

## 5. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

*Henry IV* Part 1 was almost certainly performed before Queen Elizabeth in the winter of 1596-7. There is a long tradition that the Queen was so taken with Falstaff that she commanded Shakespeare to write a play showing 'Sir John in love', and that he interrupted the writing of *Henry IV* Part 2 to produce *The Merry Wives* in a fortnight. It was probably first performed before her at the Garter Feast on St. George's Day (possibly also Shakespeare's birthday) 23 April 1597, to her great satisfaction.

This account feels right - the setting of the play at Windsor, the many topical references to court matters, the reference to the garter, the reference to the Queen herself: 'our radiant Queen', the assumption of an audience knowing Latin ... But does the play, in fact, show Falstaff in love? Dr. Johnson commented wisely:

Shakespeare knew what the queen, if the story be true, seems not to have known, that by any real passion of tenderness, the selfish craft, the careless jollity, and the lazy luxury of Falstaff, must have suffered so much abatement, that little of his former cast would have remained. Falstaff could not love, but by ceasing to be Falstaff. He could only counterfeit love, and his professions could be prompted, not by hope of pleasure, but of money.

Shakespeare cleverly evades the royal request while seeming to meet it, by having Sir John only pretend to be in love.

*The Merry Wives* is unique in several ways. With the exception of *The Tempest*, it is the only Shakespeare play without a source; that is, the only play whose plot and characters are made up by himself, though of course it draws heavily on traditional farce. It is the only play to portray contemporary domestic life - ordinary middle-class life in the England of his time. In spite of the odd references to Prince Hal, the whole feeling of the play is that we are in Elizabeth's Windsor. It is full of colloquial middle-class country-town speech and mores.

It has often been said that this Falstaff is a pale shadow of the Falstaff of the *Henry IV* plays. He is in his element lording it at the Boar's Head in Eastcheap. At Windsor he is out of it: 'What tempest threw this whale, with so many tuns of oil in his belly, ashore at Windsor?' He is not used to the company of 'honest' people, least of all 'honest' women. He cannot tell turtles from jays. To be honest in Eastcheap is to be simple. But these women are quite capable of outwitting him.

Of course there is more to the play than the humiliation of Falstaff. Falstaff is after money under cover of lechery. The 'honest' bourgeois folk of Windsor are just as unscrupulous and more hypocritical in their pursuit of it. Page is after money under cover of puritan thrift. His daughter laments

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This is my father's choice.

O, what a world of vile ill-favour'd faults

Looks handsome in three hundred pounds a year!

\* \* \*

Pagan rites are again in evidence in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, but much closer to home, not in the woods near the Athens of antiquity, but in Windsor Forest close to a community of solid bourgeois Elizabethan citizens.

Falstaff is seen by the whole community as a threat to the order on which it depends, as the embodiment of riot, vice, in particular the deadly sin of lechery. In spite of the comic context, the words used of him - 'corrupted', 'tainted', 'unclean' - are very strong. He is the old Adam to be castigated and cast out. Almost, he is the devil himself. The pre-Christian horned god, known to the Romans as Cernunnos, 'lord of the animals', god of the chase, appears in British folklore as Herne the Hunter. This god was still worshipped by the witches of Shakespeare's time. But apart from the witches, knowledge of such cults had become for the average Elizabethan almost as shadowy as our own knowledge of the significance of such pagan rituals as still survive, our maypoles, bonfires, holly and ivy. Ford has an irrational hatred of witches, though he admits to knowing nothing of their practices. They are, he says, 'beyond our element'. That Falstaff should be disguised as the witch of Brainford is a parody of the shape-shifting powers of the witches and their god. The name of Herne the Hunter meant almost as little to the Pages and Fords of Shakespeare's day as it does to us:

The superstitious idle-headed eld  
Receiv'd, and did deliver to our age,  
This tale of Herne the hunter for a truth.

Yet his oak still seemed a fearful place to them, to be avoided after dark:

Why, yet there want not many that do fear  
In deep of night to walk by this Herne's oak.

When the tree finally fell, two hundred years later, it must have been something more than mere antiquity which caused its wood to be made into curios, some of which survive to this day. One of them belongs to Ted Hughes, the author of *Gaudete*, in which a man who is part oak and part fertility god, a lecherous seducer of the village wives, throws their husbands into a panic and is hunted down by them, killed and burned.

Why should Shakespeare drag Herne the Hunter and all that hazy pagan folklore into so casual a comedy as *The Merry Wives*? Within the shallow materialistic world of Windsor, Falstaff comes to seem a representative, however degraded, of the fertility god himself. He sees himself as a scapegoat persecuted by Puritans: 'This is enough to be the decay of lust and late-walking through the realm'. He invokes, at the climax, 'omnipotent love', 'that in some respects makes a beast a man; in some other, a man a beast'. He has indeed become a beast - 'a Windsor stag, and the fattest, I think, i' th' forest' - but simultaneously a god shape-shifting for love: 'When gods have hot backs, what shall poor men do?' His frank sexuality ('My doe with the black scut') is much to be preferred to the puritanical violence Parson Evans schools the children in:

Fie on sinful fantasy,  
Fie on lust and luxury! ...  
Pinch him, and burn him, and turn him about,

Till candles and starlight and moonshine be out.

Had Evans the power of Prospero and real hobgoblins at his disposal, Falstaff would no doubt have been as tormented as Caliban.

The 'public sport' which the merry wives improvise to exorcise Sir John is clearly based on, made up of vestiges from, ancient rituals whose original meaning has been quite forgotten. Falstaff is told to come to Herne's oak at night 'disguised like Herne, with huge horns on his head'. Their children, dressed as fairies, will then 'pinch him sound, And burn him with their tapers'. The original fairies were probably an ancient race, worshippers of the horned god. Herne is, according to Graves, closely associated with Hermes, who was Hecate's messenger and lover. Fairies had not, for Shakespeare, quite lost their association with the triple Hecate, but for the merry wives they have already declined into the gossamer creatures of children's stories. The pinching may be a dim memory of the fate of the hunter-god - to be torn apart by his hounds. It may also remind us of the pinching of Caliban by sprites. Caliban's mother Sycorax is identified by Graves with triple Hecate. The real fairies might well have danced round the horned god, dressed in white and green, 'with rounds of waxen tapers on their heads' (as in surviving Scandinavian rituals). They may well have burned him - to death, but not as an act of moral cleansing; rather, on the contrary, as a guarantee of his rebirth the following year rejuvenated and revitalized in order to be able to resume his role as fertility god. This is the opposite of Mistress Page, who, intending to 'dishorn the spirit', is proposing a symbolic castration.

Falstaff's venery is also to be preferred to the cold materialistic calculation of those who triumph over him. Their 'virtue' and 'scruple' is devalued by the mutual deception of Page and his wife over the marriage of their daughter. Guarding her own honour so scrupulously, Mistress Page does not scruple to try to sell her daughter:

You would have married her most shamefully,  
Where there was no proportion held in love.

Ford admits that money buys lands, not wives. And Page concedes that 'What cannot be eschew'd must be embrac'd'.

Falstaff, like the green girdle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is precisely that which cannot be eschewed from a full and balanced life. 'Banish plump Jack and banish all the world', he had said to Prince Hal. And here, this being a comedy, he is not banished. The union of Anne and Fenton under Herne's oak vindicates him. The distinction between love and lust dissolves in laughter. He is welcomed back into the human community:

Master Fenton,  
Heaven give you many, many merry days!  
Good husband, let us every one go home  
And laugh this sport o'er by a country fire,  
Sir John and all.

Falstaff is seen by the whole community as a threat to the order upon which it depends, as the embodiment of riot, vice, in particular the deadly sin of lecher%. In spite of the comic context, the words used of him: "corrupted", "tainted", "unclean", are very strong. He is the old Adam to be castigated and cast out. Almost, he is the devil himself:

No man means evil but the devil, and we shall know hfm by his horns. The devil, as imagined in the Christian tradition, is, of course, identical with the pre-Christian horned god, still worshipped by the witches in Shakespeare's day.

Ford's fear of the witch of Brainford is real. p.113

But apart from the secret cult of the witches, shortly to be scourged by James I, knowledge of the old fertility cults had become almost as shadowy as our own knowledge of the true significance of our maypole dances, bonfires, holly and ivy, etc. The name of Herne the hunter meant almost as little to the Pages and Fords of Shakespeare's day as it does to us:

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Receiv'd, and did deliver to our age,  
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In deep of night to walk by this Herne's oak.

When the tree finally fell, two hundred years later, there was probably something more than mere antiquity which caused its wood to be made into curios which survive to this day. I have a letter from Ted Hughes in which, in the middle of a discussion of his own store/ of a modern fertility god hunted down by outraged middle-class husbands - Gaudete - he writes: I once knew the White Goddess pretty well. I deliberately avoided any conscious rigging of the themes, any archaeological showbiz with the material. So your Hercules reference came as a surprise. The 'oak' business was just part of my infatuation with oak - I have hoards of oak, new and old, beams, boards, panelling etc. One of the first things I found - in a junk-shop in Moretonhampstead - was a snuff-box of oak. On the bottom, a stuck-on old label reads 'Herne's oak' in early 19th C handwriting. I don't know when Herne's oak fell - but I imagine it was worked into curios and souvenirs.

So Herne the hunter is still with us, in the form of the changeling Nicholas Lumb, fashioned by the spirits (fairies) out of an oak tree, lecherous seducer of all the village wives, himself to be hunted to death like a stag and burned ...

The "public sport" which the merry wives improvise to exorcise Sir John is clearly based on, made up of vestiges from, ancient rituals whose original meaning is quite forgotten, in some cases reversed, by them. The fairies would indeed have been dressed in white and green "With rounds of waxen tapers on their heads", and would indeed have danced round the horned god. They might even have burned him - to death - but not as an act of moral clansing, far from it, rather as a guarantee of his rebirth the following year rejuvenated and revitalized in order to be able to resume his role as fertility god. The witches were their descendents. When Mistress Page speaks of dis-horning the spirit, she is, on the contrary, proposing a symbolic castration.

The decline of fairies from the last worshippers of the Celtic fertility gods to the gossamer creatures of children's stories was already almost complete by Shakespeare's time. viz. The God of the Witches 31-2 27 114 + illustrations

The White Goddess 125 151 217

Can you think of any other situation in a Shakespeare play which has anything in common with this? The situation of a puritan setting fairies to pinch and otherwise persecute a figure half man half beast occurs again in The Tempest.

According to Graves, Herne is closely associated with Hermes, who is, in turn, closely associated with Hecate, since he was both her messenger and her lover.

Caliban's mother is "the foul witch Sycorax" whom Graves refers to as "the Triple Hecate".

But why should Shakespeare drag Herne the hunter and with him all that body of hazy pagan mythology into so light a comedy?

What does it add to the play?

It is not merely the hunter hunted, as in the story of Actaeon. After his death, Actaeon became a fertility god. Though his objectives had not initially been lecherous, Falstaff begins to seem, at the end, even in his own person, a representative, albeit degraded, of the fertility god himself:

This is enough to be the decay of lust and late-walking through the realm.

He is to be echoed by Pompey in Measure for Measure: Does your worship mean to geld and spay all the youth of the city? Is not Falstaff's frank sexuality: "My doe with the black scut" to be preferred to the cold materialistic calculation of the puritans who seem to have triumphed over him?

Their "virtue" and their "scruol8" is devalued by the other tricks being played simultaneously with the gulling of F., that is the attempt at mutual deception by Page and his wife over the marriage of their daughter.

Guarding her own honour so scrupulously, Mistress Page had not scrupled to try to sell her daughter. But there is no triumphing over love:

In love the heavens themselves do guide the state; Money buys lands, and wives are sold by fate.

Falstaff interprets this as some vindication of himself:

I am glad, though you have ta'en a special stand to strike at me, that you arrow hath glanced.

Falstaff with his horns has been associated with the devil, and with evil, but this position, at the end, can hardly be maintained (we can almost imagine him saying: "Banish plump Jack and banish all the world". And h@ is not banished after all. The distinction between lust and love cannot be maintained. the success of Anne and Fenton under Herne's oak vindicates man's animal nature, and Falstaff is welcomed back **intoxtha** (resurrected) into the human community:

Master Fenton, Heaven give you many, many merry days! Good husband, let us every one go home, And laugh this sport o'er by a country fire, Sir John and all.

Probably it was after seeing Henry IV Part 1 early in 1597 that the Queen made her request.

There is some evidence that Sh. interrupted the writing of Henry IV Part 2 to write

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But does the play, in fact, show Falstaff in love? Johnson Arden lxviii Sh. intended to show just that, with Doll Tearsheet, in H IV 2.

Here he cleverly evades the royal request while seeming to meet it, by having Sir John only pretend to be in love.

What is unique about this play?

The domestic scene. Ordinary middle-class life in the England of his time.

In spite of the odd references to Prince Hall, the whole feeling of the play is that we are in Elizabeth's England, that, if the play was indeed performed at Windsor, the action could have been taking place there and then (though Shakespeare lets slip in a few references to Warwickshire, and a few bits of Warwickshire dialect). Above all the colloquial middle-class speech and mores.

What else is characteristic of the play's language? *ImagerA/ lxxvii*

What do you think of the play?

Would the Queen have been disappointed?

It has often been said that this Falstaff is a pale shadow of the

Falstaff of the Henry IV plays. Do you agree? *Read C\*

In what way is this Falstaff different?

Ford is in his element at the Boar's Head in Eastcheap. At Windsor he is out of it:

"That tempest threw this whale, with so many tuns of oil in his belly, ashore at Windsor?"

Why is he out of his element?

He is not used to the company of 'honest' people, least of all 'honest' women. He cannot tell turtles from jays.

To be honest in Eastcheap is to be simple. But these women are quite capable of outwitting him,

Any interest in the other characters? Ford's jealousy

Anne's down-to-earth good sense Slender's unprosaic wooing

The many misusers of English *lxxiv*

What do you make of the ending? Where do our sympathies lie? *Read Act IV sc.iv*

Falstaff is after money under cover of lechery

Page is after money under cover of puritan bourgeois-thrift

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O, what a world of vile ill-favour'd faults (=sins)

Looks handsome in three hundred pounds a year!

i.e. Page is a hypocrite.

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7300

Herne the hunter.

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