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The Merry Wives of Windsor

William Shakespeare · *c. 1597 · original English text*

Sir John Falstaff, short of money, writes the same love-letter to two Windsor wives. They compare notes, and the town turns his appetite into a comedy of baskets, disguises, and a midnight oak. Unlike the Henriad, this Falstaff is the butt of a citizen plot, and the wives keep the laugh.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What happens when a knight treats honest wives as easy game, and what kind of merriment is it that punishes him without ruining the town?

"Heaven give you many, many merry days!"
The close, as the trick is laughed over by a country fire

Mistress Page and Mistress Ford are neither prudes nor fools. They stage Falstaff's humiliations—the buck-basket, the fat woman of Brentford, Herne's oak—while Ford's jealousy is itself cured by being fooled. Anne Page, meanwhile, evades her parents' schemes and marries Fenton. The play's justice is social and comic: Falstaff is pinched, not destroyed, and is even invited to the fire afterward. Windsor's virtue is wit joined to chastity, not a sermon only.

KEY CHARACTERS

Sir John Falstaff
A knight of appetite who, in Windsor, is outwitted by the wives he meant to use.

Mistress Ford and Mistress Page
The merry wives: chaste, inventive, and joint authors of the plot.

Ford
A jealous husband who disguises himself as Brook and has to be cured.

Anne Page and Fenton
The daughter and the suitor who win the marriage the parents meant to arrange otherwise.

Mistress Quickly, Caius, Evans, Slender
The town's supporting comic machinery.

MERRY DAYS

> *"The Windsor bell hath struck twelve, the minute draws on."*
> **Falstaff** · Act V

> *"Heaven give you many, many merry days!"*
> The close

Grades 9–12
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01
Two Letters
ACTS I–II

Falstaff sends identical courtships to Mistress Ford and Mistress Page. They discover the insult and agree to use him. Ford, jealous, disguises himself as Brook and pays Falstaff to woo his own wife.

- The insult is the sameness of the letters as much as the suit.
- Pistol, Nym, and the tavern remnant start the leaks.
- Ford's disguise makes him a second fool in the same plot.

02
The Buck-Basket
ACT III, THE FIRST TRAPPING

Falstaff is hidden in a basket of foul linen and thrown into the Thames. He comes out ready, still, for another appointment.

- The wives' timing is the craft of the play.
- Ford, searching the house, misses the basket and rages.
- The joke is physical and pointed: appetite ends in a ditch.

03
The Fat Woman of Brentford
ACT IV, THE SECOND TRAPPING

Falstaff is dressed as an old woman and beaten out of the house. Meanwhile Anne's suitors—Slender, Caius, and Fenton—are plotted over by her parents.

- Falstaff will still walk into a third trap.
- The Caius–Evans quarrel is a comic plot of town types.
- Anne's own will is the under-story the farce almost hides.

04
Herne the Hunter
ACT V, THE OAK

At midnight, by the Windsor oak, Falstaff waits in horns, believing the old tale. The wives and children, as fairies, pinch him until the joke is public.

- 'The Windsor bell hath struck twelve' is his cue into the last folly.
- This text calls the figure 'Herne the hunter' (hunter not always capitalized).
- Falstaff's excuse about odd numbers is bravado at the edge of the pinches.

> *"The Windsor bell hath struck twelve, the minute draws on."*
> **Falstaff** · Act V, at the oak

05
A Country Fire
ACT V, THE CLOSE

The disguises of Anne's suitors fail; Fenton has married her. Ford is cured. Falstaff is invited home to laugh the sport over.

- The blessing is 'Heaven give you many, many merry days!'
- The play lets the knight sit by the fire, not only in the mud.
- Citizen comedy here ends in a restored household, not a court.

Wit and Chastity | Jealousy | A Public Joke | Citizen Virtue | Appetite Punished

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #1517. This is a Falstaff play outside the history cycle; do not expect the Henry IV ending here.
2. Exact: "The Windsor bell hath struck twelve, the minute draws on." And: "Heaven give you many, many merry days!" Falstaff also says "there is divinity in odd numbers, either in nativity, chance, or death."
3. The old tale in this text is "Herne the hunter" (hunter often lowercase). Quote the page, not a modernized 'Hunter.'
4. The play is bawdy in talk and clean in the wives' conduct. The three humiliations are the moral plot: the knight is shamed, then still welcomed to the fire.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1517, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-merry-wives-of-windsor/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.