well" (16). He is saying that lice are typically found in old coats.

Shakespeare plays with language throughout *Merry Wives*, and linguistic muddles such as this one contribute to the humor of the play.

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