

# Gender roles and women's initiative in the merry wives of windsor



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One of the major themes of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is the change in gender roles that was happening in Shakespeare's time. Gender roles were changing to allow women more freedom and power. In the play, men are depicted as fools, delusional, jealous, and bestial. Women are depicted as happy, independent, and intelligent. We see a fear of the changing social structure in the play represented in the characters of Falstaff, Shakespeare's famous enjoyable, bawdy knight and Mister Ford, the scheming, jealous husband. Without the independence their husbands give them, the schemes of Mistress Ford and Mistress Page would not be possible.

Mister Page accepts the social revolution and allows his wife independence and trusts her. However, Mister Ford mistrusts his wife and suffers from jealousy because of her freedom. Mister Ford is a man who resists the social revolution and change. Falstaff also resists change and transformation, which makes him a target for the wives' schemes. It is interesting that Ford and Falstaff hold similar views of the women and are both victims of the schemes. Anne Parten points out that Ford and Falstaff, "may believe in the clichés equating feminine independence and vivacity with a predilection for marital infidelity" (190). Ford and Falstaff view "vivacity" and merriment as a sign of loose morals. When Falstaff discusses his plans to seduce Mistress Ford he comments, "I spy entertainment in her. She discourses; she carves, she gives the leer of invitation" (I, iii 40-43). Falstaff clearly expresses how Mistress Ford's "entertainment" is an "invitation" and we understand that he sees her attitude and personality as her being open to disloyalty. Falstaff also notes how "she carves" and "discourses" meaning that Mistress Ford is familiar with guests and comfortable with people, which makes her an

appropriate choice for him to woo. Mister Ford demonstrates his outlook of his wife's cheer being reason enough to doubt her honesty, when he says to Falstaff under the guise of Brooks, "Some say that, though she appear honest to me, /yet in other places she enlargeth her mirth so far that there is shrewd construction made of her" (I, iii 210-13). Ford believes his wife's behavior attracts the possibility of infidelity and damages her "construction" or reputation. The "merry wives" utilize their merriment in deceiving the men and succeed because the men are so deluded by what they accept as true.

Although, merriment is the cause of the wives' schemes, which are a mark of their independence, the intent of the wives' game is honest. Mistress Page defends her good cheer saying, "We'll leave a proof, by that which we will do, wives may be merry, and yet honest too./ We do not act, that often jest and laugh; tis old but true, "Still swine eats all the draff" (IV, ii 99-102). Her good humour and happiness allow her to be "honest" and her games or "jest and laugh" allow her to be more free and in control of her life instead of being "still". Her games also indicate her intelligence and her desire to be aware of what is happening around her. Her active, merry ways keep her from eating "all the draff" or swallowing her independence. The schemes and their outcome expose the power the women have. Nancy Cotton asserts that the wives' games expose their independence and also serve to "emasculate" the men (Cotton 324). Proof of this is seen when Falstaff says to Ford, who he knows as Brooks, "I went to her, Mister Brooks, as you see, like a poor old man, but I came from her, Mister Brooks, like a poor old woman" (V, i 15-17). The wives power is evident in how they humiliate Falstaff him by

forcing him to dress as a woman. He is symbolically castrated and also beaten by Ford as he leaves Mistress Ford's house.

The strength of the women is contrasted with the weakness of Falstaff and Ford. Ford's delusions and jealousies serve to weaken his character and make the women characters appear stronger. His delusions or corrupt mental state signifies an avoidance of reality. After seeing Falstaff dressed as "witch" Evans comments on his mental state when he says, "Master Ford, you must pray, and not follow the imaginations of your own heart; this is jealousies" (IV, ii). It's important that Evans tells Ford that he shouldn't trust his "own heart" because it divulges how fanatical Ford's peers think he is. In Act IV, Scene ii, Ford says, "Well he's not here I seek for" and Mister Page's response is "No, not nowhere else but in your brain". Again we see clearly that it is believed he is imagining that Falstaff is having an affair with his wife. Ford is alone in his fervor of catching his wife being disloyal. After the first search for Falstaff in the house Page says to Ford, "Are you not ashamed? What spirit, what devil suggests this imagination? I would not have your distemper in this kind for the wealth of Windsor castle" (III, iii 199-202). Page questions Ford's state of mind and alludes to Ford's illusions as being supernatural. His friend's view of him gets more serious here. Ford's response is "Tis my fault, Mister Page, I suffer for it" (III, iii 203). Ford's response is an admission of weakness for all his friends to see which helps render him impotent. Ford acknowledges that he was wrong and at "fault" which marks the beginning of Ford's confusion.

It's interesting that Ford is called out by those who are indifferent or accepting of the new social way. Both Ford and Falstaff lose in their schemes  
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with the wives. Falstaff is shoved into a laundry basket, tossed in the mud, dressed as a woman and humiliated in the end. Ford is embarrassed in front of his friends and has his sanity questioned. Ford and Falstaff's failure to figure out the wives' games is indicative of their resistance to social changes. Both men must transform to avoid further humiliation. Ford must accept his wife's social independence and Falstaff must change his disrespectful, lustful ways. In the end they are both transformed. After Ford sees what he believes to be a witch, he is roused from his stance of resistance (Carroll 194). It is not long after that seen when Ford's character appears completely changed (Carroll 194). He is jealous and delusional no longer. He accepts his wife's power, even telling her, " Pardon me, wife./ Henceforth do what thou wilt/ I rather will suspect the sun with cold/ than thee with wantonness. Now doth thy honour stand/ In him that was of late an heretic, as firm as faith" (IV, iv 6-9). Ford's transformation is finished. His wife is now free to do what she " wilt" because he has " faith" in her. Ford is clearly giving in to his wife's independence and freedom. Perhaps this transformation saves Ford from being totally humiliated.

Falstaff, however, is not so lucky. Falstaff is forced to transform in the end and becomes the symbol of Actaeon, the lustful hunter who is caught watching Artemis and her nymphs bathing in the woods. In the myth Artemis (or Diana) turns Actaeon into a stag, for her dogs to hunt and tear to pieces (Parten 195). The Actaeon myth is paralleled by the " Herne the Hunter" myth, a similar more English version of the old greek myth (Carroll 198). The myth of Actaeon is alluded to a few times in the play, but clearly references Falstaff when Pistol encourages Ford to act against Falstaff (Carroll 198).

Pistol says to Ford, "Prevent, or go thou, like Sir Actaeon, he, / With Ringwood at thy heels/ O, odious is thy name!" (II, I 106-8). There is no doubt that the "he" is Falstaff, especially given the "Sir" that has been added to Actaeon's name to make it a more fitting metaphor for Pistol to use because of Falstaff's status as a knight and Pistol's status as below him. Falstaff refers to himself as a stag when he says, "For me, I am here the Windsor stag, and the fattest I think i'the forest" (V, v 12-13). He is sacrificed and the women have won. He says to the wives, "Divide me like a bribed buck, each a haunch" (V, v 24). He surrenders to them and the humiliation. Falstaff's unwillingness or maybe even inability to change has led him to this end.

The wives keep their power and their merriment because of the games they play. For their part, the men have lost their internal struggle against the social change Mister Ford and Falstaff's surrender ensure this. As the course of the comedy indicates, the wives are innocent of any real foul play and their intentions all along are honest. They teach Falstaff a much deserved lesson and, whether or not they mean to, they change a jealous husband into a trusting, happy one.

## **Works Cited**

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