



Oregon
Shakespeare
Festival

2017 Study Guide



Costume rendering of Anne Page by Ulises Alcalá.

The Merry Wives of Windsor by William Shakespeare

ARRANGED MARRIAGES IN ELIZABETHAN SOCIETY

- Almost all marriages among the noble class were arranged by the parents of the betrothed. The goal of the union was to preserve or gain prestige, wealth and land. Being in love was of very little importance in arranged marriages, in fact, some couples would have met each other for the first time at the wedding.
- Women had very little, if any, decision in who her husband would be. Once married, a woman became the property of her husband. If she disobeyed him, she could be reprimanded by law.
- The legal age for marrying in the Elizabethan era was 12 for girls and 14 for boys, although many people did not marry until they were in their 20s.
- Arranged marriages were not as customary among commoners and laborers, therefore they had more freedom to marry for love. They also tended to marry later in life.
- Queen Elizabeth was one of a handful of English monarchs who never married and therefore produced no heir.



Town of Windsor

WINDSOR

- *The Merry Wives of Windsor* takes place in Windsor, a market town located about 30 miles west of central London and home to Windsor Castle.
- Many of the inhabitants were considered members of a fast-growing new socio-economic group referred to as the middle-class, which consisted mostly of merchants and businessmen in commerce and maritime trade.
- Knights were formally installed into the Order of the Garter in Windsor.



William Shakespeare

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

- Shakespeare was born into a middle-class family. His father was a glove maker and local merchant. It is believed that Shakespeare attended Stratford Grammar School and learned the standard equivalent to a K-12 education.
- While most of Shakespeare's comedies took place in distant, exotic or even magical lands, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is Shakespeare's only play that is set in his own place and time: England in the 1590s.
- In Shakespeare's comedies, most of his characters were young people rebelling against the social order of their parents' generation. In contrast, his tragedies and romances were often about children betraying or refusing to obey their parents.

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research “citizen comedy.” Who are the typical characters that make up a “citizen comedy?”

These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/genres/city-comedy-iid-21364>

http://folgerpedia.folger.edu/The_Merry_Wives_of_Windsor

2. What did the word humor mean to the Elizabethans? Research medieval Comedy of Humors. Research Ben Jonson’s concept of humor. In what ways were health and personality traits connected?

These and other websites provide information:

<https://literarycriticismjohn.blogspot.com/2011/11/00027-whats-ben-jonsons-concept-of.html>

<http://www.shakespeareswords.com/Humours>

3. What was the hierarchy of classes in Elizabethan society? In what ways could a person raise or lower their position? Research professions of the time and what status was afforded to each profession.

These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.elizabethanenglandlife.com/elizabethan-era-hierarchy-classes-ranks-in-society.html>

<http://study.com/academy/lesson/elizabethan-era-class-system.html>

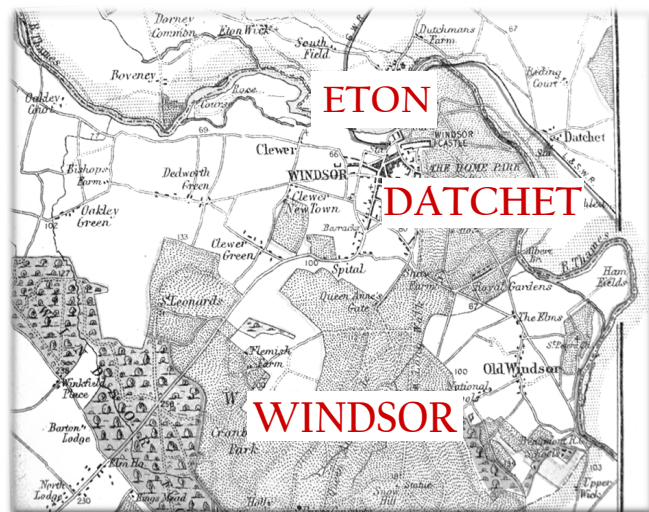
<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-occupations-and-jobs.htm>

4. In regard to family life, what expectations were placed on the individual family members? What duty did each owe to the other?

These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-family-life.htm>

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/society/family/index.html>



Map of Windsor and surrounding counties

A popular legend says that Queen Elizabeth liked the character Falstaff from previous Shakespeare plays and requested that Shakespeare write a play showing him in love.



The Rainbow Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I

5. What was the role of women in Elizabethan society? What was expected of them?

This and other websites provide information:

<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-women.htm>

6. Learn more about Shakespeare’s life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>

<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&C-FID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

After seeing/reading the play

1. Why might Shakespeare have chosen Windsor as the setting for his play? What is its proximity to London? What is its connection to the court? If Windsor is neither in the court nor the country, then where is it?

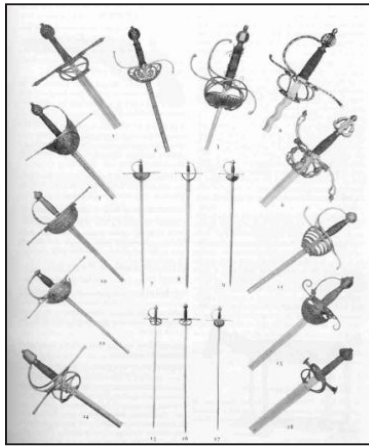
2. Compare the ratio of verse to prose in the play. Which characters speak in verse? Which speak in prose? Why might Shakespeare have made these choices? What is the effect of Shakespeare’s use of verse and prose?

3. How is language used to comic effect in this play? Who uses language incorrectly? How is the misuse of language a source of humor?

4. Refer to your research about the role of women and family life in Elizabethan society. Examine the four women characters in the play: Mistress Ford, Mistress Page, Mistress Quickly and Anne Page. What is the role of the women in society, as illustrated in the play? What freedoms does each have? What restrictions are placed on each? How are the four women the same? Different?

5. Compare and contrast the marriages between the Fords and the Pages. What gets in the way of Master Ford’s and Mistress Ford’s happiness? What do Master Ford and Master Page learn from their wives? Based on their behavior during the play, how might both relationships change after the play ends?

Although dueling was considered a dangerous and illegal activity in Elizabethan England, it was still very popular. Men would practice dueling for self-defense and to improve their personal fighting skills. They dueled to settle private matters such as insulting someone by calling them a liar or questioning their power.



Dueling swords

6. Refer once more to your research about the role of women and family life in Elizabethan society. How is Anne Page's decision to marry Fenton contrary to what was expected of young women at the time? What does Anne Page learn from her parents? What do the Pages learn from Anne?

7. Whose honesty is called into question in the play? Who deceives whom and why? Who tells the truth and why? How might the suspicions of deception be handled? Who is made a fool? Who is fooled in the play? How are the deceptions resolved?

8. Who disguises themselves in the play? In what way does each character embody their disguise? What do the disguises reveal about the characters who wear them?

9. Refer to your research on the role of women in Elizabethan society. How does casting women in men's roles influence the play? What insight might women bring to traditionally male roles?

In addition to Falstaff wearing horns in the forest, there are other references to horns throughout the play. Master Ford, who is convinced his wife is not loyal to him, is afraid that he will be called a cuckold. A cuckold is a term for a man whose wife was thought to be unfaithful. He could be easily recognized by the metaphorical horns on his head.



Falstaff with horns rendering by Ulises Alcalá.

10. Who are the outsiders and/or foreigners in the play? How do the people of Windsor view them? In what ways are they mocked? What does their behavior say about the Windsor community? What do the members of the community learn from the outsiders, if anything?

11. Why do the merry wives lure Falstaff into the woods? Why does Falstaff agree to meet them? Which plans are set to take place in the woods? Which come to fruition? Which do not? What is concealed in the woods? What is revealed in the woods?

12. Refer to your research on humors. What characters from the play fit into the stereotypes of Ben Jonson's theory of humors and why?

13. Falstaff is often considered to be one of Shakespeare's most popular and beloved characters. What is appealing about Falstaff? Referring to your research on humors, what personality trait(s) might be out of balance or excessive for Falstaff?

14. Refer to your research on "citizen comedy." *The Merry Wives of Windsor* employs many of the same comedic elements as contemporary comedies. What is a citizen comedy that is popular today, and why is this form of comedy still appealing?



2017 *The Merry Wives of Windsor* set rendering. Designed by Regina García.

15. Falstaff, Bardolph, Pistol, Nym, Mistress Quickly and Shallow also appear in one or more of the following plays: *Henry IV, Part One* and *Henry IV, Part Two*. If you have also read or seen these plays, compare and contrast the versions of the characters presented in the history plays to the versions presented in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In what ways are these characters similar? In what ways are they different?

16. If you have also seen *Shakespeare in Love*, how do Mistress Ford, Mistress Page, Mistress Quickly and Anne Page compare to the women in *Shakespeare in Love* in regard to their roles in society? What are the similarities? What are the differences?



Pinching is a type of punishment thought to be similar to a pagan tradition that was quite well-known in the countryside of Shakespeare's day. It involved investing an animal—a deer, for instance—with the sins of the community and then releasing it into the wild to be hunted and killed. The sacrifice would cleanse the community of its sins and provide reconciliation and a fresh beginning. In the play you will see many fairies engage in this practice.



Costume renderings of fairies by Ulises Alcalá.



Toward the end of the play, you will hear reference to the local Windsor legend of Herne the Hunter, a ghost who haunts the forest near the oak tree from which he was found hanging. While there are several versions of this story, in all of them Herne was found dead with deer horns on his head.



Herne the Hunter, print by George Cruikshank, 1843. The Mansell Collection/Art Resource.

Gender-parity casting is designed to create a more balanced female-to-male ratio onstage. In this OSF production, a few of the characters that are typically cast with male actors will instead be cast with female actors.

Herne's Oak print by Rowney & Foster, 1788.

Members of Oregon Shakespeare Festival Education created the "2017 Study Guide for *The Merry Wives of Windsor*." These suggestions were designed for students and teachers but may be enjoyed by audiences of all ages. They may be used without restriction for educational purposes. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is not responsible for the content of any website listed above.

© Oregon Shakespeare Festival. No part of the "2017 Study Guide for *The Merry Wives of Windsor*" may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system, for professional or commercial purposes without permission in writing from Oregon Shakespeare Festival Education.

