



The Tale of Herne the Hunter: Landscape, Stagecraft, and Fictional Worlds in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

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The Merry Wives of Windsor is, in many ways, a play concerned about a specific time and place. The play was first performed, as far as has been ascertained, in 1597 and is set in a roughly contemporary year.¹ The play depicts the town of Windsor and its local inhabitants getting ready for, and gossiping about, the garter ceremony. In the play, the popular character Sir John Falstaff lecherously pursues the wives of two wealthy burghers, Ford and Page. Aware of and repulsed by his would-be seduction, the two wives contrive a series of humiliating tricks against him. In one instance, they convince him to climb into a buck basket and dump him in Datchet Mead with the washing, in another trick, they convince him to disguise himself as the witch of Brentford, which gets him beaten and thrown from the house by Ford. The setting of the play reflects the actual world of early modern England as it would have been recognizable to its original audience. Throughout the play, landmarks and locations present in the actual town of Windsor are mapped onto the space of the stage, offering a reflection of contemporary middle-class life. However, in the final trick the wives recruit the help of the local townspeople to enact the tale of Herne the hunter. They lure Falstaff to Windsor Forest where they disguise themselves as fairies and pinch him, making him believe he is haunted for his unchaste desires. While the trick works to restore domestic order both in stopping Falstaff's advances and in tempering Ford's jealous behavior toward his wife, the scene momentarily departs from the sense of contemporary English locality that has hitherto governed the world of the play. Instead, Falstaff is immersed in the Tale of Herne the Hunter, convinced "in spite of the teeth of all reason" that he has been abducted into a fairy realm. Although he eventually sees his error, what momentarily emerges is the complete and ontologically distinct fictional world created by the wives. I argue that the landscape of Windsor Forest takes an active role in the creation of this fictional world, both serving as a setting and performance space for the masque-like fairy procession that is the wives' third and final trick. The wives utilize the landscape in this scene to create a believable fictional world that operates with entities and structuring principles that are unique from the rest of the play. In doing so, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* demonstrates the power of landscape in the creation of fictional worlds, even in or perhaps particularly in performance, and perhaps raises questions about its own performance on a relatively bare Elizabethan stage.

From its opening lines, the play is set in and revolves around the daily lives of Windsor citizens. The setting of the play in Windsor had a unique relationship to the actual geography of the

¹ All quotations are taken from Shakespeare, William. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Norton, 2008, pp. 1255-1320.



borough town of Windsor as Shakespeare's audiences would have known it. While the titular wives orchestrate the central plots against Falstaff, their trickery is integrated into the daily activities of the community, most notably the town's concern over the marriage of Page's daughter Anne. Anne's dowry has attracted the attention of the foolish Abraham Slender and the ridiculous physician of the French court, Doctor Caius. Anne prefers the poor nobleman Fenton, but her parents disapprove, Mistress Page favoring Caius and Page favoring Slender. This plot interconnects the characters, who are intertwined in the local business of Anne's marriage. The only two foreign characters Doctor Caius and Sir Hugh Evans, audibly marked as outsiders from the accents written into the text, are embedded within the community, although their foreign-ness is the subject of attention and derision. Sir Hugh Evans is a parson and school master in Windsor, who supports Slender's suit for Anne. Caius seeks Anne for himself – hoping to secure himself both a sizable dowry and a connection to the prominent families of new Windsor wealth.

While these characters are not based on actual Windsor citizens or allegorically related to actual members of the court, the setting of the play – the stable geographic category that embraces the entire text – reflects the actual geographic territory of Windsor at a roughly contemporary time to its performance. The town itself occupies, both in the play and in actual early modern England, a very limited area, best known perhaps for the Queen's summer residence, Windsor castle. Contemporary artistic representations of Windsor are understandably castle-centric. One of the earliest surviving depictions, Joris Hoefnagel's "Windsor Castle seen from the North with figures in the foreground" c. 1568, depicts the buildings, walls, chapels, and gates of Windsor Castle with fairly accurate details across the entire background of the sketch (Hoefnagel). Hoefnagel's view of the castle was the basis of at least two other depictions, including Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder's engraving of Queen Elizabeth in Procession with the Knights of the Garter, dated 1576.² The castle has always, it seems, loomed large in early modern imagination and in the background of nearly every artistic depiction of Windsor

Despite the fact that this seat of monarchical power was both ideologically and physically central to the town, Windsor Castle, or even the word castle, is not referenced in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* until Act 3, scene 3 when Page turns to Ford accusing him of jealousy saying, "I would not ha' your / distemper in this kind for the wealth of Windsor Castle" (3.3.182-3). The castle finally appears in Act 5, as the characters slowly encroach into the space setting up the final plot against Falstaff. Page describes the location for the audience: "Come, come; we'll couch i' the castle-ditch till we see the light of our fairies" (5.2.1-2). And later Mistress Quickly disguised as the fairy Queen ushers the fairies throughout the interior of the castle: "About, about; / Search Windsor Castle, elves, within and out: / Strew good luck, ouphes, on every sacred room" (5.5.54-6). And even though the castle is invisible throughout most of the play, the events that the play describes circulate throughout the streets of Windsor and the landscape immediately surrounding it.

² The other is a woodcut included in the 1570 edition of Foxe's Book of Martyrs, 1570. The primacy of this view of the castle in various artistic depictions is outlined in the Royal Collection Trust's online commentary. See Hoefnagel, Joris. "Windsor Castle seen from the North with figures in the foreground, c.1568." Royal Collection Trust. <https://www.rct.uk/collection/912936/windsor-castle-seen-from-the-north-with-figures-in-the-foreground>.



The setting in this immediate area, both in terms of landmarks and spatial relationships, reflects the actual geography of early modern England. Narratologists such as Marie Laurent Ryan, have helpfully distinguished between setting, and what they term “story space” or “all the spatial frames plus all the locations mentioned by the text that are not the scene of actually occurring events” (25). The off-stage story space of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is uniquely undistorted. For example, when Doctor Caius has challenged Sir Evans to a duel, the Host of the Garter appoints them “contrary places” to meet. As Doctor Caius waits in a field outside of Windsor, the host and various other “witnesses” continue to misdirect the duelers.

HOST. And, moreover, bully,--but first, master guest, and Master Page, and eke Cavaleiro Slender, go you through the town to Frogmore.

Aside to them

PAGE. Sir Hugh is there, is he?

HOST. He is there: see what humour he is in; and I will bring the doctor about by the fields. Will it do well? (2.3.66-71).

Waiting in Frogmore, Sir Hugh Evans hears from his search party that they have looked for Caius, in “the pittie-ward, the park-ward, every way; old Windsor way, and every way but the town way” (3.1.5-7). Of course, the town way is the way that Shallow, Page and Slender are coming to Frogmore. Frogmore is only about a kilometer away from Windsor Castle, and it takes the whole 26 lines between the time Caius leaves the field outside Windsor for Shallow, Page, and Slender to appear. In other words, the story space of the play adopts and prioritizes the integrity of actual spatial relationships. Audience members who have a knowledge of the area can garner further amusement, understanding like the characters do just how narrowly Evans and Caius miss each other.

More than a simple knowledge of Windsor’s geography, Windsor locals are marked by their familiarity of the landscape and its everyday use. As the wives plot against Falstaff for the first time, they convince Falstaff to rendezvous at Mistress Ford’s house, telling Falstaff that Ford is away. Mistress Ford details the plot to fool Falstaff to her household staff, saying:

Marry, as I told you before, John and Robert, be ready here hard by in the brew-house: and when I suddenly call you, come forth, and without any pause or staggering take this basket on your shoulders: that done, trudge with it in all haste, and carry it among the whitsters in Datchet-mead, and there empty it in the muddy ditch close by the Thames side. (3.3.7-13)

The trick goes off smoothly, even though Ford does return early, but the plot relies on the wives’ knowledge of local geography and demonstrates, at least on some level, the wives’ intimate knowledge of the layout and places of Windsor: where to wash laundry and where to pretend you are washing laundry but instead dumping Falstaff in mud.

Local knowledge, demonstrated through the play’s various references to folklore, further creates a sense of place in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*. Mistress Ford and Page know, for instance, that



Ford “cannot abide the old woman of Brentford; he swears she's a witch; forbade her my house and hath threatened to beat her” (4.2.78-80). While Ford is the only character who refers to his wife’s aunt as a witch, Falstaff consults with a wise woman from Brentford in Act 4 scene 5.

FALSTAFF. There was, mine host, an old fat woman even now with me; but she's gone.

SIMPLE. Pray you, sir, was't not the wise woman of Brentford?

FALSTAFF. Ay, marry, was it, mussel-shell: what would you with her?

SIMPLE. My master, sir, Master Slender, sent to her, seeing her go through the streets, to know, sir, whether one Nym, sir, that beguiled him of a chain, had the chain or no.

FALSTAFF. I spake with the old woman about it.

SIMPLE. And what says she, I pray, sir?

FALSTAFF. Marry, she says that the very same man that beguiled Master Slender of his chain cozened him of it. (4.5.22-35).

Falstaff claims her advice is supernaturally wise and has taught him wit, marking him as a credulous outsider. Falstaff’s consultation with the wise woman of Brentford comes immediately after he is “beaten black and blue” by Ford for his impersonation of her as he tried to leave Ford’s house in disguise in the second trick. Slender’s active search for the wise women to help him locate a chain – referring to the folk belief that some people were supernaturally gifted in finding lost items (Willard 493) – and the hosts warning against her comes too late to save Falstaff from Ford’s beating. This series of allusions to characters who are known by reputation to Windsor locals on the periphery of the play’s main plot adds local color and creates a fully realized depiction of Shakespeare’s Windsor.

The tale of Herne the Hunter is the most predominate piece of local folklore in the play. The town locals all exhibit knowledge of local folklore, citing this knowledge of landscape and tale as something handed down from generation to generation. The interaction between Mistress Page and her husband details the town’s familiarity with the tale:

MISTRESS PAGE. There is an old tale goes that Herne the hunter,

Sometime a keeper here in Windsor Forest,

Doth all the winter-time, at still midnight,

Walk round about an oak, with great ragg'd horns;...

You have heard of such a spirit, and well you know

The superstitious idle-headed eld

Received and did deliver to our age

This tale of Herne the hunter for a truth.

PAGE. Why, yet there want not many that do fear

In deep of night to walk by this Herne's oak:

But what of this? (4.4.27-39).

While Page expresses doubts that Falstaff will be fooled into a rendezvous a third time, his wife simply responds with the start of the Herne the Hunter tale, which is realized in the final act. She establishes, in the face of her husband’s incredulity, the basic world of the story she and Mistress



Ford will bring to life for Falstaff. The setting they propose for this third trick is not inside Mistress Ford's home, as the previous two, or in the town of Windsor itself, but rather the space on the other side of Windsor Castle, in Windsor Forest, part of the extensive "little park" used for the monarch's hunting grounds.

As the final trick progresses, the stable recognizable depiction of the actual world of early modern England that has been upheld with cartographic precision on stage begins to break down. As Helgerson notes "as the performance develops, it takes on a generic aura well removed from local practices and particularities" (176). The street names eclipse into Windsor Park as the characters physically descend into ditches surrounding Windsor Castle. This movement across and into the landscape creates the believable fictional world of Herne the Hunter. As Falstaff takes on the likeness of Herne, Nan Page, the children dressed as fairies and Sir Hugh Evans also take on the properties of their fictional world identities. As they are "all couched in a pit hard by Herne's oak," Mistress Ford asks Mistress Page, "Where is Nan now and her troop of fairies, and the / Welsh devil Hugh?" Sir Hugh Evans, previously described as a Welshman or Welsh soul-curer becomes a "Welsh devil" as he waits dressed as a hobgoblin, physically obscured by the Windsor landscape (5.3.13-14; 11-12).

The world that the wives create here is separate and linguistically distinct from the rest of the play as well. The fairy spell in Act 5, scene 2 breaks from the neat iambic pentameter that pervaded most of the play and falls into the descending patterns of trochaic and dactylic metrical feet:

Pinch him, fairies, mutually;
Pinch him for his villainy;
Pinch him, and burn him, and turn him about,
Till candles and starlight and moonshine be out. (5.5.99-102)

Falstaff's reaction speaks to the world's believability, and he tellingly falls to the ground, crouching into the landscape for protection. The "contemporary, domestic, and non-aristocratic feel" of the play that Walter Cohen identifies is suddenly transformed into a believable and separate fictional world (1255). The world that unfolds in the fairy trick is a space "that is outside of the town proper" (Theis 59). The fairy masque mirrors the world of Windsor, but is neither subject to its social norms, nor its geography.

For Falstaff, being in a landscape that is seemingly less subject to social strictures signals an opportunity to participate in fantasies of an erotic nature. He takes his cue for his fantasy from the landscape wherein the wives have chosen to meet. The text remains ambiguous about what the wives have offered Falstaff as a means to "devise to bring him thither" (4.4.26). Likewise, when Mistress Quickly brings their letter to Falstaff, Quickly convinces him to "let me speak with you in your chamber you shall hear how things go, and, I warrant, to your content," and the rest of their conversation takes place offstage (4.5.115-7). Whatever the suggestion given in the letter, the result is clear: Falstaff arrives in Windsor Forest wearing deer antlers, praying to the "hot blooded gods" Jove and Jupiter, who likewise took on animal forms to seduce their lovers (5.5.2). Several scholars have noted the manner in which Falstaff's disguise is reminiscent of the legend Actaeon, a huntsman who



came across Diana when she was bathing with her nymphs and was consequently turned into a stag (Stephen 735; Steadman). In renaissance iconography, Actaeon is typically depicted as a stag from the waist up, recalling Falstaff's antlers and his invocations of classical deities for virility. In local Berkshire legend, Herne was Richard II's favorite huntsman, and it is clear that Falstaff is trying to position himself as a "hunter" of the Windsor wives (Theis). Regardless, Falstaff sees the woods as a place where erotic fantasies can be played out away from the preview of Mistress Ford's husband.

However, Falstaff's knowledge of Windsor's lore ends at a cursory understanding of its erotic undertones (or perhaps he remains willfully ignorant of the endings of such stories.): In Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1351), Herne hung himself because of his love's continuous rejection, and his ghost was doomed to continuously relieve his final gruesome hunt, chasing down his love and disemboweling her only to have her spring up and flee again. In the Actaeon myth, Actaeon was transformed into a stag by Diana as punishment for his voyeurism, and he was consequently torn apart by his own hounds (Stephen 733). Falstaff alludes to this tale ironically when he tells the wives to "divide me like a bribed buck" (5.5.23). Instead of the Jove or Jupiter seduction myths in which Falstaff fantasizes himself as role playing, Falstaff has walked into a story that the *wives* have created. Falstaff is correct in interpreting Windsor Forest as "a communal site of ceremony and release from norms that govern the village" (Barber 35-57). However, legally this park under the jurisdiction of the monarch—and it is Elizabeth on the throne. This world that Falstaff has submitted himself to is world of old wives' tales come to life, created from a landscape that is under the jurisdiction of the fairy queen—an epithet for Elizabeth herself.³ If the storyworld the wives have created is a fantasy realm, it is the fantasy of female sovereignty, a world in which wives can be merry and honest too. In this landscape, Anne Page also uses the fairy trick to elope with her choice of husband, Fenton, despite the favoritism of her father and mother toward ill-matched suitors.

As the fairies begin to pinch Falstaff, Mistress Quickly begins to lead the fairies in song; the fairy song evokes the interior spaces of Windsor Castle for the first time in the play. Mistress Quickly beckons the fairies to "search Windsor Castle, elves within and out. Strew good luck, aufs, on every sacred room" (5.5.53-6). This departure from the quotidian streets of Windsor town to the evocative descriptions of the interior of Windsor Castle is a tantalizing view of what might have been something of a fantasy for Shakespeare's original public audience. The first audience of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was exclusive to the Queen, her knights, courtiers and clergymen, and therefore as Katz observes:

A public performance would have served as a metatheatrical realization of the relationship implied within the play, of courtiers arriving to attend a Garter ceremony (and by extension the production of Merry Wives embedded in that ceremony) [...] In other words, the popular audience received the play itself as a thing produced for the court and, accordingly, went to the theater to see what the court *saw*. (90)

³ For more on the trope of old wives' tales and their connection to Elizabeth see Diane Purkiss, "Old Wives Tales Retold: The Mutations of the Fairy Queen." *This Double Voice': Gendered Writing in Early Modern England*, edited by Danielle Clarke and Elizabeth Clarke. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, pp. 103–22.



The fairy masque gives playgoers the satisfaction of a glance at the interior workings of the garter ceremony. However, while the play reflects the landscape of early modern Windsor, in the original performance for the queen in the year 1597, the garter ceremony did not actually take place in Windsor Castle as the play depicts. The ceremony was moved to Whitehall or Greenwich after 1572. Anachronistically, the play depicts the garter feast presently occurring as it was, and in the place it was famously held.

Just as the wives utilize the landscape to build a fictional world that tempts Falstaff's willing suspension of disbelief, they likewise tempt Shakespeare's original audience with an evocation of the interiors of Windsor Castle. Like Falstaff, members of Shakespeare's public playgoing audience were outsiders to Windsor and the garter festivities, developing a sense of its main players by hearsay and recalling the lore of its customs. To the average early modern English citizen, the garter festivities probably resembled something of a fairy realm, steeped in ritual and otherworldly extravagance. Mistress Quickly as the fairy queen describes the perceived similarities, telling the children "nightly, meadow-fairies, look you sing, / Like to the Garter's compass, in a ring:...And 'Honi soit qui mal y pense' write / In emerald tufts, flowers purple, blue and white" (5.5.65-70). And like Falstaff who, when given the opportunity to participate, imagines a world steeped in antiquity, Shakespeare's audience clearly was willing to suspend disbelief, ever immortalizing the garter ceremony in popular imagination in Windsor Castle, a place where it had not been held for some time. The wives' on-stage creation of the fairy masque is a metadramatic description of how to effectively create and perform folklore, even as Shakespeare offers the same to his early modern audience. Like the early modern theater itself, Windsor Forest offers a performance space that can be tailored to its immediate audience.

Tale and landscape are inextricably linked. This construction of the fictional world of Herne the Hunter is inspired and rendered believable by the Windsor landscape, and the landscape takes on new potential when imbued with the magical qualities that the tale perpetuates. Thus, even for its first courtly audience, the Tale of Herne the hunter in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is all the more about the power and presence of landscape even when not physically powerfully present.



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