



Oregon  
Shakespeare  
Festival.

# 2025 Study Guide

## The Merry Wives of Windsor

by William Shakespeare



### Windsor and the Middle Class

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* takes place in Windsor, a market town located about 30 miles west of central London. Windsor is home to 900-year-old Windsor Castle, which today is the oldest and largest occupied castle in the world. Windsor is also home to the oldest order of knighthood, The Order of the Garter.

Many of Windsor's townspeople were considered members of a fast-growing new socio-economic group referred to as the Yeomanry or the middle class. The Yeomanry consisted of farmers who owned and worked their own land and skilled workers such as tailors and carpenters. Professionals such as lawyers and physicians were also considered part of the middle class as well as merchants who profited from trade and commerce. The middle class generally lacked land or titles, so they were not the top of society but not the poorest either.

Shakespeare's own family were considered middle class. His father, John, was a glove maker and a local merchant who also served on the town council. John would later become a high bailiff (mayor) in Stratford-upon-Avon.



Terri McMahon

### Director of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

- Terri has been a proud actor with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival for 23 seasons.
- Other directing credits include Southern Oregon University, Oregon Cabaret Theatre, and Oregon Repertory Theater. Terri has directed *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at Great Lakes Theatre, Idaho Shakespeare Festival, and Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival.
- She says of this play, "*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, with utterly recognizable human foibles at its heart, is meant not only to entertain, but open our minds, for that's what laughter does."



William Shakespeare

### William Shakespeare

- 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: Windsor, England, in the 1590s.
- Since Shakespeare was born into a middle-class family, this makes Windsor very familiar to him. In the play, he writes about life in a small provincial town and the daily duties and activities that its inhabitants perform.
- The play was written around 1597 and first published in 1602.





## 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:  
[https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/The\\_Merry\\_Wives\\_of\\_Windsor](https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/The_Merry_Wives_of_Windsor)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City\\_comedy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_comedy)
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://shakespeareswords.com/Public/LanguageCompanion/ThemesAndTopics.aspx?TopicId=22>  
<https://www.britannica.com/art/comedy-of-humours>

“Wives may be merry, and yet honest, too.”

Mrs. Page, Act IV, scene ii

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:  
<https://www.history.org.uk/student/module/4536/overview-of-elizabeth-i/4543/social-structure#:~:text=Elizabethan%20England%20had%2four%20main,and%20their%20children%20could%20get>  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z3dhv4/revision/1>

4. Regarding Elizabethan family life, what expectations were placed on individual family members? What duty did each owe to each other? These and other websites provide information:  
<https://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-family-life.html>  
<https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/society/family/index.html>
5. That was the role of women in Elizabethan society? What was expected of them? This and other websites provide information:  
<https://www.elizabethi.org/contents/women/>
6. What was the function of knights in the Elizabethan era? How were they expected to behave? These and other websites provide information:  
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/inspire-me/brief-history-of-knights/>  
<https://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-knights.html>  
<https://www.royal.uk/the-order-of-the-garter>
7. Learn more about Shakespeare’s life and times at the following websites:  
<https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeareslife/>  
<https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/williamshakespeare/william-shakespeare-biography/>



Arms of the Most Noble Order of the Garter

## Knights and the Order of the Garter

Shakespeare’s plays feature several knights that he used to explore how complex the ideas of chivalry and honor can be. He also used knights, such as Falstaff, to show how knights in society evolve and how they can also be heroic and flawed. Shakespeare himself was never knighted.

Knights fell under the Gentry class in the Elizabethan social structure along with squires, gentleman and gentlewoman. The Gentry had money and lands and were of a higher status than the poor or middle classes. It took money to outfit a knight thus mostly boys from noble families with money were made knights.

People were also knighted for the great deeds and public services they performed for England. Henry Carey, 1st Baron Hunsdon who was the patron of The Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Shakespeare’s playing company, was knighted in 1558 by Queen Elizabeth. He also became a Knight of the Garter in 1561.

It was a knight’s duty to learn how to serve and to fight for their King or Queen according to the Code of Chivalry. The Code of Chivalry states that not only should knights be strong and brave but that they must also be courteous, have honor, protect the poor and the weak and act gallantly towards women.

The Order of the Garter is the oldest British order of chivalry. It was established by Edward III in 1348 and to this day is considered the highest British civil and military honor that can be obtained. The Order is strictly limited and includes the King/Queen, the Prince of Wales and no more than 24 living Companion members. The Order is celebrated annually at St. George’s Chapel in Windsor Castle.





## After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to the sidebar on Windsor. 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 characters speak in prose? Why might Shakespeare have made these choices? What is the effect of Shakespeare's use of verse and prose?

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?

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 these four women characters in the play: Mrs. Ford, Mrs. Page, Mrs. 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 Mr. Ford's and Mrs. Ford's happiness? What do Mr. Ford and Mr. Page learn from their wives? Based on their behavior during the play, how might both relationships change after the play ends?
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 learn from her parents? What do the Pages learn from Anne?
7. Whose honesty is called into question during the play? Who deceives whom and why? Who tells the truth and why? How are suspicions of deception handled? Who is made the fool? Who is fooled in the play? How are the deceptions resolved?
8. 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 the insider's behavior say about the Windsor community? What do the members of the community learn from the outsiders, if anything?
9. Why do the merry wives lure Falstaff into the woods? Why does Falstaff agree to meet with 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?
10. Refer to your research on humors. What characters fit into the stereotypes of Ben Jonson's theory of humors and why?



Queen Elizabeth I preceded by the Knights of the Garter, c. 1601.



## After seeing/reading the play (continued)

11. 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?
12. 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?
13. Refer to your research on knights and their code of conduct. Does Falstaff fit the description of a knight? Does he conduct himself as a knight should? What are some behaviors that Falstaff indulges in that may not fit into a knight's code of conduct?
14. If you are seeing August Wilson's *Jitney*, *Shane*, *Into the Woods*, or *As You Like It*, compare the relationships of the parents and their children with those in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. What are some of the similarities and differences in how the parents and children interact with each other? Describe the care, or lack thereof, for each other.
15. Falstaff, Bardolph, Pistol, Nym, Mistress Quickly, and Shallow also appear in *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?

### SIR JOHN FALSTAFF

Sir John Falstaff is a popular Shakespeare character.

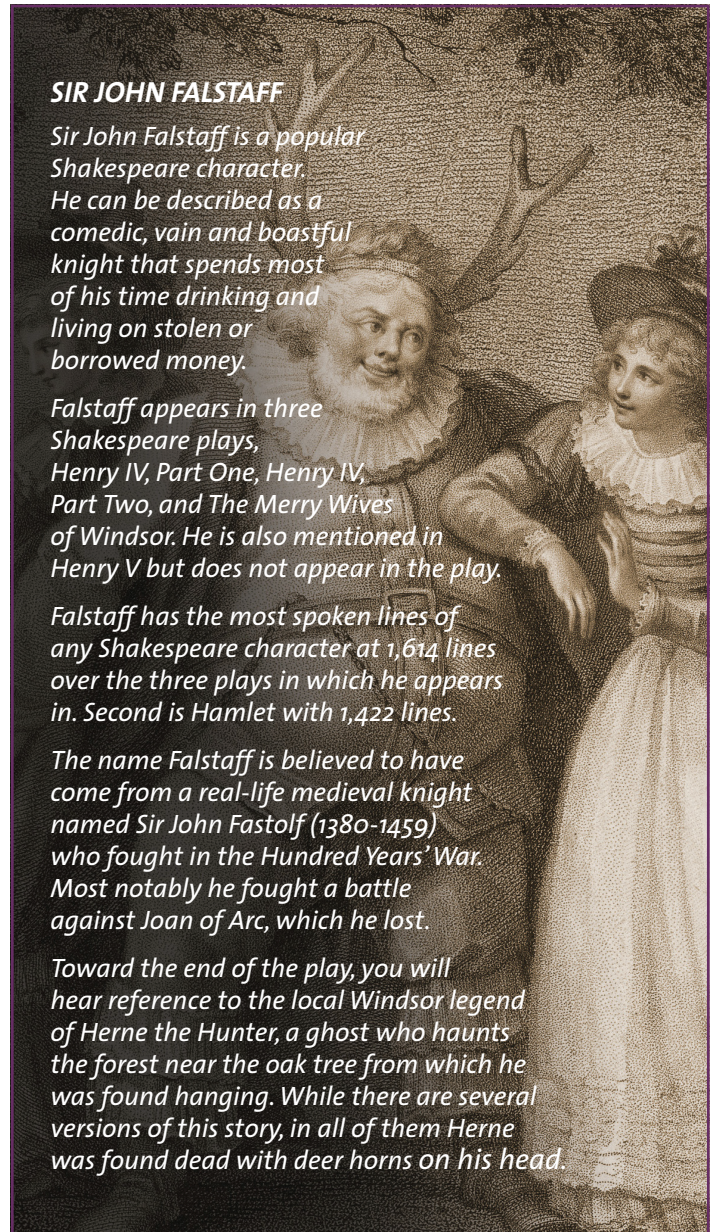
He can be described as a comedic, vain and boastful knight that spends most of his time drinking and living on stolen or borrowed money.

Falstaff appears in three Shakespeare plays, *Henry IV, Part One*, *Henry IV, Part Two*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. He is also mentioned in *Henry V* but does not appear in the play.

Falstaff has the most spoken lines of any Shakespeare character at 1,614 lines over the three plays in which he appears in. Second is Hamlet with 1,422 lines.

The name Falstaff is believed to have come from a real-life medieval knight named Sir John Fastolf (1380-1459) who fought in the Hundred Years' War. Most notably he fought a battle against Joan of Arc, which he lost.

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.

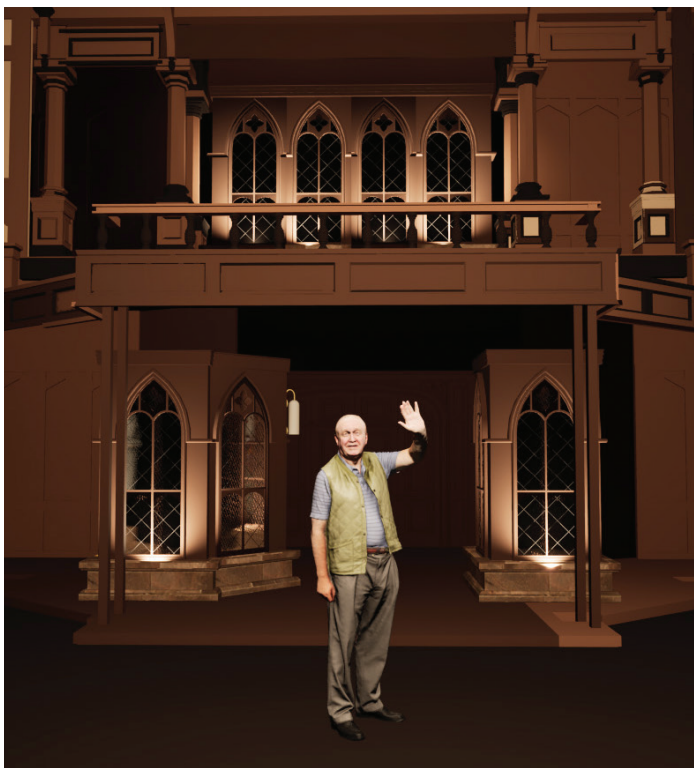


Falstaff at Herne's Oak. Public domain.

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. Public domain.



Set design for *The Merry Wives of Windsor* by Efrén Delgadillo, Jr.



# Flash *From the* Past

90  
90 years  
of OSF

For our 90<sup>th</sup>  
**Anniversary Season**  
we thought it would be  
fun to share pictures of  
past productions of *The  
Merry Wives of Windsor*.



Left: K.T. Voght as Falstaff, 2017.  
Middle: G. Valmont Thomas as Falstaff, 2006.  
Bottom Right: Jim Edmonson as Bardolph, 2006.

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