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**Sir John Falstaff the Jack-o-Lent: Transformation and Decline in *Merry Wives of Windsor***

In the Henry plays, Sir John Falstaff is a lovable trickster, proficient in the arts of deception, resilience, and escape. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, he is a buffoon who is outwitted, time and again, by literature's least threatening archetypes: old wives, jealous husbands, and children. His characteristic drinking and debauchery aside, Falstaff seems to have metamorphosed into a bastardized version of his former self. Indeed, the theme of destructive transformation runs throughout the play. Grace Tiffany, in her article "Asexuality in *Merry Wives of Windsor*," points to this when she says, "Unlike, for example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which creates a world capable of transformation and renewal... *The Merry Wives of Windsor* presents a static community for which transformation is a threat." (254) I would go so far as to say that each transformative event in the play is an act of violence meant to puncture a person's false belief about him or herself.

With a cast of characters dominated by, in Ford's words, "not young" people, the threat of transformation could be seen as the threat of elderly decline, that tipping point at middle age when change ceases to be creative — in the eyes of society — and starts to be destructive. (II, i, 108) This would certainly be the case for Falstaff who is "worn to pieces with age." (II, i, 20) That said, his sin is not so much in being old — the elderly make up the majority of the play — but in failing to recognize his age and behave accordingly. He is an old man who continues to "show himself a young gallant," and this is the offense that the wives of Windsor cannot abide. (II, i, 21) Read in this light, *Merry*

*Wives* could be summarized as the story of a man who is, through a series of comic transformations, forced to accept that he is old. While I will briefly touch on the three areas of decline that Falstaff must ultimately face by the play's end — namely physical, financial, and psychological — the focus of my presentation will be on his moments of self reprimand during that climactic moment of disillusionment in the fifth act.

The first fantasy that is undone by the play's final scene, is Falstaff's belief in his potency as a lover. After a brief exchange with Mistress Ford, Falstaff says, "I spy entertainment in her: she discourses, she carves, she gives the leer of invitation." (I, iii, 41-2) This assertion is immediately undone in the next act when Mistress Ford, enraged by his love letter, says, "I was then frugal in my mirth." (II, i, 26) This is the first in a long line of Falstaff's misinterpretations, all of them obscured by a haze of wishful thinking. The knight's advances are not for a second taken seriously by the wives or by the audience. And even though his attempt to woo Mistress Ford and Mistress Page is the double-crime of lust and adultery, his age — and, of course, his heft — is what makes his advances grotesque and therefore comic. And he is, indeed, punished for this affront. The wives use playacting as their means of revenge, and his disguises escalate both in absurdity and ramification. A basket of dirty laundry, an old woman, a mythological hunter are, respectively, dumped in the Thames, beaten, and burned. And yet there is only one moment before the final disillusionment, where Falstaff may begin to ever so slightly doubt his virility. After the laundry basket incident, Quickly tries to convince him to go back to Mistress Ford: "Alas the day, good heart, that was not her fault. She does so take on with her men; they mistook their erection." (III, v, 36-7) This final word is meant to be an accidental mispronunciation of "direction." And in a typically

Shakespearean double entendre, Falstaff's response takes on new meaning: "As did I mine." (III, v, 39) Perhaps this lament is a subconscious acknowledgement of impotence, but if it is, then the glimmer of self-awareness is short-lived.

The true moment of realization comes at that pivotal line, "I do begin to perceive that I am made an ass." (V, v, 121) This is the moment of collapse. Falstaff is dressed up as Herne the Hunter and, like a "superstitious idle-headed eld," he believed the fairies and the fairy Queen to truly be fantastical creatures come to do him harm, an interesting inversion of the benevolent, real pixies in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. (IV, iv, 35) There is something of a double meaning in their song: "fie on sinful fantasy!" which, in Falstaff's case, could allude to lecherous thoughts or to self-deception. Either way, they find him guilty in classic witch-hunt style: "If he be chaste, the flame will back descend and turn him to no pain; but if he start, it is the flesh of a corrupted heart." (V, v, 87-9) Once Mistress Page calls an end to the rather excessive abuse, Falstaff realizes to what extent he has been duped and he cries out, "this is enough to be the decay of lust and late-walking through the realm." (V, v, 48-9) Now, on the first reading, this could simply be a reference to staying out late in order to fulfill sexual urges, but "lust and late-walking" could also be an allusion to carnal desire in late life, in which case Falstaff is finally buckling under that constant, implicit demand to act his age.

And yet, his ultimate punishment is not physical, but financial. Indeed, the plot is powered by money, not sex, and Falstaff pursues the wives of Windsor for their husbands' purses: "They shall be my East and West Indies, and I shall trade to them both." (I, iii, 66-7) Again, Falstaff falsely believes that he is still cunning in the ways of the world, savvy enough to dupe two married women out of their fortunes. This may

have been the case for the old Falstaff — the one in the *Henriad* — but this one didn't even have the foresight to draft different letters to each wife. And yet, in *Windsor*, wooing for money is only a crime for the old. Fenton, who has already admitted to being irresponsible with his own wealth, tells Anne, "I will confess, thy father's wealth was the first motive that I wooed thee." (III, iv, 13-5) And this is the hero of the play. For the young, poverty can be cured with marriage. For the old, it is a permanent fall from the ranks of nobility.

There is a particularly cruel moment at the end of the play when Page and Ford take turns insulting Falstaff who, burned and pinched to submission, bears their abuse without rebuttal. They call him old, lecherous and, perhaps most cruelly, given their ultimate punishment, "poor as Job." (V, v, 158) But it is Sir Hugh Evans, the Welshman, who pushes Falstaff over the edge. In response to his bumbling and repetitive insult, Falstaff says, "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, 164-66) In this class-conscious play, foreign accents, blunt turns of phrase, mispronunciations, and misunderstandings are indicators of low station. When Falstaff has no retort for the "Welsh flannel", he considers it the ultimate fall from grace. And as if that weren't enough, Ford delivers the final blow only a few lines later: "Over and above what you have suffered, I think to repay that money will be a biting affliction." (V, v, 169-171) There is a finality to this punishment. Falstaff can no longer make his living through the seduction of women. In this reading, the "ill employment" Falstaff alludes to in his moral — "see how wit may be made a Jack-o-Lent, when 'tis upon ill employment" — could be a reference to that employment that must be left to younger men. (V, v, 128-30)

While Falstaff's botched repartee with Evans is a social failure, it could also be read as a mental one. William Carroll, in his article on imagination in *Merry Wives of Windsor*, wrote, "Even in II Henry IV, where Falstaff's long decline is painfully obvious, and where he tells Doll Tearsheet 'I am old, I am old' (II, iv, 25), even there nothing quite prepares us for the apparent psychological collapse in *Merry Wives*." This collapse can be identified in the moments when language fails Falstaff. There is an anxiety about English throughout the play, and each character has a verbal tick that makes their discourse stilted and repetitive. The host calls everyone "bully" and asks "said I well?" Nym makes incessant references to "humor" and "humors". And the Welshman turns "B" words into "P" words: "putter" instead of "butter." Moreover, characters are hyperconscious of each other's linguistic faults. When the Host wants to settle a duel between Dr. Caius and Sir Hugh Evans, he says, "let them keep their limbs whole and hack our English." (III, i, 70-1) While Falstaff's verbal shortcomings are less obvious, he is often clumsy and unimaginative when it comes to persuading others. As Tiffany put it, "Even Falstaff, whose language is more interesting than anyone else's in *Merry Wives*, is, as most critics acknowledge, a mere verbal shadow of the Falstaff of the Henry plays." (257) Take his love letter: "You are not young, nor am I...You are merry, so am I...You love sack, and so do I." (II, i, 6-9) Besides being vaguely insulting, the letter is repetitive, bare, and, while funny, completely unpersuasive. Not only that but he could not conceive of a different letter to send Mistress Page. And yet Falstaff was confident that these twin declarations would convince the wives, both loyal by reputation, to cheat on their husbands. This assurance in the sheer power of his rhetoric is the third delusion that gets peeled away in the final act.

Falstaff directs a lot of animosity at “that Welsh fairy” during the night scene in Windsor forest. He makes great hay of the term “Welsh rarebit”, a kind of baked cheese, and it is the *only* insult he can think of to hurl at the Welshman. When Evans is a satyr, in the eyes of Falstaff, he is still most threatened by his accent: “Heavens defend me from that Welsh fairy, lest he transform me to a piece of cheese.” (V, v, 82-3) When the physical abuse devolves to verbal abuse, Falstaff deflects Evans’ taunts the same way: “‘tis time I were choked with a piece of toasted cheese.” (V, v, 142) Finally, language fails him altogether and he simply laments, “Have I lived to stand the taunts of one who makes fritters of English?” (V, v, 145-6) Falstaff’s insecurity about being defeated by this un-queenly English could be interpreted as the recognition that his wit has dulled with age. He cannot even find an adequate comeback to: “your belly is all putter.” (V, v, 143-4) This is particularly crushing when one considers his dexterity with language in the Henry plays.

This brings us back to Falstaff’s uncharacteristic moment of self-reprimand: “See how wit may be made a Jack-o-Lent when ‘tis upon ill employment.” (V, v, 128-30) A Jack-o-Lent is a kind of giant puppet that children used as target practice during lent, an apt term considering the abuse he just endured at the hands of children. In one respect, Falstaff is saying that he is made wordless by his crimes, but the puppet also implies manipulation and he, therefore, identifies himself as a kind of scapegoat, forced into this self-admonition by social pressures. With this in mind, it could be argued that Falstaff himself didn’t alter internally, but rather, public perception of him changed as he grew older. The qualities that made him an audience favorite in the Henry plays — devious, witty, designing, and lustful — make him a laughing stock in *Merry Wives*. Where once

he was a cunning, mischievous knight, he is now a lecherous oaf, clumsy, witless, and at the mercy of the very lowest on the hierarchical ladder: women, children, and servants. In this light, Falstaff is not so much fundamentally transformed, but societally transformed, made unacceptable by his age.

I return one more time to the allusion to the Jack-o-Lent, which served another purpose in early modern England. It was also used as a straw effigy, a symbol of winter and of death. During lent, the Jack-o-Lent was ceremoniously burned to defeat winter and herald spring. This reading makes the scene in Windsor Forest much more menacing. There is something pagan about people dressed in fairy costumes, burning the “Jack-o-Lent” with their torches. And when Falstaff is accepted back into the household for dinner, there is a sense that winter *has* been defeated. Falstaff will no longer be the Falstaff we’ve known. He will fade into the background of other people’s dramas. Indeed, this is exactly what happens when the complex marriage plot unravels and the knight is all but forgotten.

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