

The Merry Wives of Windsor (Winter 2010)

“THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR is no doubt a very amusing play, with a great deal of humour, character, and nature in it: but we should have liked it much better, if any one else had been the hero of it, instead of Falstaff.” So says William Hazlitt, in his *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays*, and he seems to have plenty of company in that opinion. Indeed, this “sparkling farce-comedy,” to use Harold Goddard’s phrase [182],¹ would almost certainly have a better reputation amongst critics if its protagonist had a different name; even Harold Bloom, possibly Sir John’s least compromising admirer, concedes that “nobody can wholly dislike what became the basis for Verdi’s *Falstaff*” [315], a point which confirms the play’s popular appeal—as Russ McDonald argues, in his introduction to the Pelican edition of the play, artists such as Verdi “knew a theatrical winner when they saw one, and their instincts correspond to (and probably derive from) the success of the play with audiences over the centuries” [xxx]. My own experience, though limited, supports McDonald’s point—I have attended only one production of *Merry Wives*, but I remember it being hilarious.

That said, my focus in these essays is characterization; as *Merry Wives* offers little in this regard, my remarks here will necessarily be brief. I shall try not to allow my own affection for the “Immortal Falstaff” of the *Henry IV* plays to distort my reading of Shakespeare’s farcical follow-up.² Yet the ghost of plump Jack cannot be exorcised from

¹ Goddard also calls *Merry Wives* Shakespeare’s “most inconsequential and merely theatrical” play . . . though only the stuffiest theatregoer would reject a play for being “merely” theatrical.

² Though scholars remain divided on the question of when *Merry Wives* was written, my own opinion is that parts of the play make little sense unless we suppose Elizabethan audiences already had met such characters as Pistol and Justice Shallow, whose undiluted forms first appear in *Henry IV, Part 2*.

Windsor—it hovers throughout, reminding us that the spirit animating the “puffed man” of *this* play [V.v.149] is made of grosser stuff. We therefore begin with him:

Falstaff

Right from the start we can sense Shakespeare cultivating anticipation for Falstaff. “Sir Hugh, persuade me not,” says Justice Shallow to begin the play; “I will make a Star Chamber matter of it. If he were twenty Sir John Falstaffs he shall not abuse Robert Shallow, Esquire” [I.i.1–3]. Sir Hugh Evans is the Welsh parson of Windsor, which means he pronounces his *b*’s as *p*’s and his *d*’s as *t*’s; following some perfunctory banter between himself, Shallow, and Shallow’s absurd kinsman Slender, the parson returns to the preferred theme:

Evans: If Sir John Falstaff have committed disparagements unto you, I am of the church, and will be glad to do my benevolence to make atonements and compromises between you.

Shallow: The Council shall hear it. It is a riot.

Evans: It is not meet the Council hear a riot. There is no fear of Got in a riot. The Council, look you, shall desire to hear the fear of Got, and not to hear a riot. Take your vizaments in that.

Shallow: Ha! O’ my life, if I were young again, the sword should end it.

[I.i.27–37]

This raises the stakes nicely, and the trio approaches the house of Master George Page, where Falstaff is reported to be feasting. Evans knocks, and the door is opened not by the fat knight but by the respectable Page. Again the conversation turns to Falstaff, and again Shakespeare ratchets up the suspense:

Shallow: Is Sir John Falstaff here?

Page: Sir, he is within. And I would I could do a good office between you.

Evans: It is spoke as a Christians ought to speak.

Shallow: He hath wronged me, Master Page.

Page: Sir, he doth in some sort confess it.

Shallow: If it be confessed, it is not redressed. Is not that so, Master Page? He hath wronged me; indeed, he hath. At a word, he hath, believe me. Robert Shallow, Esquire, saith he is wronged.

Page: Here comes Sir John.

[I.i.90–101]

Now Shakespeare has things cooking—not only is Falstaff on the cusp of entering, but Shallow, with his mouthfuls of redundancies, is beginning to sound like himself. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Falstaff, whose entrance amounts to one of the bigger anticlimaxes in Shakespeare:

Falstaff: Now, Master Shallow, you'll complain of me to the king?

Shallow: Knight, you have beaten my men, killed my deer, and broke open my lodge.

Falstaff: But not kissed your keeper's daughter?

Shallow: Tut, a pin! This shall be answered.

Falstaff: I will answer it straight—I have done all this. That is now answered.

[I.i.102–9]

For me this retort crystallizes everything Falstaff lacks in his post-*Henry* characterization: He is bluntly funny, yet bluntness is no substitute for wit. Shallow has served up a softball, and for a moment Falstaff seems poised to knock it out of the park: “I will answer it straight”—and he pauses, and we lean forward for the crowning blow. Only Falstaff does not deliver, as though in the moment of the pause he decides Shallow and his “pins” are not worth the effort; instead he settles for the easy and obvious. Granted Shallow is witless, but we have seen Falstaff challenged by unworthies before and utter something more memorable, more knowing, than “That is now answered.” One needn't search long for evidence in the *Henry IV* plays:

Bardolph: Why, you are so fat, Sir John, that you must needs be out of all compass—out of all reasonable compass, Sir John.

Falstaff: Do thou amend thy face, and I'll amend my life. Thou art our admiral, thou bearest the lantern in the poop—but 'tis in the nose of thee. Thou art the Knight of the Burning Lamp.

Bardolph: Why, Sir John, my face does you no harm.

Falstaff: No, I'll be sworn. I make as good use of it as many a man doth of a death's-head or a memento mori. I never see thy face but I think

upon hellfire and Dives that lived in purple; for there he is in his robes, burning, burning.

[*1HIV*, III.iii.21–33]

Lord Chief Justice: Do you set down your name in the scroll of youth, that are written down old with all the characters of age? Have you not a moist eye? A dry hand? A yellow cheek? A white beard? A decreasing leg? An increasing belly? Is not your voice broken? Your wind short? Your chin double? Your wit single? And every part about you blasted with antiquity? And will you yet call yourself young? Fie, fie, fie, Sir John!

Falstaff: My lord, I was born about three of the clock in the afternoon, with a white head and something a round belly. For my voice, I have lost it with halloing and singing of anthems. To approve my youth further, I will not. The truth is, I am only old in judgment and understanding; and he that will caper with me for a thousand marks, let him lend me the money, and have at him!

[*2HIV*, I.ii.174–89]

Lancaster: Now, Falstaff, where have you been all this while?
When everything is ended, then you come.
These tardy tricks of yours will, on my life,
One time or other break some gallows' back.

Falstaff: I would be sorry, my lord, but it should be thus. I never knew yet but rebuke and check was the reward of valor. Do you think me a swallow, an arrow, or a bullet? Have I, in my poor and old motion, the expedition of thought? I have speeded hither with the very extremest inch of possibility. I have foundered nine score and odd posts, and here, travel-tainted as I am, have, in my pure and immaculate valor, taken Sir John Coleville of the dale, a most furious knight and valorous enemy. But what of that? He saw me, and yielded, that I may justly say, with the hook-nosed fellow of Rome, their Caesar, "I came, saw, and overcame."

[*2HIV*, IV.iii.26–41]

Were *Merry Wives* a better play, with fewer inconsistencies and unresolved subplots, one might be tempted to conclude that its action takes place *after* Falstaff's rejection by Hal/Henry—that we are witnessing the "banished" Falstaff. Certainly this would explain his impoverished state, his primary motive for pursuing Mistress Ford ("Now, the report goes she has all the rule of her husband's purse" [I.iii.50–1]) and Mistress Page ("She bears the purse too; she is a region in Guiana, all gold and bounty")

[I.iii.66–7]). The trauma of rejection breaks Falstaff’s heart—might it not also break his wit?

Setting aside such speculation—for the universe of *Merry Wives* is so different from that of *Henry IV*, the question of continuity is practically irrelevant—the version of the fat knight who blusters through Windsor seems to exist solely to be the butt of mean-spirited jests devised by bourgeois moralists who would be helpless in Eastcheap.

Listening to the mocking chorus that surrounds Falstaff in the wake of his final humiliation, at Herne’s oak, who can believe anyone in Windsor even *likes* him?

Mrs. Page: Why, Sir John, do you think, though we would have thrust virtue out of our hearts by the head and shoulders, and have given ourselves without scruple to hell, that ever the devil could have made you our delight?

Ford: What, a hodge-pudding? a bag of flax?

Mrs. Page: A puffed man?

Page: Old, cold, withered, and of intolerable entrails?

Ford: And one that is as slanderous as Satan?

Page: And as poor as Job?

Ford: And as wicked as his wife?

Evans: And given to fornications, and to taverns, and sack and wine and metheglins, and to drinkings and swearings and starings, pribbles and prabbles?

Falstaff: Well, I am your theme. You have the start of me; I am dejected; I am not able to answer the Welsh flannel. Ignorance itself is a plummet o’er me; use me as you will.

[V.v.143–60]

Only in Windsor could someone as pitiful as Ford—comforted more by the thought of catching his wife in another man’s arms than by the reality of finding her faithful—be permitted to gloat over a yielding Falstaff. Only in Windsor could Falstaff be dumped in a sewer, beaten as a witch by a would-be cuckold, and burned and pinched by children in fairy costumes *before* it occurred to him, “I do begin to perceive that I am made an ass” [V.v.117]. And only by forgetting everything we have had the pleasure of

knowing about Falstaff—by imagining we are watching the humiliation of an entirely different man—can we enjoy *The Merry Wives of Windsor* for the farce that it is.

Mistress Page and Mistress Ford

The play's best joke is to pass off a pair of Puritans as "merry wives." Consider Mistress Page's initial reaction to Falstaff's flattering love letter:

What a Herod of Jewry is this! O wicked, wicked world. One that is well-nigh worn to pieces with age, to show himself a young gallant? What an unweighed behavior hath this Flemish drunkard picked—with the devil's name!—out of my conversation that he dares in this manner assay me? Why, he hath not been thrice in my company. What should I say to him? I was then frugal of my mirth! Heaven forgive me! Why, I'll exhibit a bill in the parliament for the putting down of men. How shall I be revenged on him? for revenged I will be, as sure as his guts are made of puddings.

[II.i.19–29]

Is it too much to expect at least a modicum of mirth in response to the pitiful spectacle of Falstaff-in-love? Granted, the wooing is insincere, but Mistress Page makes her speech *before* she learns Falstaff has sent an identical letter to Mistress Ford, who proves equally indignant:

Here, read, read: perceive how I might be knighted. I shall think the worse of fat men as long as I have an eye to make difference of men's liking. And yet he would not swear; praised women's modesty; and gave such orderly and well-behaved reproof to all uncomeliness that I would have sworn his disposition would have gone to the truth of his words. But they do no more adhere and keep place together than the Hundredth Psalm to the tune of "Greensleeves." What tempest, I trow, threw this whale, with so many tuns of oil in his belly, ashore at Windsor? How shall I be revenged on him? I think the best way were to entertain him with hope till the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease.

[II.i.49–62]

Both women vow to be revenged on the lustful, "wicked" Falstaff, and vengeance remains an important motive throughout the play—Pistol and Nym plot their own

revenge against Falstaff for cashiering them [I.iii.83–101], and Evans vows with Dr. Caius to “knog our prains together to be revenge on this same scall, scurvy, cogging companion, the host of the Garter” [III.i.109–11], who has played a relatively benign joke on the two foreigners. But it is the wives who fixate most obsessively on the theme. We hear it following Falstaff’s enforced excursion in the buck basket:

Mrs. Ford: I am half afraid he will have need of washing; so throwing him into the water will do him a benefit.

Mrs. Page: Hang him, dishonest rascal! I would all of the same strain were in the same distress.

Mrs. Ford: I think my husband hath some special suspicion of Falstaff’s being here, for I never saw him so gross in his jealousy till now.

Mrs. Page: I will lay a plot to try that, and we will yet have more tricks with Falstaff—his dissolute disease will scarce obey this medicine.

Mrs. Ford: Shall we send that foolish carrion Mistress Quickly to him, and excuse his throwing into the water; and give him another hope, to betray him to another punishment?

[III.iii.162–76]

We hear it again after Falstaff, disguised as “the fat woman of Brainford” [IV.ii.67], is beaten by a crazed Ford:

Mrs. Page: I’ll have the cudgel hallowed and hung o’er the altar; it hath done meritorious service.

Mrs. Ford: What think you? May we, with the warrant of womanhood and the witness of a good conscience, pursue him with any further revenge?

Mrs. Page: The spirit of wantonness is, sure, scared out of him. If the devil have him not in fee simple, with fine and recovery, he will never, I think, in the way of waste, attempt us again.

[IV.ii.189–97]

Lines such as these rationalize vengeance as a normative desire to teach an old sinner “a lesson.” There is no place in Windsor for Falstaffian outliers—the townspeople seem anxious enough in the presence of harmless men like Evans who “hack our English” [III.i.71]. It is not enough that the scoundrel give up his designs on married women, nor even that he be punished for pursuing them—he must be *reformed*. In this

respect, the goodwives Page and Ford are scarcely different from the newly crowned Henry V, who at least confines his moralizing to public appearances. Mistress Page recites this jingle directly to the audience:

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.94–7]

In other words, she wants to reform *us* too!

William Page

If in such moments *Merry Wives* seems to be unfolding in a church or schoolhouse, the quirky scene between Parson Evans (who is also the town's schoolmaster) and the Pages' young son, William, is more than a welcome diversion—it reminds us that subversive energies cannot be scourged entirely. The most earnest lessons are ripest for satire.

The scene is immediately prior to Falstaff's second assignation with Mistress Ford. Evans informs Mistress Page and William that school has been cancelled at Slender's request. (We may infer that Slender requires the schoolmaster's help in advancing his floundering love suit with Anne Page, so that even before the obscene punning starts we sense frivolity encroaching on learning.) Mistress Page then asks Evans to quiz William on his Latin—"my husband says my son profits nothing in the world at his book," she frets [IV.i.12–13]—and the Welshman's accent, the child's (assumed) innocence, and Mistress Quickly's corrupting translations combine to produce more filth than anything touched by Falstaff:

Evans: What is the focative case, William?
William: O, vocativo, O.

Evans: Remember, William; focative is *caret*.

Quickly: And that's a good root.

Evans: 'Oman, forbear.

Mrs. Page: Peace.

Evans: What is your genitive case plural, William?

William: Genitive case?

Evans: Ay.

William: *Genitivo, horum, harum, horum*.

Quickly: 'Vengeance of Jenny's case! fie on her! Never name her, child, if she be a whore.

Evans: For shame, 'oman.

Quickly: You do ill to teach the child such words. He teaches him to hick and to hack, which they'll do fast enough of themselves, and to call "horum." Fie upon you!

[IV.i.45–62]

Though William's wide-eyed *O*'s suggest he is attuned to the mischief that can transpire when *f*'s replace *v*'s, only Mistress Quickly is free to make explicit what respectable characters must pretend not to hear. His command of Latin remains doubtful, yet William has learned other things at school. We need not guess which lessons will stay with him longer.

Ford

There is a shadow upon Master Ford that refuses to be lightened by comedy. More than merely jealous, he seems in his soliloquies to flirt with a madness that Shakespeare shall fully develop in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*. It is appropriate that Pistol—another would-be tragedian made foolish by genre—first puts the horrifying image in Ford's head:

Ford: Well, I hope it be not so.

Pistol: Hope is a curtal dog in some affairs.

Sir John affects thy wife.

Ford: Why, sir, my wife is not young.

Pistol: He woos both high and low, both rich and poor,

Both young and old, one with another, Ford.

He loves the gallimaufry. Ford, perpend.

Ford: Love my wife?

Pistol: With liver burning hot. Prevent, or go thou,
Like Sir Actaeon he, with Ringwood at thy heels.—
O, odious is the name!

Ford: What name, sir?

Pistol: The horn, I say. Farewell.
Take heed, have open eye, for thieves do foot by night.
Take heed, ere summer comes or cuckoo birds do sing.

[II.i.100–14]

From this moment, the cuckold's horns wind through Ford's language. So prepared is he to wear them, he presents himself (disguised as "Master Brook") to Falstaff as a kind of patron (or pander), trading money and encouragement for knowledge of the adulterous act. Naturally Falstaff is happy to oblige—in fact, he boasts, he is meeting Mistress Ford "between ten and eleven, for at that time the jealous rascally knave her husband will be forth" [II.ii.249–50]. Ford plots revenge, though it torments rather than pleases him:

What a damned Epicurean rascal is this! My heart is ready to crack with impatience. Who says this is improvident jealousy? My wife hath sent to him, the hour is fixed, the match is made. Would any man have thought this? See the hell of having a false woman! My bed shall be abused, my coffers ransacked, my reputation gnawn at; and I shall not only receive this villainous wrong, but stand under the adoption of abominable terms, and by him that does me this wrong. Terms! names! Amaimon sounds well; Lucifer, well; Barbason, well; yet they are devils' additions, the names of fiends. But Cuckold! Wittol! Cuckold! The devil himself hath not such a name. Page is an ass, a secure ass. He will trust his wife; he will not be jealous. I will rather trust a Fleming with my butter, Parson Hugh the Welshman with my cheese, an Irishman with my aqua vitae bottle, or a thief to walk my ambling gelding, than my wife with herself. Then she plots, then she ruminates, then she devises—and what they think in their hearts they may effect, they will break their hearts but they will effect. God be praised for my jealousy. Eleven o'clock the hour. I will prevent this, detect my wife, be revenged on Falstaff, and laugh at Page. I will about it; better three hours too soon than a minute too late. Fie, fie, fie! cuckold! cuckold! cuckold!

[II.ii.270–94]

Setting aside the lame jabs at cheese-loving Welshmen and Irish drunkards, this is very uncomfortable ground for comedy; one may laugh at an ignorant fool, but an obsessed fool is dangerous. Racing home to catch his wife with Falstaff, Ford spots Mistress Page with Falstaff's page boy, Robin, and his mind reels further toward violence:

Has Page any brains? hath he any eyes? hath he any thinking?
 Sure, they sleep; he hath no use of them. Why, this boy will carry a
 letter twenty mile as easy as a cannon will shoot point-blank
 twelve score. He pieces out his wife's inclination; he gives her
 folly motion and advantage; and now she's going to my wife, and
 Falstaff's boy with her. A man may hear this shower sing in the
 wind. And Falstaff's boy with her. Good plots! They are laid, and
 our revolted wives share damnation together. Well, I will take him,
 then torture my wife, pluck the borrowed veil of modesty from the
 so-seeming Mistress Page, divulge Page himself for a secure and
 willful Actaeon; and to these violent proceedings all my neighbors
 shall cry "Aim!"

[III.ii.26–39]

In *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale* such misinterpreted motives lead to irreparable loss; here they lead to hijinks in a washtub and comic beatings. Though the Fords finally reconcile when the merry wives confess their pranks, the moment is no more convincing than the final scene of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, when Proteus falls back in love with Julia after failing to rape Sylvia. Even the good husband Page grows impatient:

Ford: Pardon me, wife. Henceforth do what thou wilt:
 I rather will suspect the sun with cold
 Than thee with wantonness. Now doth thy honor stand,
 In him that was of late an heretic,
 As firm as faith.

Page: 'Tis well, 'tis well; no more:
 Be not as extreme in submission as in offense.
 But let our plot go forward. Let our wives
 Yet once again, to make us public sport,
 Appoint a meeting with this old fat fellow,
 Where we may take him and disgrace him for it.

[IV.iv.6–15]

As easily as that, order is restored in Windsor, and husbands and wives unite to mock an “old fat fellow.” Even the former villain gets to rewrite history, however subtly. In the play’s final scene, after Falstaff “begins to perceive” he has been tricked, Ford makes a remarkable announcement, though no one remarks on it. “Marry, sir,” he tells Falstaff, “we’ll bring you to Windsor, to one Master Brook, that you have cozened of money, to whom you should have been a pander. Over and above that you have suffered, I think to repay that money will be a biting affliction” [V.v.161–5].

What can Falstaff say to this? That in fact “Master Brook” sought out Falstaff, presented Falstaff with a “bag of money,” and promised, “If you will help to bear it, Sir John, take all, or half, for easing me of the carriage,” and later, “There is money. Spend it, spend it; spend more; spend all I have” [II.ii.163–5 & 220–1]! For Falstaff to be punished by those he had thought to cheat is bad enough; for him to then be cheated of that which he was freely given is the final insult.

Clowns

In making the various comic types that round out the cast, Shakespeare seems to have used three molds. The first he borrowed from the *Henry IV* plays; from this mold came Bardolph, Pistol, Mistress Quickly, and Justice Shallow, all of whom lost at least some of their luster in journeying from history to farce—especially Shallow, who after the opening scene is reduced to following the nattering Host of the Garter from jest to jest.³ The second mold produced the foreign caricatures: Sir Hugh the Welshman, who

³ As I previously suggested, one of my main reasons for believing Shakespeare wrote *Merry Wives* after *Henry IV, Part 2* is this reduction of Shallow from splendid simpleton to hanger-on. It is easier to imagine Shakespeare making a dull copy of a sparkling original—and assuming the copy, still familiar to audiences, would garner laughs—than a sparkling copy of a dull original.

prattles of “seese” and “putter” [V.v.137], and the French hothead, Dr. Caius, whose denseness is the occasion for much uninspired laughter:

Host: A word, Monsieur Mockwater.

Caius: Mockvater? vat is dat?

Host: Mockwater, in our English tongue, is valor, bully.

Caius: By gar, then I have as much mockvater as de Englishman.—Scurvy jack-dog priest! By gar, me vill cut his ears.

Host: He will clapperclaw thee titely, bully.

Caius: Clapper-de-claw? vat is dat?

Host: That is, he will make thee amends.

Caius: By gar, me do look he shall clapper-de-claw me; for, by gar, me vill have it.

Host: And I will provoke him to't, or let him wag.

Caius: Me tank you for dat.

[II.iii.51–64]

These “jokes” don’t even qualify as puns—the Host merely hurls insults at the oblivious doctor and lies about their meaning. As for “my ranting host of the Garter” [II.i.174], he epitomizes the third mold, in which Shakespeare builds a comic type from a handful of repeated words. The host prefers “bullyrook” and “Cavaliero”; he also has a weakness for synonyms, as in this excruciating bit:

Caius: Vat be all you, one, two, tree, four, come for?

Host: To see thee fight, to see thee foin, to see thee traverse; to see thee here, to see thee there; to see thee pass thy punto, thy stock, thy reverse, thy distance, thy montant. Is he dead, my Ethiopian? Is he dead, my Francisco? Ha, bully? What says my Aesculapius? my Galen? my heart of elder? Ha, is he dead, bully stale? is he dead?

[II.iii.20–7]

The other chief example of this type is Nym, who also appears in *Henry V* and whose word of choice is “humor” (as in “Slice! that’s my humor” [I.i.123] and “I love not the humor of bread and cheese, and there’s the humor of it” [II.i.124–6]).

And then there is Abraham Slender, nephew to Shallow, suitor to Anne Page, and the only character in Windsor who deserves a better play. Imagine the fun that Prince Hal

or the authentic Falstaff would have had with Slender, whose ample store of witless remarks would impress the peerless Sir Andrew Aguecheek:

I'll ne'er be drunk whilst I live again, but in honest, civil, godly company, for this trick. If I be drunk, I'll be drunk with those that have the fear of God, and not with drunken knaves.

[I.i.165–8]

I bruised my shin th' other day with playing at sword and dagger with a master of fence—three veneys for a dish of stewed prunes—and, by my troth, I cannot abide the smell of hot meat since.

[I.i.261–5]

I had a father, Mistress Anne—my uncle can tell you good jests of him. Pray you, uncle, tell Mistress Anne the jest how my father stole two geese out of a pen, good uncle.

[III.iv.38-41]

Slender is totally overmatched by the less-than-formidable Anne Page, who (in Slender's charming description) "has brown hair, and speaks small like a woman" [I.i.43–4]. Always sympathetic to young lovers thwarted by their parents, Shakespeare gives Anne the most heartfelt lines in the play. "This is my father's choice," she mutters as Slender approaches. "O, what a world of vile ill-favored faults / Looks handsome in three hundred pounds a year" [III.iv.31–3]; her own preference, a gentleman named Fenton, has apparently squandered his fortune running "with the wild prince and Pains" [III.ii.64–5]. Yet even supported by Master Page (and coached by his uncle), Slender's wooing is an absolutely delightful disaster:

Shallow: Mistress Anne, my cousin loves you.

Slender: Ay, that I do, as well as I love any woman in Gloucestershire.

Slender: He will maintain you like a gentlewoman.

Slender: Ay, that I will, come cut and longtail, under the degree of a squire.

Shallow: He will make you a hundred and fifty pounds jointure.

Anne: Good Master Shallow, let him woo for himself.

Shallow: Marry, I thank you for it, I thank you for that good comfort. She calls you, coz. I'll leave you.

Anne: Now, Master Slender—

Slender: Now, good Mistress Anne—

Anne: What is your will?

Slender: My will? 'Od's heartlings, that's a pretty jest indeed! I ne'er made my will yet, I thank God. I am not such a sickly creature, I give heaven praise.

Anne: I mean, Master Slender, what would you with me?

Slender: Truly, for mine own part, I would little or nothing with you. Your father and my uncle have made motions. If it be my luck, so; if not, happy man be his dole. They can tell you how things go better than I can. You may ask your father; here he comes.

[III.iv.42–64]

Slender feigns nonchalance, but we know he is smitten—in an earlier scene, as Shallow, Master Page, and the Host of the Garter tease Evans and Caius, a distracted Slender speaks but three lines: “Ah sweet Anne Page!” “O sweet Anne Page!” and (are there more endearing repetitions in Shakespeare?) “O sweet Anne Page!” [III.i.38, 65 & 105]. Sweet Anne may not want him, but to audiences hungry for laughs Slender is welcome company. He is the most original personality onstage, not only by Windsor's standards but by Shakespeare's generally loftier ones. If only Queen Elizabeth had ordered a play about Abraham Slender in love. . . .

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