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# The Three Merry Wives of Windsor

Kirsten Marciniak

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Under the Direction of Tanya Caldwell, PhD

## ABSTRACT

Current scholarship on Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* mostly focuses on topics surrounding Sir John Falstaff's presence, mythical allusions, and the questionable date of publication. Although their actions are the driving force of the play, the woman frontrunners, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, receive little scholarship attention. Anne Page, daughter of Mistress Page and wife of Fenton, also dictates the course of the play by taking control of her betrothal. Yet she remains underappreciated in scholarship. This thesis highlights important characteristics of all three wives of Windsor in addition to justifying Anne Page's role as a wife of Windsor. Through close readings of the text and analyses of scholarship immediately relevant to these wives and common attributes of women in Renaissance England and Shakespeare plays, I argue these strong, multifaceted women refute stereotypical female roles and undermine patriarchal authority aligning themselves with other idolized outspoken woman characters in Shakespeare plays.

INDEX WORDS: *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Mistress Page, Mistress Ford, Anne Page

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my wonderful family and friends. Thank you mom and dad for always supporting me in everything I set out to accomplish and for raising my spirits in my episodes of self-doubt. Thank you to my sister Kandace for always making me laugh when I got discouraged and always being there for me. Thank you to my wonderful fiancé Greg who always told me how proud he was of me and stayed at my side through my all my emotional rollercoasters, late nights, and accomplishments. Thank you to my grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins who encouraged me to reach for the stars. Thank you to my friends who supported my efforts and aided me in those times I was, literally, at a loss for words. I love you all so much.

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# INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in recent years has primarily focused on how the play is structured around Falstaff[i]. Other aspects of the play that have received critical attention include the play's middle social class setting and allusions to mythical and folklore elements[ii]. The primary characters Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, however, have received little critical attention with few scholars addressing the complex characterization of these wives and the thematic implications of their psychology and behavior. Anne Page, daughter of Mistress Page, receives even less critical attention, though she is at the center of the secondary plot of the play. The lack of concentration dedicated to analyzing these women in relation to the play is the inspiration behind this thesis.

In this play, the characters Mistress Ford and Mistress Page seek revenge on the drunkard Falstaff for his failed attempt to woo them for pleasure and monetary gain. Intertwined with this plot is the competition of the three suitors Slender, Doctor Caius and Fenton, who all seek the hand of young Anne Page. Both plots come to fruition in Act 5 as a fairy play is put together in the forest for the intentions of humiliating Falstaff in front of the town and for Anne to elope with one of the two suitors favored by her parents. In the end, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, along with other townsfolk, succeed in shaming Falstaff, while Anne Page, against her parent's wishes, marries the man of her choosing, Fenton.

Some scholars have purposely or absentmindedly referenced both Mistress Page and Mistress Ford as simply "the wives" giving little to no explanation why they identify them as a unit. I argue, however, these women are complex and individualized. Though Mistress Page and Mistress Ford appear most of the time on stage together and affiliate themselves with the same group of people, they embody different qualities which can be identified through their language,

their interactions with other characters, and their actions. I also argue that most scholars have neglected one of the title characters in the play; young Anne Page is a strong-willed and merry character who becomes a wife by the end of the play. This neglect could stem from her small amount of lines in the play, but her stage time and involvement with all three schemes in the play show how essential her character is to the plot of the play. The focus of my thesis is to characterize all three wives and through this analysis prove that all three women should share the title of the play as individuals who have similarities, but are essentially different "wives." For the purpose of this analysis, I relied on The Norton Shakespeare which uses the Oxford edition of the play.

My thesis contains three chapters and a conclusion. Chapters one, two, and three are devoted to Mistress Page, Mistress Ford, and Anne Page respectively highlighting aspects of their character and their functions in the play. I conclude my thesis by tying in these characterizations to concepts such as individuality, gender, merriment, and indicate how these wives fit in among Shakespeare's other heroines.

My survey of scholarship focuses on scholarly commentary concerning gender roles of the time period, feminist criticism of the play, and the characterization of women in Shakespeare plays. An insight into Shakespeare's methods of characterization, highlighted by Christy Desmet in her book *Reading Shakespeare's Characters: Rhetoric, Ethics, and Identity*, helps illuminate some of the characteristics of these women through a deeper understanding of how Shakespeare uses language, setting, and human relation to shape the identities of his characters. An investigation into how Shakespeare uses these methods in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* assists in my efforts to analyze the play in regards to uncovering the motivations, behavior, and temperament of the three wives. I also examine how Shakespeare uses intimate conversations

between women to explore what Carole McKewin calls a "counter-universe" (McKewin 118) where women are permitted to speak freely about their opinions and question the rules of society. McKewin discusses Shakespeare's method of creating strong female leads by giving women more of a voice in private spheres where they comment on political, domestic, and gender issues. I argue that Shakespeare uses these methods to create multifaceted woman characters in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Jeanne Addison Roberts discusses criticism of the play, its date, text, characters, connection to the canon, themes such as married life, and techniques such as verbal humor. I explore aspects of some of these topics left unexplored by Roberts concerning how they relate to the wives individually. I also look into the few comments she does make about the wives, especially concerning her comments about Anne Page's refusal to wed either of the suitors her parents select and Mistress Page and Mistress Ford's tactics in humiliating Falstaff. William Green is mostly concerned about textual and performance studies. Although his work highlights important aspects of the play, his commentary on the wives is restricted to only discussing their roles in the play related to their male counterparts or their contribution in moving the plot forward.

Examining how issues of gender in Renaissance England are addressed in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* elucidates how these wives follow or defy some of the conventions of the time period. Mary Beth Rose's works give insight into the different roles women had in both the private and public spheres, and how women characters in Renaissance Drama fit in among these stereotypes. Her discussion about mothers specifically correlates with Mistress Page directly as Mistress Page's approach to parenting reveals details about her personality and opinions of society. Juliet Dusineberre also discusses gender issues of the time period such as women as

property and the expectation of women to be virtuous. Exploring how Shakespeare chooses to incorporate both public perceptions of women and his interpretation of the woman psyche reveals previously unexplored aspects of the wives.

The most current research done on the play is from a feminist perspective in the text *The Merry Wives of Windsor: New Critical Essays* edited by Evelyn Gajowski and Phyllis Rackin. This secondary source is crucial to my thesis as it contains the most commentary on the women in the play. In the editors' introduction, Gajowski and Rackin address the need for a feminist rereading of Shakespeare's play as it contains a positive image of strong, middle-class female characters who challenge patriarchal authority and whose ideologies represent the controversial gender politics at work during Shakespeare's lifetime. They also point out the fact that the title of the play has been overlooked by scholars who in the past few years have dedicated more critical attention to Falstaff instead of the wives. In one of the essays, Susan Gushee O'Malley emphasizes the importance of looking at this play through a feminist perspective since the woman, as indicated in the title, should be the primary focus of the play. This view embodies the purpose of my research as I, in addition to characterizing the wives, call for a re-reading of the play focusing more on the women as individuals rather than merely binary oppositions to male characters. The first group of critical essays address this need by focusing on female community and female agency in connection to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The subject matter of these essays include using the women's language as a means of identification, the successful revenge plots of Mistress Page and Mistress Ford compared to the failed attempts of revenge by the men in the play, and a justification of why Anne's refusal to follow her parents' orders prevents her from being contained by a single narrative. Each of these essays contains crucial information about each of the wives in connection with the context and language of the play that have a direct

bearing on my approach of identifying each of these wives. The next group of essays focus on the time and setting of the play, comparing it to other plays produced during that time period and the theatrical and social context of the play as viewed by playgoers. These essays closely correlate to the purpose of Mary Beth Rose's works concerning both sexes' opinions during the time the play was produced of a woman's purpose both in society and the domestic sphere. Jennifer Higginbotham's essay in the third set relates directly to Mistress Page and Anne Page's chapters as she discusses the relationship between parent and child. The following group of essays concentrate on desire and sexuality in the play looking at the wives' motivations from a psychological perspective. These sets of essays aided my efforts to uncover the motivations and personalities of these wives.

The next part of my thesis is dedicated to analyzing the wives individually by examining their dialogue, the relationships they share with other characters, and the opinions that other characters have of them. Other characters describe Mistress Page as a virtuous, but headstrong wife who has a strong relationship with her husband and a sisterly bond with Mistress Ford. R.S. White claims that Page and Mistress Page's marriage is "based on firm companionship and trust" (White 33). I argue, however, that White overlooks aspects of Mistress Page's character and some of her actions that would contradict this statement. Mistress Page deceives her husband twice in the play by hiding that she conspired with Mistress Ford in humiliating Falstaff and secretly plotted to wed their daughter off to Dr. Caius. Her dishonesty and trickery brings into question the integrity of the Page's marriage. Mistress Page's motives for deceiving her husband include attempting to show him that she is more capable than he gives her credit for, and simply that she enjoys deception for its own sake. When confronted by Master Ford on why he is not worried about his wife having an affair with Falstaff, Master Page informs him that he trusts his wife and fears for Falstaff if he

did approach her because he believes she would punish him severely for the act. Although Master Page acknowledges that his wife is willful, he mistakenly assumes that she would confide in him if she was being wooed by Falstaff. After Mistress Page reveals to her husband that she and Mistress Ford sought revenge on Falstaff, it becomes apparent at the end of the play that there is a loss of open communication and honesty when both Master Page and Mistress Page plot to have their daughter wed to different suitors unbeknownst to one another. Even though both of their plans fall through, the fact that they are both comfortable with deceiving one another shows that they do not have the relationship that R.S White or other characters in the play believe they possess.

A close-reading shows that Mistress Page is the only character in the play that has a key role in every major conflict. These conflicts include the scheme to seek revenge on Falstaff, attempts to prearrange a marriage for Anne Page, and the town's effort to publicly humiliate Falstaff. Examining Mistress Page's dialogue, decisions, opinions, and contributions in each of these conflicts reveal features of her personality. For instance, Mistress Page's choice of Dr. Caius as a suitor for her daughter Anne exposes Mistress Page's opinions of what type of man makes a good companion. Mistress Page notes that Dr. Caius is well-off, has a respected career, and has friends that are potent at court. Interestingly, though, she ignores his faults such as having a temper, being stubborn, a tendency to be jealous, and difficulty in communicating with others due to his foreign accent. Her opinions of the other suitors, Slender and Fenton, will also aid in this venture. Mistress Page's opinions and actions show she can be crafty and has a stubborn mindset.

Descriptions of Mistress Page's physical appearance are mostly absent from the dialogue of the play. The only instance Shakespeare addresses her appearance is when Mistress Page, upon receiving Falstaff's letter, states "What, have I scaped love-letters in the holiday time of my beauty, and am I now a subject for them?" (Shakespeare 2.1.1-2). A lack of a physical description is odd

since both Anne Page and Mistress Ford are often described by other male characters to be beautiful. For example. Falstaff, when discussing his plans to woo both wives to his friends, refers to Mistress Ford as alluring and Mistress Page as "a region in Guiana, all gold and bounty" (Shakespeare 1.3.59-60). This implies that Falstaff is more interested in Mistress Page for her money rather than her sexual appeal. Although Mistress Page hints that she was beautiful in her youth, there is no inclination that her beauty carried on with age.

My analysis of Mistress Ford focuses on her beauty, passionate expressions and imagery in dialogue, and her cunning language and behavior. Master Ford's jealousy could stem from his awareness that his wife is very beautiful and therefore, acknowledges that other men fancy her. The first glimpse the audience gets of Mistress Ford's personality is through her dialogue with Mistress Page when discussing Falstaff's letter. Mistress Ford expresses her astonishment that Falstaff would think she would succumb to his advances and vehemently expresses her animosity towards him. Her proposal to seek revenge on Falstaff is loaded with powerful imagery: "I think the best way were to entertain him (Falstaff) with hope, till the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease" (Shakespeare 2.1.57-59). I examine how Mistress Ford's speech fluctuates between the dialogue she shares with Mistress Page and with other characters as there seems to be a significant difference in tone and diction. This could be a result of McKewin's theory that woman are more free to express themselves among one another in private spheres in comparison to group settings or among men. Another reason could stem from Mistress Ford's enjoyment of putting on a façade in front of others such as Falstaff and her husband. I agree with Alison Findley's assessment of Mistress Ford that she displays "a sense of fun as a merry wife." (Findlay 145). I explore how her charisma helps her achieve revenge and forgiveness in the play.

In addition to planning out the first scheme to humiliate Falstaff, Mistress Ford is also used as the bait in seducing him. It is important to note that Falstaff is never asked by Mistress Page to come to her house, but rather the wives take revenge on Falstaff by inviting him to Mistress Ford's house. Although not directly stated, it could be insinuated that either the plan to take revenge on Falstaff became more about revealing Master Ford's jealousy or that both woman thought Falstaff would be more inclined to come and see Mistress Ford because of his physical attraction to her. Mistress Ford puts on a convincing act both for Falstaff and her husband for the purposes of exposing their faults later to other characters in the play. Not only does she use cunning language to keep Falstaff coming back so that she can abuse him further, but also uses an innocent demeanor to make a fool of her husband who tries to catch her having secret meetings with Falstaff. One of her most cunning ideas is to dress up Falstaff as her maid's aunt, which she knows will infuriate her husband since he despises the woman, whom he calls a witch, and humiliate Falstaff because he is forced to wear woman's clothing. She also shows wit when she mocks Falstaff at the end of the play saying "Sir John, we have had ill luck. We could never mate. I will never take you for my love again, but I will always count you my deer" (Shakespeare 5.5.112-114). This is only one instance in which Mistress Ford engages in witty wordplay with other characters; she also exchanges this type of banter with Mistress Page and Master Ford showing her cunning personality.

The differences between Mistress Ford and Mistress Page's language and tone throughout the play shows how Shakespeare intended for his audiences to note the dissimilarities between these two wives. For example, Mistress Page seems to be more direct in her sentences as she discusses specific plans to take revenge on Falstaff, while Mistress Ford's speech is filled more with emotional thoughts in 2.1. Early in the dialogue, Mistress Ford, out of anger and disgust,

mentions that the wives should seek revenge on Falstaff by giving him false hope. Mistress Page, thinking logically, adopts this idea, but provides more direction in order to succeed in their goal. This can be seen in the dialogue that takes place between them in 2.1 in the play:

> MISTRESS PAGE: …Let's be revenged on him (Falstaff). Let's appoint him a meeting, give him a show of comfort in his suit, and lead him on with a fine baited delay till he hath pawned his horses to mine Host of the Garter.
> MISTRESS FORD: Nay I will consent to act any villainy against him that may not sully the chariness of our honesty. O that my husband saw this letter! It would give eternal food to his jealousy.
> (Shakespeare 2.1.82-89)

This is the first instance Mistress Ford brings up her husband's jealousy. As the planned shenanigans against Falstaff are carried out, Mistress Ford seems to shift her motive for embarrassing Falstaff to punishing her husband for being jealous. This can be seen in 3.3 when she states to Mistress Page "I know not which pleases me better: that my husband is deceived, or Sir John" (Shakespeare 3.3.149-150). Mistress Page on the other hand is more interested in how successful their plan was and looks forward to plotting out their next ruse. In 3.3 she states "I will lay a plot to try that, and we will yet have more tricks with Falstaff" (Shakespeare 3.3.160-161). I examine the dialogue between Mistress Ford and Mistress Page throughout the play because it is through their private discussions that most of their differences become apparent.

My analysis of Anne Page focuses on her strong-willed character and her interactions with her suitors, parents and Mistress Quickly. It also includes reasons why she should be considered one of the title characters of the play. In the first scene, Anne's character is introduced through the descriptions provided by Slender, Shallow, and Sir Hugh Evans on her physical appearance. She is described as having "good gifts" and having a "fair" appearance (Shakespeare 1.1.51, 217). Through this dialogue the audience becomes aware that Anne is of age to be courted. Both Slender and Dr. Caius seem to be solely concerned marrying Anne because of her beauty, family name,

and dowry. Although Anne's dialogue with Slender at the beginning of the plays shows her distaste for him through her language and impatience, Anne's feelings about her suitors are revealed in 3.4 as she asks her mother to not marry her to Slender because he is a "fool" and not to marry her to Dr. Caius because she would "rather be set quick I'th earth and bowled to death with turnips" (Shakespeare 3.4. 80, 84-85). Anne's vivid description of how much she would loathe marrying Slender or Dr. Caius shows she is a very passionate and determined young woman. Mistress Quickly, a friend of Anne's and a servant to Dr. Caius, discloses to another servant, Simple, that she knows that Anne disapproves of all her suitors. Findlay notes that to male characters in the beginning of the play, such as Evans who claims Anne is "pretty virginity," Anne is attractive, meek, and rich, an heiress to a good amount of money. (15). Anne's suitors initially treat her like a trophy, but they soon learn that she has more to offer as a complex, highly opinionated, and sassy young woman. Anne is patient with her suitors' advances, but replies with either vague or blunt phrases when she is annoyed with them. This happens most often with Slender as he continues to fumble over his words when speaking to Anne. Despite the pressures coming from her parents to pick their favorite suitors, she remains adamant that she will choose her partner based on her own liking.

Later in the play, although her parents disapprove of him, Anne becomes smitten with Fenton. She is in fact so adamant about being with Fenton that she confides in him that she will use her parent's plans of dressing her up to go with the suitor of their choice against them. She comes up with the scheme of dressing two young boys in the dresses provided by her parents in order to trick Dr. Caius and Slender to marry the cross-dressed boys instead. This would present her with the opportunity to elope with her lover Fenton. Anne's purposeful defiance of her parent's wishes, I argue, shows how she stands out as a strong independent female character who rises

above what is expected of her. I claim that Anne Page, who does eventually get married at the end of the play, deserves to be treated as one of the title characters.

My purposes for analyzing these three wives in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are to illuminate how Shakespeare explores individuality and aspects of gender in the play and how these wives compare to Shakespeare's other heroines. Juliet Dusinberre in her book *Shakespeare and the Nature of Woman* covers topics such as chastity, equality, and virtue in relation to many of Shakespeare's woman characters. Although Dusinberre relates some womanly characteristics of other female characters in Shakespeare's plays to the wives in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, I examine how other traits mentioned in her book may apply to the wives such as integrity, authority, and wittiness. I will also be looking into her chapter on women as property, which I believe will give insight into the wives that, like other women in Shakespeare plays, on the surface fulfill their roles as the angel in the house, but apart from their male counterparts show they are capable of much more. I also use my conclusion to explore the theme of adultery as it connects to the Fords in the play in order to connect Mistress Ford's suspicions of her husband's jealousy and her efforts to expose her husband's faults to aspects of her character. I also connect some aspects of her chapter about women and equality to Anne Page whose refusal to be betrothed to any one of the men presented to her, I argue, paints her as a Shakespearean heroine who asserts herself over the male domination of the time period. Another female character that acts in a similar way is Juliet. Like Juliet, Anne is young yet also displays many signs of maturity. I additionally look into Charles Frey's chapter on the connections between patriarchy and defiant daughters in Shakespeare plays in the book *The Women's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* to help illuminate some qualities Anne might share with other Shakespeare heroines in similar situations. Furthermore, I explore the meaning of merriment as it is connected the play

and to the wives individually. I consult both Phillips' article "'Late Falstaff, The Merry World, And *The Merry Wives of Windsor*", which discusses the history of merriment in England, and the *Oxford Shakespeare Concordances: The Merry of Windsor* to see the many interpretations of what merry could mean in the context. My purpose for using these sources in my investigation is to help elucidate how the wives in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are both different and similar to other woman in Shakespeare plays, how they fit in among other major characters in the canon, and how their embodiment of merriment connects them to other woman of the time period.

## CHAPTER 1: MISTRESS PAGE

Mistress Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* involves herself with every conflict in the play such as seeking revenge on Falstaff with Mistress Ford and selecting a suitor she deems best for her daughter, Anne Page. Her involvement in these plots show she is a calculating, headstrong, and determined merry wife as she plans out multifaceted schemes. Mistress Page's demeanor in the presence of male characters of the play matches their descriptions of her as an honest and obedient wife; her mannerisms in front of female characters, however, demonstrate she is capable of conjuring up a plan to deceive others. Her actions and behavior whilst interacting with Mistress Quickly, Anne Page, and Mistress Ford or speaking to herself in the play reveal her temperament and psychology; she desires control over situations and is very thorough when thinking or outlining a plan. The relationship Mistress Page has with her husband appears to be happy among company, but the problems in their marriage surface as events unfold in the play. Although their main conflict seems to be their different opinions on who would make a better partner for Anne, the audience becomes aware through Master Ford's comments that he underestimate his wife's capabilities and undermines her in conversation. Mistress Page takes notice of this and retaliates by excluding him from her revenge plot on Falstaff and planning against him concerning the elopement of their daughter. With her children, Mistress Page uses an authoritarian parenting style as she convinces herself she knows what's best for them. Mistress Page's approach with Anne in particular is to match her daughter with a suitor whom she thinks will improve Anne's socioeconomic status. A close-reading of the text looking out for Shakespeare's methods of characterization and a comparison between Mistress Page as a housewife and mother with how women conducted themselves in these roles during the Renaissance reveal aspects of Mistress Page's character and function in the play.

Some scholars regard Mistress Page's relationship with her husband as the model relationship in the play, but a close-reading reveals that their seemingly ideal relationship is a facade as Master Ford underestimates his wife and Mistress Page keeps secrets away from her husband. Alison Findlay notes that Mistress Page "appears to enjoy a companionate, mutually trusting relationship with her husband" (313). R.S. White agrees with this assessment as well stating that the Page's marriage is "based on firm companionship and trust" (White 33). While this generally accepted consensus[iii] does have merit, there is evidence both in the plot and language spoken by both Mistress Page and Master Page that indicate that they too have marital problems in the play. Although Mistress Ford and Mistress Page claim that their intentions are to humiliate Falstaff and reveal the jealousies of Master Ford through their scheming, the play provides no explanation as to why Mistress Page keeps this a secret from her husband. When speaking with Mistress Ford about Master Ford's jealousy, Mistress Page informs her when seeing her own husband come into the room that "He's as far from jealousy as I am from giving him cause; and that, I hope, is an unmeasurable distance" (Shakespeare 2.1.91-92). This statement does initially indicate that the Pages have a very trusting relationship since jealousy is absent in their relationship. As the plot unfolds, however, it becomes clear that communication between them is minimal on stage, albeit one private conversation in Act 2.1 that the audience is not permitted to hear. This lack of communication reveals some negative qualities of their relationship such as being comfortable keeping secrets and lying to one another. For example, Mistress Page deceives her husband by tricking him into thinking that Falstaff has not attempted to woo her and Mistress Ford, while Master Page continues to try helping Slender win over his daughter Anne in secret knowing that Mistress Page disapproves of him as a suitor for their

daughter. Mistress Page reacts to her husband's dismissive commentary and trickery, but discreetly in order to uphold her reputation in the town as an honest wife.

Different forms of the word 'honesty' are used in connection to characters, such as Mistress Page, throughout the play[iv], but the connotations depend on the context and the speaker. Mistress Page takes pride in her role as an honest wife and uses this label as justification for deceiving her husband. In Act 4.2 after having a discussion with Mistress Ford about their plans to dress Falstaff as Ford's maid's aunt of Brentford, Mistress Page states to herself "Wives may be merry, and yet honest too" (Shakespeare 4.2.89). Given the context of the situation, in which Master Ford is hurriedly coming home to see if his wife is having an affair with Falstaff, the word honesty here implies chastity. Therefore, Mistress Page suggests that as long as a woman is chaste, she should be permitted to be joyful, lively, and carefree. This statement divulges much about both Mistress Page's character and the type of relationship she has with her husband. Andrew James Hartley states in his chapter about honesty that a person during the Renaissance could be labeled as honest either for their Christian virtues or courtly manner. He goes on to explain that Christian virtues could include chastity, truthfulness, and moral behavior, while courtly manners referred to a person's "preservation of social and aesthetic decorum" (89). Since Shakespeare does include the word *honest* in different contexts throughout the play, he seems to play on the different meanings the word could be understood by his audience. This is one way, Christy Desmet points out, that Shakespeare experiments with language in order to reveal certain characteristics that his characters possess without making it blatant to his audience. Most characters of the play hold a high opinion of Mistress Page treating her with the utmost respect when acknowledging her presence, with some referring to her as "good Mistress Page" (Shakespeare 1.1.67). She also conducts herself in a pleasurable manner in front of company

such as offering hospitality to guests of her house and gratitude when fitting. In addition, she is quick to point out the misconducts of others, such as condemning Master Ford for being jealous in Act 3.4 stating "You do yourself mighty wrong, Master Ford" (Shakespeare 3.4.175). Mistress Page taking pride in her social decorum would suggest that, in addition to being chaste, she believes that she should be seen as ethical by the townsfolk of Windsor. Her statement about the importance of being honest, therefore, according to Hartley, would include her virtuous reputation in Windsor in addition to her chastity. She would then be implying that women should be allowed to be merry, as long as they are unsullied and have a moral reputation. This serves as a justification for Mistress Page's behavior and explains why Mistress Page cares very little about deceiving her husband. In her mind, as long as she is doing her part by remaining faithful to her husband and being respectful to him and his company, she is permitted to partake in any merriment of her choosing. To further justify her actions, she states "We do not act that often jest and laugh, 'Tis old but true; 'Still swine eats all the draff'" (Shakespeare 4.2.90-91). The footnote in the Oxford edition interprets this as "in other words, quietness conceals sexual immortality, whereas playfulness is innocent" (Shakespeare 1306). Mistress Page insinuates that her enjoyment of humiliating Falstaff makes her innocent, whereas she would be guilty if she withheld taking action against his advances.

Although some characters hold a high opinion of Mistress Page, Mistress Quickly notes she is uncharacteristically domineering in her relationship with Master Page. In a conversation with Falstaff, Mistress Quickly informs him "Never a wife in Windsor leads a better life than she (Mistress Page) does. Do what she will; say what she will; take all, pay all; go to bed when she list; rise when she list; all is as she will" (Shakespeare 2.2.105-108). Master Ford comments quite often that Master Page underestimates what his wife is capable of, such as "Page be a

secure fool and stands so firmly on his wife's frailty" (Shakespeare 2.2.202-203). Other characters also believe then that Mistress Page holds a great deal of power over her husband. Even Master Page slightly acknowledges his wife's assertive behavior when Master Ford asks whether he fears that his wife may be having an affair by replying "If he (Falstaff) should intend this voyage toward my wife, I would turn her loose to him; and what he gets more of her than sharp words, let it lie on my head" (Shakespeare 2.1.160-162). Master Page's assertion that Mistress Page would scold Falstaff if he attempted to seduce her shows that he acknowledges that Mistress Page has headstrong personality. Susan Gushee O'Malley argues that Master Page's reasons for admitting to Master Ford that he would turn his wife loose to Falstaff is because "perhaps (he) is not much interested in her" (O'Malley 65). Although her argument that he cares little for his wife can be refuted with the few endearing exchanges they do have in the play, her argument about the Page's relationship being more complex can be supported (O'Malley 65). Master Ford does not err in his assumption that Master Page underestimates his wife. Thinking that he has the upper-hand in deciding which suitor will get Anne's hand in marriage near the end of the play, Master Page jokingly tells Falstaff "Yet be cheerful knight. Thou shall eat a posset tonight at my house, where I will desire thee to laugh at my wife that now laughs at thee. Tell her Master Slender hath married her daughter" (Shakespeare 5.5.158-161). Unbeknownst to him, Mistress Page came up with her own plan to have her daughter married off to Dr. Caius instead. Upon discovering that Master Page planned to have their daughter dressed up in white so that Master Slender would know what "fairy child" to grab out of the group, Mistress Page made sure his plan backfired and admitted that she deceived him stating "I knew of your purpose, turned my daughter into green, and indeed she is now with the Doctor at the deanery, and there married" (Shakespeare 5.5.183-185). Although her plan also backfired

because Anne planned to run off with Fenton instead, Mistress Page's intentions of deceiving her husband to ensure her daughter marries Dr. Caius illustrates that there is a lack of trust in the Page's relationship and that Mistress Page has no qualms lying to her husband to get what she desires.

After disclosing to her husband that she was involved in plotting against Falstaff, Mistress Page attempts to impress her husband with her planning skills by revealing the scheme she put together with Mistress Ford. Master Page, however, remains unimpressed and unconvinced his wife's fairy plan will work. Master Page voices his doubts stating "fie, fie, he'll (Falstaff) never come" and agreeing with Sir Hugh Evans that Falstaff will have no desire to appear saying "So think I too" (Shakespeare 4.4.18, 23). Only when the other men agree to the plan does Page follow along stating that he will go buy some props, such as the silk costumes, to assist in the staging of the performance. The audience soon becomes aware, though, that he only accepts his wife's plan because he sees an opportunity to use her plan against her by ensuring their daughter elopes with Slender. He seizes the opportunity to choose the color and fabric his daughter will wear the night of the performance, which will make it easier for Slender to pick her out among the fairies and lead her way to get marry nearby. Though Master Page demonstrates in this scene his capability to deceive and plot on his own, Mistress Page soon catches on to his plans and plots to foil them. Master Page's only attempt in the play to trick his wife fails as Mistress Page easily learns of his plans and cleverly arranges for their daughter to wear green and run off with Dr. Caius instead. Her second attempt of showing off her skills to her husband at the end of the play receives more attention as she embarrasses him among his friends by openly revealing her plot demonstrating she can clearly outsmart Master Page in a battle of wits. Despite their troubling relationship and impulse to undermine each other, though, the Pages

continue to rely on one another in particular moments of the play, such as both accepting their daughter's marriage to Fenton. They are also endearing to one another in the presence of company genuinely asking how the other is doing in Act 2.1 and speaking highly of the other to their friends. This indicates that they are somewhat compatible in spite of their differences and competitive natures. Mary Beth Rose notes that Shakespeare experiments with the concept of inclusiveness and duality, but does so in a conservative way with the goal of reconciling differences by the end of his comedic plays (Rose 42). This is relative to the Page's marriage as Shakespeare explores the complications of communication and desire between husband and wife, but abruptly ends the last scene on a happy note with no explanation or inclination whether any of the marital issues between the Pages are or will be resolved. Unlike the Ford's marriage, in which Shakespeare does include a conversation where they reconcile their differences, Shakespeare neglects to provide any type of solution of how the Pages plan to deal with their marital problems. This is, therefore, left up to the audience's interpretation of whether their issues will be dissolved or if they persist.

Mistress Page has a quarrelsome relationship with her daughter Anne as they disagree on which suitor would make the best companion for her. Mistress Page prefers the flamboyant Dr. Caius, whom she believes is a good companion, because "the Doctor is well moneyed, and his friends potent at court" (Shakespeare 4.4.85-86). These qualities seem to be very important to Mistress Page for her to overlook Dr. Caius' faults such as having a temper, being stubborn, a tendency to be jealous, and difficulty in communicating with others due to his foreign accent. Her preference for Dr. Caius as a partner for Anne reveals what kind of future Mistress Page wants for her daughter. Since Mistress Page brings attention to Dr. Caius' reputation among people of a higher socioeconomic class, she reveals that she desires her daughter to improve her

status in the town of Windsor. Mistress Page's concern for her daughter's socioeconomic status in the town shows that Mistress Page believes a person's status can dictate a person's happiness and that marrying Dr. Caius will ensure that. Mistress Page's concern correlates to her own desire to ensure her reputation in the town as an honest wife is upheld.

Mistress Page's disapproval of what the other two suitors can offer Anne also reveals what Mistress Page believes will ensure Anne's happiness. The Pages are described to be well-off financially with Falstaff referring to Mistress Page as "a region in Guiana, all gold and bounty" and that she controls the money (Shakespeare 1.3.63-65). The suitors also reveal that whoever marries Anne Page will receive her large dowry. Both Pages agree that Slender could offer Anne more wealth, but Mistress Page believes the cost of being married to a fool will not balance out the wealth Anne would receive. In Act 4.4 Mistress Page voices her opinion on Slender stating "That Slender, though well landed, is an idiot; and he my husband best of all affects" (Shakespeare 4.4.83-84). Interestingly, Mistress Page acknowledges that Slender is a fool, but doesn't see that quality in Dr. Caius who displays similar behavior. Both Dr. Caius and Slender are easily tricked at the end of the play with marrying a cross-dressed boy instead of Anne Page and both believe that they are in favor of receiving Anne's hand in marriage despite her behavior that would suggest otherwise. The audience can conclude that either Mistress Page is blind to Dr. Caius' foolishness or overlooks it because she believes his reputation among others in high court is more important. Fenton, although from a well-respected family, has little money and therefore his pleas to have Anne's hand in marriage is refused by both Master Page and Mistress Page. Fenton's association with fools of the town also contributes to the Page's disapproval of him as a partner for their daughter. Without money and a reputation, Fenton is turned away from Mistress Page who requests he stay away from her daughter.

Mistress Page confuses her hopes for Anne, however, with Anne's own desires to find a partner who genuinely loves her. In speaking to Mistress Ford, Mistress Page states that she believes that "my husband will rejoice so much at the abuse of Falstaff as he will chafe at the doctor's marrying my daughter. But 'tis no matter. Better a little chiding than a great deal of heartbreak" (Shakespeare 5.3.7-9). Mistress Page is aware that her husband will be disappointed if their daughter married Dr. Caius, but believes that Anne would be heartbroken if she married Slender. Slender in 3.4, when Anne bluntly asks what he wants with her, informs her "truly, for mine own part, I would little or nothing with you. Your father and my uncle hath made motions. If it be my luck, so. If not, happy man be his dole" (Shakespeare 3.4.58-60). Shortly after Slender's confession that he cares very little if he wins the competition or not, Mistress Page and her daughter share an exchange in which Mistress Page believes that her daughter's negative comments about marrying Slender or Dr. Caius are only directed at Slender. Although Anne does voice her opinion about Slender calling him a "yon fool," she directs her second comment to Dr. Caius stating that she would rather be "bowled to death with turnips" than marry him. (Shakespeare 3.4.80, 85). Unbeknownst to Mistress Page, Mistress Quickly in an aside tells Anne that Mistress Page prefers Dr. Caius before Anne Page's comment about preferring being bowled to death with turnips. Therefore, Mistress Page believes she is still talking about Slender when Anne continues to complain. This would explain why Mistress Page believes that Anne would be happy marrying Dr. Caius because she believes her daughter only disfavors Slender. It could be insinuated Mistress Page plots against her husband in order to spare her daughter of heartbreak or simply to guarantee Anne marries whom she believes would be the best match for her daughter.

Mistress Page's role as a mother in the play is comparable to various roles of mothers during the Renaissance, but she escapes the restrictions put on wives and mothers during the time period by refusing to give up on her interests and desires. Mary Beth Rose discusses the implications of motherhood during the Renaissance concerning the mother's role in influencing the lives of her children, decision-making in comparison to her husband, and managing household affairs. Rose notes that it was common for mothers to have to sacrifice their desires for the sake of having children and to allow their husbands to satisfy their own agendas. She notes that "a basic structural principle underlying Shakespeare's comic interpretation of marriage and the family (is that) the harmonious, stable, wished-for-society is based upon the sacrifice of the mother's desire" (Rose 303). Although this theory reigns true for some of Shakespeare's romantic comedies such as *The Winter's Tale* and *As You Like It*, it doesn't fit the nature of Mistress Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. As stated before from an excerpt spoken by Mistress Quickly, Mistress Page does as she pleases and is not restricted by her husband by any means whether it be finances or influencing their children. Mistress Page, instead, creates a balance between appeasing her husband and partaking in anything she pleases. Shakespeare, therefore, creates a character that does not fit the common mold of a traditional mother and wife. Rose also discusses how woman during the Renaissance were expected to wean off nurturing their children as they grew older so that they had the opportunity to become individuals. She suggests that over-nurturing could result in a child lacking in experience and skill for they would have missed partaking in opportunities that would promote self-growth. A good mother, therefore, would be firm and cautious of her children, but essentially allow them to make their own mistakes so that they can learn from them. Shakespeare brings up this ideology in the play when Shallow talks to Master Page in 2.3 stating "…Master Page, we have some salt of our

youth in us. We are the sons of women, Master Page" (Shakespeare 2.3.40-42). Shallow's comment implies that sons of women were expected to be strong and willful, which would coincide with the idea that children should be allowed to explore the world apart from parental guidance. Mistress Page's relationships with her daughter Anne is opposite as she meddles in her affairs trying to decide Anne's life for her. Although Rose does mention that parents were often involved in the decision making of whom their daughters should wed, Mistress Page's plot to have Anne runaway with Dr. Caius pushes the boundaries of how much she should be involved in her daughter's future. Fenton's speech at the end of the play points out this fact as he condemns both Master Page and Mistress Page for trying to marry off Anne to men she despised. He dramatizes this by stating "a thousand irreligious cursed hours which forced marriage would have brought upon her (Anne Page)" (Shakespeare 5.5.206-207). Mistress Page responds to Fenton's speech stating "Well, I will muse no further. Master Fenton, heaven give you many, many merry days" (Shakespeare 5.5.216-217). It is here that Mistress Page pulls away allowing her daughter and Master Fenton to lead their own lives and make their own decisions.

Though only present in two scenes and speaking in only one, Mistress Page's son William Page also remains under his mother's thumb. When told by Sir Hugh Evans that the boy can play instead of studying, Mistress Page objects stating "I pray you (Evans) ask him (William) some questions in his accidence (Latin grammar)" (Shakespeare 4.1.12-13). After reviewing some past lessons, Evans coaxes the boy to go on and play. Mistress Page, however, instructs her son to go home instead. This suggests that Mistress Page restricts William's freedom, not allowing him to play and forcing him to review with Evans despite school being closed for the day. Mistress Page's restrictive parenting style would explain why Anne chooses to rebuttal because she dislikes being under the control of her parents. Even though William is

still young, it seems that he will eventually have to make a decision in the future to either follow or not follow in his sister's footprints. Shakespeare thus creates a paradox in which Mistress Page refuses to let others control her actions, yet doesn't allow her own children to make their own decisions. This shows that Mistress Page desires to have control over situations and has a need to be highly involved with every conflict presented to her.

Mistress Page is the only character involved with every conflict in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. She involves herself with the scheme to seek revenge on Falstaff, attempts to prearrange a companionship with Dr. Caius and her daughter Anne, and helps pull together a plan in the town's effort to publicly humiliate Falstaff. She seems to enjoy taking part in this deception, often reveling at the success when both Master Ford and Sir John Falstaff are humiliated. After Mistress Ford and Mistress Page's first plan proved successful humiliating both men, Mistress Page exclaims "Is there not a double excellency in this?" and "what a taking was he in when your husband asked what was in the basket!" (Shakespeare 3.3.148, 151-152). Mistress Page's comment shows she was genuinely both surprised and proud how well their plan worked. O'Malley notes that the men's success in carrying out revenge plots pales in comparison to the success the woman share in carrying out their revenge on Falstaff (O'Malley 63). She states that while the men's plots "fizzle out" the women's revenge plots "determine the main action of the play" (O'Malley 63). Mistress Page comes to realize how big an impact she can make by planning out different schemes on Falstaff. As a result, she starts to enjoy deception for its own sake. This shows through her continued efforts to conjure up more grandeur plans, despite the possibility that she might be going too far in trying to teach Falstaff a lesson. Her original goal of getting revenge on Falstaff slowly shifts after each successful plot to proving that she is capable of producing a well carried out plan while enjoying the success and adrenaline she

feels when they prove to be effective. She thus becomes more headstrong and more confident in her abilities to be deceptive and cunning.

Shakespeare does not provide a physical description of Mistress anywhere in the play. The one reference to her appearance is when Mistress Page speaks to herself whilst opening up the letter Falstaff sent her declaring "What have I scaped love-letters in the holiday time of my beauty, and am I now a subject for them?" (Shakespeare 2.1.1-2). This indicates that Mistress Page acknowledges that she has already passed her prime of beauty and therefore is taken aback why she would receive a love-letter from anyone. In comparison to Mistress Ford and Anne Page, who both are described to be physically attractive at different points in the play, Mistress Page's appearance is not listed as a reason why she is being pursued by a man. On the contrary, Falstaff states that he wants to woo Mistress Page in order to gain access to her wealth. Although he states he has the same intentions in pursuing Mistress Ford, he also uses her alluring physical appearance as a reason too. Master Ford's jealousy and Master Page's lack thereof could also stem from the possibility that Mistress Ford is more beautiful than Mistress Page giving Master Ford more of a reason to be concerned his wife might be having an affair. Shakespeare's purpose for not including any sort of physical description of Mistress Page could also be his intentions of making sure his audience knew that her qualities of her character were more important in connection to the plot than that of Mistress Ford and Anne Page. Without beauty, Mistress Page needed to work harder to get the attention of those that surround her which proved successful by the end of the play.

Mistress Page's cunning mind and domineering personality make her stand out amongst the other characters in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In comparison to her other female counterparts, Mistress Page plays a bigger role in moving the plot forward. Her enjoyment of

deceiving others and taking control of situations dictates how the plot will move forward throughout the play. Shakespeare creates a woman character who possesses masculine qualities, but embraces the benefits of the stereotypes tied to her gender, such as playing the obedient wife. Mistress Page is one of Shakespeare's most deceptive, clever, and underappreciated woman characters whose actions and behavior reveal both her intelligence and importance in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

## CHAPTER 2: MISTRESS FORD

Mistress Ford, like Mistress Page, breaks away from the housewife stereotype by demonstrating initiative, but does this tactfully by posing as different types of women in order to get what she desires. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* Mistress Ford takes on two roles in the plots to humiliate Falstaff and reveal the jealousies of her husband: the innocent housewife and the oblivious temptress. The reception of Mistress Ford's acting reveals much about how others perceive her character and how she identifies herself. After the initial shock of receiving Falstaff's letter, Mistress Ford quickly turns from self-pity to vengeance as she plots out how to give Falstaff hope and then humiliate him in front of the town. Her efforts to allure Falstaff are effective as he continues to come see her when she beckons him despite the embarrassment and injuries that follow his visits. Mistress Ford's clever plots and acting in front of Falstaff accounts for most of the humor in the play as Falstaff falls victim to her charm and the promise of money. Mistress Ford's performance as an innocent wife in front of her husband, however, fails to convince him as he persistently doubts her faithfulness. Master Ford's jealousy and doubt concerning his wife's chastity show the complexity of the Fords' marriage as their disfavor for one another stems from their knowledge of the other's personality. Mistress Ford, well aware of her husband's jealousy, wishes to expose him for his faults and her purpose for plotting against Falstaff soon shifts to humiliating her husband. Master Ford, on the other hand, is determined to uncover his wife's deception and he grows more paranoid as he continues to be outwitted by his wife. Mistress Ford shows she knows her husband well as she uses her innocent persona to irritate him in order to escalate his jealousy. Mistress Ford's primary function in the play, therefore, is to unmask Falstaff and Master Ford's faults humiliating them both in front of townsfolk and to improve her own reputation in the town as a chaste wife. Mistress Ford

confides in her counterpart Mistress Page throughout the play about her insecurities and unhappiness in her marriage. It is only through these private conversations that Mistress Ford vehemently expresses her opinions through passionate language and blunt tones. Her interactions and relationships with Mistress Page, Falstaff and Master Ford show her conniving and passionate personality, while also revealing her high intellect. A close reading of the text reveals Mistress Ford's intentions to keep her thoughts and opinions hidden from the men around her in order to practice abrasiveness discreetly without sullying her reputation as a docile wife. Although certain characters undermine Mistress Ford's moral behavior and intelligence throughout the play because of her merry disposition, Mistress Ford shows the town that a woman can be witty and deceptive without giving up her chastity.

In order to deceive both Falstaff and her husband, Mistress Ford puts on two different performances in front of them in an attempt to expose them for their faults. Some critics, such as Allison Findlay and Rebecca Olson, have mistaken Mistress Ford's acting as an insight into her actual character. Findlay misses the fact that Mistress Ford puts on an act in front of her husband painting her as a merry and carefree wife, but does acknowledge that Mistress Ford plays the role of an adulteress in front of Falstaff (145-146). Rebecca Olson paints Mistress Ford as the innocent wife in order to justify her reasoning that Master Ford is an unruly and abrasive husband (175-184). While the way in which Mistress Ford acts in front of Falstaff and her husband is solely for performance purposes, why she chooses to act in particular ways reveals much about her true character. Master Ford points out near the beginning of the play to Pistol that "my wife is not young" (Shakespeare 2.1.99). Later in the play, Mistress Quickly informs Falstaff that many men tried to woo Mistress Ford in her youth, but "they could not get an eye wink of her" (Shakespeare 2.2.66-67). These comments by Master Ford and Mistress Quickly

indicate that Mistress Ford is a mature woman at the time of the play who has had experience dealing with undesirable suitors. In regards to the plot against Falstaff, Mistress Ford's experience would explain why Mistress Ford and Mistress Page decide to use Mistress Ford as bait to coax Falstaff into their trap.

Before her first encounter with Falstaff, Mistress Ford verifies with Mistress Page and her servants that the plan they laid out is in proper order. Mistress Ford sees herself as the leader in this plot for revenge as she takes charge of the situation. Since Mistress Ford stands to gain more from this plotting than Mistress Page, it is fitting that Mistress Ford takes charge since she has more to lose if something in their plans go wrong. Mistress Ford plans to show Falstaff, her husband, and the townsfolk of Windsor that she has the capability to successfully plot out revenge and deceive her husband. Mistress Ford puts on a convincing performance as Falstaff inevitably decides to return to the Ford's house even after being dumped out of a laundry basket into the Thames River. Falstaff's reasons for returning could either be the result of Mistress Quickly's persuasive message from Mistress Ford or Falstaff's determination to win over Mistress Ford's favor. Both reasons point to Falstaff believing that Mistress Ford is worth the risk of pursuing again. Mistress Ford's persistence in trying to fool Falstaff for revenge and Falstaff's determination to convince Mistress Ford to sleep with him and share her wealth provides much of the entertainment of the play as both are unwilling to give up their desires. Falstaff only gives up the chase out of fear from the fairy scene and after being humiliated in public. Mistress Ford, therefore, prevails in achieving her goals while Falstaff is forced to give up his venture after being put to shame by the townsfolk of Windsor. Her success is overlooked by scholars, though, as they concentrate more on Falstaff's humiliation instead of Mistress Ford's proven capability to outsmart Falstaff and make him the public spectacle. Mistress Ford

shows that despite her limitations as a woman, she can be conniving, witty and clever without sullying her reputation.

Mistress Ford's charm and her flirtatious language grabs Falstaff's attention in their first two meetings. She refers to Falstaff as "sweet Sir John" and informs him, "heaven knows how I love you; and you shall one day find it" (Shakespeare 3.3.38,67-68). For most of the play, Falstaff prides himself on his capability to trick and woo Mistress Page and Mistress Ford. This pride, however, hinders him from noticing the irony, double entendres, and vagueness of Mistress Ford's word choices. For instance, after Mistress Ford tells Falstaff that only heaven knows how much she loves him and he informs her that he will be deserving of that love, she states "Nay I must tell you, so you do; or else I could not be in that mind" (Shakespeare 3.3.70-71). Mistress Ford shows how clever she can be in this part of the play as this line can imply two things. Falstaff believes that Mistress Ford insinuates that he deserves her love or she would not have taken the risk of meeting with him. The audience, who at the point knows that Mistress Ford has only distaste for Falstaff after reading his letter, can interpret that she chooses her words carefully to masque her true feelings towards Falstaff. When she admits her love, she chooses to say that "heaven knows how I love you" and that Falstaff is deserving of that amount of love (Shakespeare 3.3 67). Since "heaven" knows Mistress Ford does not love Falstaff, Mistress Ford secretly reveals that she believes Falstaff deserves all the disgust she has for him. Christy Desmet notes that this use of double-meaning words or phrases is common in Shakespeare plays. Her discussion on character identification and how to read Shakespeare's text is imperative to this analysis. Desmet states in her chapter on character motives that in order to identify a character fully in a Shakespeare play "…the exercise of writing and reading the Character, 'stripping away' the rags and false ornaments, is more important than the printed

portrait itself" (Desmet 38). In other words, Desmet argues that the audience cannot fully identify a character in the play simply by trying to understand a character at face value. Shakespeare's characters are multifarious and, therefore, the audience should expect that these characters are susceptible to misjudgment and are capable of taking on multiple personalities. Mistress Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has been undermined in criticism of the play as many critics have written her off as nothing more than the partner in crime with Mistress Page and the wife of the jealous Master Ford. A close-reading of the text, however, reveals that Mistress Ford is a multifaceted character herself who uses witty language and her passionate personality as tools to aid her in her goals to humiliate Falstaff and reveal the jealousies of her husband. Mistress Ford's approach to revenge and putting on a show in front of Falstaff and her husband show that she is more than the innocent and honest housewife other characters label her to be.

Mistress Ford's performance in front of her husband, Master Ford, is best explained through their relationship with one another. The first impression the audience receives of the Ford's relationship comes from Nim in Act 1.3 as he informs Pistol that he intends to "incense Ford to deal with poison; I will possess him with yellowness…" (Shakespeare 1.3.87-88). Although Nim and Pistol do provoke Master Ford's jealousy, their knowledge that they could easily do so implies that he has been jealous before. Mistress Ford confirms this idea in 2.1 when she states "O that my husband saw this letter! It would give eternal food to his jealousy" (Shakespeare 2.1.87-89). Master Ford's jealousy could be the result of his own superstition and domineering nature, but another possibility could be that he has reasons why he should be jealous based on events that happened before the audience is introduced to these characters. The evaluation of the Fords' relationship provided in the commentary of Mistress Ford, Master Ford,

and other characters reveals that there may be some merit to Master Ford's reasoning why he should be jealous. In Act 2.2., Mistress Quickly informs Falstaff that many men, such as earls and dukes, have chased after Mistress Ford in her youth, but none prevailed. This coincides with Master Ford's comment to Pistol that "why, sir, my wife is not young" (Shakespeare 2.1.99). Master Ford's comment could be inferring that when his wife was young, he expected others to pursue her. When disguised as Master Brooke, Master Ford informs Falstaff that although Mistress Ford appears honest "…in other places she enlargeth her mirth so far that there is shrewd construction made of her" (Shakespeare 2.2.197-199). After speaking with Falstaff, Master Ford curses alone stating "See the hell of having a false woman!" (Shakespeare 2.2.256-257). Master Ford and Mistress Quickly's comments indicate that the Fords have not had a trusting relationship. Mistress Ford predicts Master Ford's jealousy and Master Ford easily condemns his wife without just cause.

Despite the prospect of infidelity in the past in the Ford's relationship, Master Ford's inclination to overreact with anger also feeds into his jealousy. Mistress Quickly informs Falstaff that "Alas, the sweet woman [Mistress Ford] leads an ill life with him. He's a very jealous man. She leads a very frampold [disagreeable] life with him, good heart" (Shakespeare 2.2.82-82). She also tells Falstaff later in the play that "Mistress Ford, good heart, is beaten black and blue, that you cannot see a white spot about her" (Shakespeare 4.5.92-94). Although Mistress Quickly's comments could be false in order to provoke Falstaff to continue visiting Mistress Ford, others' comments and actions in the play that would support that idea that Master Ford is abusive towards his wife. Falstaff discloses to Master Brooke, who is Master Ford in disguise, that he believes Master Ford is a "jealous knave" and a "lunatic knave" (Shakespeare 3.5.88, 90). Falstaff's accusations prove to have weight when Master Ford savagely beats Falstaff disguised

as his maid's Aunt of Brentford. Although he believes that the woman is a witch that curses others, his beating of "her" is deemed unwarranted by others such as Mistress Page who states "Are you not ashamed? I think you have killed the poor woman" (Shakespeare 4.2.163-164). This action alone proves that Master Ford is able and willing to beat a woman. Mistress Ford could therefore be in the hands of an abusive man, which would coincide with her comment to Mistress Page that "you are the happier woman" (Shakespeare 2.1.93). The reason for Master Ford's jealousy concerning Mistress Ford's chastity could thus be a result of both Mistress Ford's past encounters with men and Master Ford's belligerent temperament.

Although there are apparent issues in the Ford's relationship, their knowledge of each other's imperfections shows that they know each other very well. This familiarity contrasts the familiarity in the Page's relationship as the Page's encounter situations where each is surprised by their spouse's behavior. As already indicated, Mistress Ford can be deceptive as she plots against her husband and Falstaff and takes on multiple personalities in the play for performance purposes. Master Ford in Act 2 acknowledges his wife's capacity for illusion when he states:

> I will rather trust a Fleming with my butter, Parson Hugh the Welshman with my cheese, and 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…
> (Shakespeare 2.2.265-269).

Master Ford's accusations against his wife indicate that his lack of faith results from his knowledge and experience of how Mistress Ford conducts herself when she attempts to deceive him or others. Mistress Ford also denotes how much she knows her husband throughout the play. Besides the affirmation of Mistress Ford's guess that her husband would be jealous that Falstaff

is pursuing her, Mistress Ford also knows how her husband will react to her maid's Aunt of Brentford being in the house. When Mistress Page condemns Master Ford for beating and almost killing "her," Mistress Ford notes "Nay, he will do it…" (Shakespeare 4.2.165). Her assertion that she thinks he would have killed "her" if given the chance reveals that she knows Master Ford's tendency to be violent.

Although the Fords' awareness of their spouse's faults shows they know each other well, their determination to expose one another's faults to other characters in the play creates the tension in their marriage. Jeanne Addison Roberts notes that "Mistress Ford gratuitously tricks her husband a second time with the buck basket, apparently enjoying his agonies, and he is almost sadistic in plotting to unmask his wife as an adulteress" (Roberts 74). As stated before, Mistress Ford's goal, along with humiliating Falstaff, is to expose the jealousies of her husband, while Master Ford desires to expose Mistress Ford's dishonesty and deception to the other men in the play. Mistress Ford succeeds in revealing Master Ford's jealousy, and even though Master Ford is not given credit, Mistress Ford discloses herself that she deceived her husband when she admits she purposely tricked him. The play condones Mistress Ford unveiling her husband's fault as others taunt Master Ford for being jealous, but no one gives Master Ford credit that he was right about his wife plotting against him. Most characters concentrate on the fact that Master Ford was partly wrong for thinking that his wife was cheating on him with Falstaff. Juliet Dusinberre discusses how some woman characters were rewarded in Shakespeare plays for teaching men a moral lesson or punishing them for any wrongdoing (Dusinberre 90). In reference to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in regards to a wife's chastity Dusinberre states "…a wife is more likely to be virtuous if trusted to be so than if compelled to be so..." (Dusinberre 95). Therefore, Dusinberre argues that if Mistress Ford was trusted by her husband, she wouldn't

have felt compelled to teach him a lesson. Jeanne Addison Roberts notes that Nicholas Rowe, one of Shakespeare's first editors, remarks that the main purpose of the play concerns Mistress Ford teaching Master Ford a lesson and curing his unreasonable jealousy (Roberts 72). Though many critics share this consensus, their analyses mostly focus on Master Ford's redemption at the end of the play rather than Mistress Ford's efforts to ridicule and unmask her husband's yellowness.

Mistress Ford's goal of exposing her husband's jealousy to the public of Windsor coincides with the innocent persona she portrays in front of him and his company. Master Ford's determination to catch his wife committing adultery grows worse after she plays coy with him. Mistress Ford condemns her husband for not trusting her while his friends are present, which she knows will infuriate him more since he cares about his reputation in the town. Mistress Ford takes pride in her ability to frustrate him and sends him into a jealous rage when she states to Mistress Page "I know not which pleases me better: that my husband is deceived or Sir John" (Shakespeare 3.3.149-150). Mistress Ford's knowledge of her husband's behavior and his awareness that she is capable of deceiving him gives her the advantage of how to enrage her husband making him look like a fool among his friends. Mistress Ford's actions demonstrate her wittiness and her desire to control situations. R. S. White observes that Shakespeare stands apart from his contemporaries for "allowing women, if only temporarily, an assertiveness of their own which controls the plot. In each situation in which the women find themselves, they are allowed to exercise initiative and they are never docile" (White 33-34). Mistress Ford seeks revenge on both Falstaff and then her husband after both assume she will willingly give up her chastity as a married woman. After taking offense to these accusations, Mistress Ford turns her emotional distress to anger and devises a plot allowing her to have the upper hand in both situations. Her

desire to take control of how others perceive her character coincides with White's claims of the women in the play displaying assertive behavior. However, I disagree with White's opinion that "they (Mistress Ford and Mistress Page) must simply react to men's initiatives rather than pursuing independent goals of their own" (White 34). Though women during the Renaissance were restrained by society in some ways, both wives in the play do take initiative in pursuing their own goals as Mistress Ford wishes to teach her husband a lesson and Mistress Page desires to prove to her husband she is capable of outwitting him. Mistress Ford succeeds in her endeavor proving to herself that she can dictate how others perceive her and how others perceive her spouse.

Mistress Ford and Mistress Page have a companionship that creates a safe environment allowing both women to voice their opinions and thoughts openly with one another. Through witnessing their private conversations in several scenes, the audience grasps a better understanding of both their characters as these wives feel comfortable stepping away from their stereotypical wifely demeanors and naturally transition into strong complex individuals. Carole Mckewin calls this private space women share a "counter universe" where "they provide space which women together can express their own perceptions and identities, comment on masculine society, and gather strength and engage in reconnaissance to act in it" (McKewin 118-119). She further explains that scenes in Shakespeare plays where the woman hold these private conversations "…reveals the freedoms and constraints of women in the patriarchal society of Shakespeare plays" (McKewin 119). Essentially this space gives Mistress Ford and Mistress Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* an opportunity to express themselves without breaking the rules of the patriarchal society of Windsor. In concordance with McKewin's summary of what women talk about in these private spheres, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page discuss the men that

surround them, how they are misrepresented by others, and how to seek revenge on Falstaff. Mistress Ford, who is bent on revenge, still worries about her public image when she informs Mistress Page "Nay, I will consent to any villainy against him that may not sully the chariness of our honesty" (Shakespeare 2.1. 86-87). Mistress Ford's concerns indicate that she wants to plot against Falstaff, as long as her identity in the public eye as a good and meek housewife is not compromised. Mistress Page, who has similar goals, also wants to avoid tainting her image, but the image she upholds differs from Mistress Ford's.

Whether intentionally or not, the women do expose the parts of their personality they hold back for most of the play in the last Act, but are not faulted for being themselves. Mistress Page, as stated in the last chapter, puts on a façade of an obedient wife and honest mother. However, she falters in both as she reveals that she deceives her husband in the last scene and arranges for a suitor to wed Anne that Anne disapproves. Mistress Page tries to keep her highly opinionated and conniving nature a secret, but ends up exposing herself to the public of Windsor in the last Act. No one in Windsor, not even her husband, openly condemns her for her actions of deceiving her husband and, although Fenton condemns the Page's for arranging Anne to marry suitors against her wishes, is not forced to apologize for trying to make Anne marry Dr. Caius. Her actions are assumed to be forgiven or forgotten by the end of the play. On the other hand, Mistress Ford likes the attention the men in the play give her, but resists the urge to show it in front of them. She enjoys putting on show in front of Falstaff and Master Ford, but when the plots are unveiled to Master Ford and later Falstaff, Mistress Ford does not hold back expressing her thoughts in the presence of male company. Since she avoids judgement by others for her actions, Mistress Ford seems to believe that she can be free to express herself from that point forward. Kirsten Uszkalo, in an essay about cunning and cozening queens, states that these wives

are “clever and playful women subverting and profiting from the systems put in place to control them” (Uszkalo 21). Mistress Ford and Mistress Page use their wifely personas to their advantage in most of the play as they attempt to deceive other characters knowing that most of their company will believe in their guises. After their plans are revealed, however, no one scolds or mocks their behavior. In fact, both Mistress Page and Mistress Ford are treated with the same level of respect or more from the men around them. Many critics[v] have given credit to Shakespeare for his efforts to create complex women characters whose actions and thoughts parallel in intelligence and vigilance with the men characters in his plays. With this play in particular, Shakespeare takes it a step further and creates an environment where women can speak freely and still be accepted in society. All of the wives, Anne Page included, are still loved by their husbands despite sharing their thoughts and opinions openly in public. Although Shakespeare by no means implies that both sexes should be treated equally, he does send a message to his audiences that woman should be free to express themselves and not forced to hide behind a masque to appease others.

Mistress Ford’s and Mistress Page’s decision to be more open with their personalities not only helps themselves, but also helps their marriages. Cristina Léon Alfar in her essay about women’s agency in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* argues that women’s openness of their deception “authorizes a view of a marital bond strengthened by a female driven mirth” (Alfar 39). Both wives, therefore, strengthen their marriage by being themselves. She furthers her argument stating “while the play does nothing to unhinge marriage, it does rework the terms in which marriage functions” (Alfar 39). Shakespeare thus produces a play that redefines marriage as a partnership, which differs greatly with plays written by his competitors and even some of his own, such as *Othello* and *Hamlet*. This does not imply there are no marital problems between the

Fords and Pages, but rather there is an acceptance from each partner of the other's personality. Jean A. Howard explains that the lengths these women go to deceive their husbands essentially saves their marriages. She concludes her argument by stating "moreover the plot of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* suggests that the power to restore familial and communal harmony lies squarely in their hands [Mistress Ford and Mistress Page]" (Howard 77). Therefore, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page dictate the success of their marriages and create harmony once again in Windsor by taking action and, eventually, being open to expressing themselves in public.

Mistress Page and Mistress Ford express themselves very differently even when they share private conversations. Catherine Belsey points out that "the speech patterns of the wives are distinctive in the play" (Besley 34). Mistress Page speaks in a practical manner using straightforward language and encourages Mistress Ford to do the same. In the first scene of Act 2, Mistress Ford bursts onto the stage declaring that she should go to hell if she is guilty of a certain act of dishonesty. Mistress Page tries to pull the story out of her three times asking Mistress Ford "What's the matter woman?" and "Dispense with trifles. What is it?" (Shakespeare 2.1.37, 41). Mistress Ford, who uses descriptive language and expresses herself dramatically, enjoys leaving her friend guessing as she avoids Mistress Page's questions stating "(how) I could to such honour" and "If I would but go to hell for an eternal moment or so, I could be knighted" (Shakespeare 2.1.39, 42-43). After Mistress Ford relinquishes her letter from Falstaff to Mistress Page to read, she goes on a rant about how Falstaff has forced her to think "the worse of fat men as long as I have an eye to make difference of men's liking" (Shakespeare 2.1.49-50). She goes on to say that the best way to be revenged on Falstaff is to "entertain him with hope, till the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease" (Shakespeare 2.1.58-59). Mistress Page's proposal for revenge pales in comparison with the imagery Mistress Ford uses in her pitch as she

states “let’s appoint him a meeting, give him a show of comfort in his suit, and lead him on with a fine baited delay till he hath pawned his horses to mine Host of the Garter” (Shakespeare 2.1.82-85). How both woman express themselves coincides with their personalities. Mistress Page uses practical and straightforward language because she asserts herself as an organized housewife and sees herself as the moral compass for others. Mistress Ford dramatizes situations and uses passionate language because she enjoys being the center of attention as she takes pride in her performances in front of Falstaff and Master Ford, and loves to show off her wit among company. Shakespeare’s clever use of language in this play aids his audiences in uncovering Mistress Ford and Mistress Page’s characteristics. Although their scheming is essential to the plot of the play, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page’s words speak more than their actions when it comes to character identification.

Mistress Ford’s interactions with different characters reveal her playful and flamboyant personality. Her performances in front of Falstaff and Master Ford show that she can be witty and is familiar with how to entice and infuriate her audiences. Mistress Ford and Master Ford both acknowledge the faults of their spouse, which they use to their advantage when attempting to unveil the other’s flaws to their friends. Even though Mistress Ford succeeds in her endeavor, Master Ford does not as no one condemns Mistress Ford for deceiving her husband. Unlike Mistress Page, Mistress Ford is a passionate woman whose emotions triumph over practicality. In private conversation with Mistress Page, Mistress Ford embraces the opportunity to express her thoughts and opinions. She uses cunning language and enjoys a battle of wits with both Falstaff and Master Ford. Out of all the characters in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Mistress Ford stands out as the most personable character as she lets her emotions dictate her actions and harvests feelings the audience can relate to including fear, satisfaction, and joy. In the end,

Mistress Ford and Master Ford kindle their relationship and Mistress Ford eventually feels more comfortable expressing herself and being open to sharing her own personality with others.

## CHAPTER 3: ANNE PAGE

Anne Page, the youngest wife in Windsor, displays moxie and often weights her own opinion over others. Forced to mingle with suitors at the request of her parents, she rejects the men's advances and enjoys indulging in verbal jousting. Anne's interactions with Slender are most memorable as her blatant sarcasm goes unnoticed by the dumb-witted Slender in their conversations. Although not favored at first, Fenton steals Anne's heart and ends up eloping with her at the end of the play. Anne's stubbornness and determination leads her to disobey her parents and marry the man of her choosing. Her conquest for love and seizing it at the opportunity shows Anne's passion and belief that love triumphs over money and status, which her other two suitors could have given her. Unlike Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, Anne keeps no secrets from her partner Fenton and he has been fully exposed to her domineering personality. Like the other wives, Anne creates a plot, but her intentions are to deceive her parents and not Fenton. In fact, she informs Fenton of her plans to trick the other suitors into running away with someone else, and Fenton prearranges with the Host a marriage ceremony for him and Anne at the church. Though they are young lovers, Anne and Fenton already embody better relationship qualities than the other two primary couples. Arguably, Anne could be considered the merriest wife in Windsor by the end of the play as she seems to be in the happiest relationship. Many scholars who have included commentary about Anne in their works have not considered Anne a wife, with some classifying her as simply the Page's daughter. Although some scholars recognize her marriage to Fenton at the end of the play,[vi] Anne remains disconnected to the title in scholarship. I argue her frequent presence on stage and her joyful union at the end of the play constitutes Anne Page as a merry wife of Windsor worthy of being included along with Mistress Ford and Mistress Page as one of the wives being referenced by the title *The Merry Wives of*

*Windsor*. An analysis of Anne Page's character and a justification for her inclusion in the title are the focal points of this chapter.

Commentary about Anne's character made by her suitors Slender and Dr. Caius in the play generally focuses on what they believe Anne represents as a young English girl rather than gives insight into her actual personality. Rachel Prusko supports this claim noting "Her (Anne's) suitors, meanwhile, well acquainted with Anne's financial situation, seem to know little of Anne herself" (Prusko 56). The play opens up to a heated discussion between Sir Hugh Evans, Robert Shallow, and Master Abraham Slender that quickly transitions to the topic of Slender pursuing Anne Page as a wife. Evans describes Anne as "pretty virginity" and Shallow confirms that "she has good gifts" when attempting to convince Slender to pursue Anne. (Shakespeare 1.1.39, 51). They also inform Slender that Anne Page has a huge dowry since her family is very wealthy; such a dowry would add to his own wealth. These men essentially treat Anne Page as a prize to be won: a prize albeit that is very beautiful and worth a great deal. Dr. Caius too considers Anne Page as a trophy wife when he informs Mistress Quickly "I will have myself Anne Page" (Shakespeare 1.4.104). Dr. Caius refers to Anne Page as an object rather than a person. Slender and Dr. Caius' views towards marrying Anne and Anne's disapproval of both men stems from betrothal customs of the Renaissance era. Mary Beth Rose maps out the differences between the rights of women according to the laws written in Renaissance England and newer scholarship that undermines these laws. She states "In the realm of the legal, we can observe that a married woman in Renaissance England forfeited both agency and identity" (Rose 293). As Rose notes, however, this idea has been refuted by many scholars[vii] who have produced "abundant empirical evidence to demonstrate that women exercised legal agency on a broad scale that contradicted their conceptual legal status, buying, selling, and bequeathing property and actively negotiating

the marriages of their children" (Rose 293.) Juliet Dusinberre's research reached the same consensus as she states "Elizabethan wives enjoyed a working equality with their husbands which made foreigners declare them to be more liberated in practice than women in any other country" (Dusinberre 127). Both Slender and Dr. Caius' points of view encapsulate the ideas set forth in the actual laws that Anne Page would be their property after marriage. She essentially becomes a means to more wealth and power for both men rather than a companion.

Even Fenton, Anne's chosen future spouse, admits to Anne "albeit I will confess thy father's wealth was the first motive that wooed thee, Anne" (Shakespeare 3.4.13-14). At first, Anne believes Fenton has the same intentions as Slender and Dr. Caius when she replies to Fenton's comment about her father suspecting that Fenton has greedy intentions stating "Maybe he tells you true" (Shakespeare 3.4.11). Fenton contests her comment though declaring "Yet, wooing thee, I found thee of more value than stamps in gold or sums in sealed bags; and tis the very riches of thyself that now I aim at" (Shakespeare 3.4.15-18). After he states this, Anne changes her attitude towards Fenton imploring him to seek her father's approval before getting cut off by Shallow and Slender approaching asserting "Gentle Master Fenton, yet seek my father's love, still seek it, sir. If opportunity and humblest suit cannot attain it, why then…." (Shakespeare 3.4.19-21). The audience sees this shift in Anne's attitude towards Fenton only when he proclaims that Anne's worth as an individual triumphs over her value as a wealthy man's daughter. How much Fenton's comment affected Anne's opinion of him reveals what Anne deems important in a future spouse; she wants to be treated like a person and wants her spouse to see and love her as an individual and partner rather than be seen as a prize or a woman whose opinion matters very little to her spouse. Jennifer Higginbotham notes that "Anne's willingness to challenge her lover indicates a stronger, more spirited character" than the sheepish

and pretty woman some male characters paint her to be (Higginbotham 118). Anne does not fear challenging Fenton on his word because she wants to ensure that his true intentions are to seek her affections and not the dowry attached to her.

Anne sees through the wooing of Slender and Dr. Caius and grows to despise these men for their inability to woo her and their apparent disinterest in her as a person. Unlike Fenton, these men evade complimenting Anne in front of her and look towards Anne's parents for their approval instead of Anne's favor. Dr. Caius, whom Mistress Page prefers, avoids conversation with Anne Page altogether, although both are present on stage in multiple scenes. Barbara Traister states in her analysis of Dr. Caius' character that he "seems a character meant merely to swell a scene or two, yet on the other he appears in all five acts of *Merry Wives* and is involved in nearly all the play's plot lines" (Traister 121). Dr. Caius' consistent presence on stage throughout the play leads the audience to believe that he plays a major role in the plot of the play, but his small amount of lines contradicts this notion. Although loud and obnoxious when he does speak, Dr. Caius for the most part disappears in the background as a simple supporting character and the least important suitor to Anne. In the few lines he does speak in the play, the foreign and easily angered Dr. Caius quickly defends his right to Anne Page in the presence of other characters, but avoids talking to Anne when in her company. He informs Mistress Quickly that he will have Anne Page for himself and brags to Master Page "de maid is love-a me. My nursh-a Quickly tell me so mush" (Shakespeare 3.2.54-55). His pompous attitude towards marrying Anne, though, arises from the reassurance he receives from Mistress Quickly and Mistress Page rather than Anne herself. Near the end of the play, Mistress Page divulges her plot to Dr. Caius that she has planned and informed Anne personally to dress in green and elope with him the night of the fairy ploy against Falstaff. Slender under the direction of Master Page,

however, discusses a plan with Anne herself about how they would elope and what color dress she will be wearing. From the audience's perspective, Anne's disapproval of Dr. Caius as a partner cannot derive from her interactions with him, since there are none, but rather his neglect to approach her and make an effort to talk to her. Anne's disfavor for Dr. Caius stems from his disinterest to get to know her rather than him as a person since, from the audience's perspective, she has not gotten the opportunity to get to know him as much as Slender and Fenton.

While Dr. Caius avoids a conversation with Anne altogether, Slender only engages in inane banter while trying to impress her. The subjects of Slender and Anne's first conversation focus around Slender's attempts at impressing Anne with his supposed sword battle and bearbaiting stories. When Anne persists that Slender join her father and company at the dining table, Slender refuses with excuses such as "I bruised my shin th'other day with playing at sword and dagger with a master of fence" and quickly transitions to his story about attending a bearbaiting where he had "taken him (the bear) by the chain" (Shakespeare 1.1.237-239, 248). Anne remains unimpressed, however, replying to his objections and stories with vague comments such as "Ay, indeed, sir" (Shakespeare 1.1.246). R.S. White comments that Slender sees Anne as a business transaction and that "Slender is completely unable to or unwilling to communicate with Anne except in male terms and by defining the woman as 'other', as one who does not like bearbaiting" (White 19). Anne's distaste for Slender, therefore, could stem from his inability or unwillingness to see her as an individual and not as just another "woman." When Anne and Slender are both present on stage together in Act 3.4, Anne complains to Fenton in an aside about Slender stating "O, what a world of vile ill-favoured faults looks handsome in three hundred pounds a year" (Shakespeare 3.4.31-32). Anne acknowledges in this statement that she knows Slender is interested more in the dowry than being married to her. This infuriates Anne as

she pleads to her mother "do not marry me to yon fool" (Shakespeare 3.4.80). In addition to sharing her feelings about Slender to others, Anne also challenges Slender to impress her and win her over with his charm and devotion. When Shallow informs Anne that Slender loves her, Anne states "Good Master Shallow, let him woo for himself" (Shakespeare 3.4.48). Rachel Prusko comments calls this "the wry quip of a girl who knows very well she won't marry this fool; and reminds us that she is, after all, daughter to a witty, merry mother Mistress Page" (Prusko 57). Although Anne does embody her mother's wittiness, she lacks her mother's social graces as she bravely confronts Slender face to face slightly tarnishing her image in public as a stereotypical meek young woman. After Shallow leaves Slender and Anne to converse, Anne abruptly asks Slender "what is your will?" and "what would you with me?" (Shakespeare 3.4.53, 57). It is through these curt requests that Anne receives an honest answer from Slender as he answers "Truly, for my own part, I would little or nothing with you. Your father and my uncle hath made motions. If it be my luck, so. If not, happy man be his dole" (Shakespeare 3.4.58-60). By being upfront with Slender, Anne finally receives a straightforward answer from him about his intentions; he cares very little for her and seeks her hand for selfish reasons of pleasing both Shallow and Master Page. Anne proves to herself in this scene that by being assertive, she has the power to reaffirm her suspicions and take control over situations.

Anne's whirlwind romance with Fenton evolves into the most believable, compatible relationship in the play as both show devotion and affection towards each other, and both accept wholly and admire the other's personality. Jennifer Higginbotham notes that "Rather than emphasizing Anne's identity as their (Master and Mistress Page's) child, the play largely presents her (Anne) in relation to Fenton as a romantic heroine" (Higginbotham 115). Higginbotham, therefore, argues that Anne's role in the play as a lover and partner for Fenton

trumps her role as the Pages' daughter. Unlike Anne's other suitors, Fenton appreciates Anne's assertive behavior and opinionated mind informing her that he loves her because of her personality rather than her dowry in Act 3.4. Anne becomes smitten with Fenton as a result and sets up her own plot to deceive her parents and elope with Fenton during the fairy ploy in Act 5.5. Before the fairy scheme, Fenton visits the Host of the Garter and informs him that Anne "mutually hath answered my affection" and that she has come up with a plan to avoid marrying the men of her parents' choosing (Shakespeare 4.6.10). Fenton reveals the contents of a letter he received from Anne to the Host which discusses both Master Page's plan for Anne to marry Slender and Mistress Page's plan for Anne to marry Dr. Caius. When the Host asks which parent Anne plans on deceiving, Fenton replies "Both, my good Host, to go along with me. And here it rests: that you'll procure the vicar to stay for me at church 'twixt twelve and one, and, in the lawful name of marrying, to give our hearts united ceremony" (Shakespeare 4.6.46-50). Anne's letter shows that she trusts Fenton with her plans and with her feelings towards the other suitors.

Anne's openness with Fenton demonstrates that she wants a partnership with Fenton built on mutual trust, respect, and understanding. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mistress Page and Master Page's relationship, although seemingly favorable from a distant perspective, lacks these values as they keep secrets from each other, underestimate each other's capability, and remain somewhat oblivious to their spouse's personality. The only person, besides Mistress Page and Master Page themselves, who sees these differences firsthand is their daughter Anne. Throughout the play, Anne gets coaxed by each parent to marry the suitor of their choosing and is subjected to her parents' plans to deceive one another. Their disagreements essentially lead Anne to hate the suitors they choose and rebel by creating her own ruse to trick both her parents and her other two suitors Slender and Dr. Caius. Rachel Prusko makes the argument that "we do

know that Anne doesn't get what she doesn't want: a parentally ordained marriage to either Slender or Dr. Caius" and she "quietly but effectively evades the parents and suitors who would determine the course of her life, and displaces herself from their defining narratives" (Prusko 58). Prusko also claims that Fenton only serves the purpose of providing Anne with a solution for escaping the fate set forth by her parents. Though Prusko's claim that the purpose of Fenton's character serves to help Anne escape her fate of marrying Slender or Dr. Caius has merit, I argue that Fenton becomes more than a means for Anne to get away from her parents' choices by showing Anne that a compatible and honest relationship is possible despite her upbringing convincing her otherwise. Anne's initial doubt that Fenton's intentions were not pure could stem from her disbelief that she could be involved in a relationship where her spouse would accept and love her as an equal individual since she has grown up in a household that demonstrates inequality in a marriage. When Fenton reassures Anne that his reasons for marrying her have shifted from greed to love, Anne too changes her perspective on marriage and her opinion of Fenton.

Near the end of the play, Fenton and Anne return to the fairy scene to proudly announce their marriage. After Anne is bombarded with questions by her parents, Fenton speaks on her behalf stating:

> You do amaze her. Hear the truth of it. You would have married her, most shamefully, where there was no proportion held in love. The truth is, she and I, long since contracted, are now so sure that nothing can dissolve us. Th'offence is holy that she hath committed, and this deceit lose the name of craft, of disobedience, or unduteous title, since therein she doth evitate and shun a thousand irreligious cursed hours which forced marriage would have brought upon her.
> (Shakespeare 5.5.197-207)

Although this speech shows Fenton's affection towards Anne and support for her decision to deceive her parents, some scholars question why Anne does not speak up for herself in the last

scene [viii]. Up to this point of the play, Fenton had previously been the least favorable suitor in the minds of Anne's parents and the other suitors. Even Mistress Quickly and Anne Page doubted his objectives and questioned whether he was a viable partner for Anne. This last scene does present Fenton with an opportunity to gloat that he had won over Anne's heart, as Rachel Prusko notes, but he does this in a sincere way by supporting his wife's decisions and putting her parents to shame rather than bragging to the townsfolk of Windsor about his victory. Fenton claims that since Anne's reason for tricking her parents was for love and a desire not to live a miserable life with one of her other suitors, she committed an offense that would be easily forgiven in the eyes of heaven. Juliet Dusinberre supports this notion stating "When the dramatists uphold the love match against the mercenary marriage, as they unfailingly do, they uphold women's values against men's, concluding with Fenton in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, that if a woman escapes the degradation of being bought and sold: 'The; offence is holy that she hath committed'" (Dusinberre 123). No one, even Mistress Quickly who claims to adore Anne, has till this point spoken up for Anne and defended her right to choose her own husband. By speaking on Anne's behalf, Fenton shows that he cares for Anne's well-being and reputation in Windsor; he wants Anne's parents to respect and understand her decision to prioritize her own feelings over who they decided would be the best companion for her. Fenton principally asks Anne's parents to respect her opinion and to see her as a grown woman rather than a doting child. Although Anne could have spoken up for herself again at the end of the play instead of Fenton, her attempt at defending her rights to marry a man of her choosing may have been ignored again since her pleas were already refuted by her mother. Fenton's speech at the end of the play functions to strengthen his relationship with Anne while establishing a better reputation for both himself and Anne as a strong and likeminded couple. Anne, thenceforth, finds a companion who possesses

the same level of intelligence and passion she embodies in her battle to escape the futures planned out by her parents.

Anne's relationship with her parents is strained over the course of the play as they persistently encourage their daughter to marry the suitors they prefer. As I discussed previously, Mistress Page believes she knows best when she decides Dr. Caius would make the best partner for Anne. Mistress Page thinks that Dr. Caius' position in society will help build Anne's own reputation. Her confidence in her match-making skills blinds her, however, to what Anne wants in a future husband. Master Page displays similar behavior, but his purposes for backing Slender center on Slender's wealth and abundance of land rather than his reputation. Juliet Dusinberre notes that Master Page's concerns about both the dowry and Slender's fortune revolve around the concept that "For avaricious father's love is for women and cash is for men" (Dusinberre 123). Dusinberre claims that Master Page's obsessions with what suitor will receive Anne's dowry keeps him from seeing what his daughter ranks most important in a future spouse. Jeanne Addison Roberts observes that there are three men in the play who are greedy: Falstaff, Master Ford, and Master Page. Referring to Falstaff and Master Page specifically, she notes "interestingly Falstaff's greed is punished, not once but three times, while Page's, though of potentially more disastrous consequences, is disappointed but forgiven" (Roberts 73). Roberts argues that Anne marrying an idiotic man such as Slender would cause her more misery than what the other wives would have suffered if they had not planned to humiliate Falstaff. Though Anne and Mistress Page prove to have an adversarial relationship, there seems to be a general lack of communication between Anne and Master Page throughout the play that would indicate any type of relationship they share. When Master Page addresses Anne, he only does it in the presence of company and usually asks her to comply with his wishes, such as leading company

to dinner or pleading with his daughter to "love him (Slender), daughter Anne" (Shakespeare 3.4.63). This detachment with both her mother and father leads Anne to make the hasty decision to disconnect herself from her parents and marry Fenton, thus becoming another merry wife of Windsor.

Anne's marriage to Fenton and her defiance of her parent's orders at the end of the play transitions her status in the small town of Windsor as the Pages' darling child to the third merry wife. Anne demonstrates to the townsfolk in Act 5.5 that she has bloomed into a spirited, independent woman and has left the innocence of childhood behind her. Although the audience is introduced to Anne's character in the middle of this transition, they can conclude through comments made by multiple characters that Anne's status in Windsor at the opening of the play was simply "an attractive prospect to the bachelors of the small Windsor community" (Findlay 15) and a pretty young face who "speaks small like a woman" (Shakespeare 40-41). Anne Page breaks these stereotypes, however, as Allison Findlay points out as she "turns out to be more intelligent and more assertive than this initial pictures suggests" (Findlay 15). Aware that her parents plan to marry her off to different suitors, Anne decides to take control of her own fate as she mingles with Slender, curses to her mother about the idiotic Slender and Dr. Caius, and plots to run away with Fenton, whom she chooses as her husband, while deceiving both her parents and the other two suitors. Jennifer Higginbotham notes that Anne has a "sense of having an active role in her choice of a suitor and a right of participation in the family decision over her betrothal. She does not describe herself as merely acting in a play written by her parents, but as a kind of co-author" (Higginbotham 116). Rachel Prusko adds to this idea stating:

> Parents and potential husbands essentialize Anne: she is the dutiful daughter; the smitten girl in love with a dashing young man; the pretty prop in the staging of an appropriate marriage. But Anne rejects such absolutes. Not only does she rebel

> against her parents' wishes in the choice of a husband, but
> she also intervenes in and destabilizes the norms established for young girls by her parents and community.
> (Prusko 51)

Anne escapes the typecast of a subservient daughter by proving her capability of being independent before her marriage to Fenton in the final scene. Prusko points out that Anne's "rather remarkable capacity for choice and self-fashioning" shows she regards herself as autonomous in regards to planning her future and handling situations. Anne chooses to speak out to her mother in Act 3.4. about her objections in marrying Slender, whom she calls a fool, or Dr. Caius, whom she has no relationship with whatsoever. Jeanne Addison Roberts points out that "Anne Page moves with all the cool clearsightedness of Shaw's life-force to select her mate, blithely dismissing the ineffectual ardor of Slender, and protesting rather than marry Caius she would 'rather be set quick I'th' earth and bowled to death with turnips'" (Roberts 74). Since her protests go unnoticed or are ignored, Anne decides to make a plot that would trick both of her undesirable suitors to run away with young boys instead of her and also humiliate her parents in the presence of the townsfolk of Windsor. Prusko discusses Anne's successful plot stating that by 'using gossip and disguise as cover, Anne, quietly, but effectively, evades the parents and suitors who would determine the course of her life, and displaces herself from their defining narratives" (Prusko 58). Anne essentially creates her own future, presumably makes amends with her parents, and becomes a wife, but only at her own discretion.

Anne's success in gaining independence and her happy union with Fenton at the end of the play constitute Anne as a merry wife of Windsor. Scholars have habitually used the term "wives" when referencing the title of the play to refer to Mistress Page and Mistress Ford exclusively in their works, but there is no indication that the title is limited to only two wives. I argue that Anne Page, who becomes a wife by the end of the play, is also a merry wife of Windsor who succeeds

in achieving her goals of marrying her lover Fenton and gaining independence from her parents. Since Anne's relationship with Fenton embodies favorable relationship qualities such as trust and respect, Anne's marriage to Fenton could be considered the happiest union in the play considering the other wives, for most of the play, trick and deceive their husbands in hope they will receive the respect they think they deserve. Anne, therefore, is a merry wife who feels appreciated and loved by Fenton as he accepts her spirited personality and stands up for her rights to marry the man of her choosing in his final speech of the play. Her success in getting what she desires by the ending scene could even establish Anne as a merrier wife than Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, whose marriage problems are not completely solved by the play's concluding scene. Hence, Anne Page's merriness and her marriage to Fenton justify her connection to the title of the play as an equal, if not merrier, wife of Windsor.

# CONCLUSIONS

All three wives in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* share the stage as strong, independent individuals who demonstrate that women with different personalities can overcome the restrictions of society in their own ways. Mistress Page, although appearing honest in the presence of company, secretly plots revenge on Falstaff and a union between Dr. Caius and her daughter revealing her headstrong personality and assertive nature. Mistress Ford, unwelcomingly pursued by Falstaff and accused of adultery by her husband, defends her reputation using authority and wittiness to fool and humiliate both men in front of company. Anne Page, despite her young age, fights for her independence as she deceives her parents, Slender, and Dr. Caius in order to marry the man of her choosing, Fenton. Shakespeare, thus, created wives who challenge conventional roles, such as subservient wife or doting daughter, proving that women, in the words of Mistress Page, can be "merry, and yet honest too" (Shakespeare 4.2.89).

Shakespeare's description of the wives as merry in the title of the play reveals how he wanted his audiences to view the wives. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word merry had multiple meanings attached to it during the Renaissance. A merry person at the time was generally described as a person "characterized by happiness or joy" ("Honesty"). There were, however, other popular meanings at the time such as "Jocular, humorous, witty" and "Happy, pleased, content" ("Honesty"). Although these definitions seem to share similar connotations, each has a distinct meaning, suggesting that the source of merriment can vary among individuals. The most obvious synonym for "merry" would most likely be happy or joy. Therefore, the play's title would be understood as referring to the happy wives of Windsor. After a close analysis of the wives, however, it becomes clear that these wives only experience

moments of joy when deceiving others or contesting conventional roles. As previously discussed in all three chapters, all three wives possess headstrong personalities and cleverness as they plot against other characters in the play in order to achieve their desires. Therefore, the wives are not cheerful consistently throughout the play which conflicts with the "happy and joyful" definition. Replacing merry in the title of the play with the second and third definitions listed above would be more suitable given the context of the play. Since all three women demonstrate cunning behavior in their own ways, replacing the word "merry" with "witty" would be fitting. The title The Witty Wives of Windsor or The Humorous Wives of Windsor would both be appropriate for describing the wives as the first gives credit to their clever behavior, while the second title acknowledges their knack for planning out comical schemes.

The third definition would indicate that the wives were content and pleased with their positions in society. As discussed in each of the chapters, all three wives keep up a facade in front of company, but reveal their true thoughts and feelings to people they can trust in privacy. If Shakespeare intended to use the word merry in reference to the third definition, then he did so for the intensive purposes of playing on words since the women rebel as a result of dissatisfaction with their current roles in society and, therefore, are not content with their positions in society. The women only feel content once they succeed in carrying out their plots and break away social norms. Shakespeare's choice of the word merry in the title of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, therefore, would most likely either be referencing the wives' witty personalities or their determination to escape the confines of their conventional roles.

Juliet Dusinberre and Charles Frey's discussions about women in Shakespeare plays concerning topics such as authority, adultery, women as property, and chastity illuminate how Mistress Page, Mistress Ford, and Anne Page compare to other Shakespeare heroines.

Dusinberre remarks that "In the sixteenth century the idea that women had consciences which might operate independently from men's, might even judge and oppose the male conscience, was revolutionary" (86). She notes in her analysis that because Shakespeare, along with other Renaissance dramatists, desired his characters to be life-like, "Shakespeare and his fellows asked questions about the nature of women which could not be answered by society's definition of femininity" (231). Shakespeare, fascinated by the human psyche, acknowledged that in order to make his characters relatable to his audiences he needed to gain a better understanding of the differences between male and female thoughts and behaviors, in addition to comprehending a diverse range of personality types among individuals of the same sex. With women in particular, Shakespeare attempted to comprehend how women reacted to the restrictions of society in private spheres and how they challenged these barriers.

Dusinberre notes that Shakespeare's witty woman characters were particularly popular with audiences, stating:

> The influence of Elizabeth's example in combining the untouchability (at least in the myth) of the Virgin Queen with a sharpness which survives in Shakespeare's noble ladies, together with the actual situation of middle-class women in Jacobean society, gave the witty woman noticeable status in the drama (Dusinberre 228).

In addition to the wives in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, other witty woman characters include Kate from *Taming of the Shrew*, Portia from *The Merchant of Venice*, and Rosalind from *As You like It*. Witty women in Shakespeare plays were usually favorable characters because "wit contradicts the male ideal of the silent submissive woman because its nature is combative and verbal" (Dusinberre 227). Witty women, therefore, were entertaining because they challenged men and their authority. Dusinberre's idea that "the husband owns no monopoly of authority, nor the wife of submission" in many Shakespeare plays applies to the wives specifically in *The*

*Merry Wives of Windsor* as they outsmart their husbands and dictate the course of the play with their scheming. Anne Page shares some similarities qualities with Kate as they both reject the suitors selected by their parent(s), but Anne ends up marrying the man of her choosing while Kate, conflicted, ends up marrying a man she initially detests. Anne, therefore, chooses Fenton while Kate learns to cope with her husband Petruchio. Though both women demonstrate wittiness, Anne's decision to deceive her parents and run off with Fenton, I argue, makes her a stronger rebel of male authority than Kate who arguably somewhat submits to her husband's authority by the end of the play. Mistress Page and Mistress Ford also challenge authority within the confinements of their marriages embodying ideas set forth by Puritan secularism such as "offering women an identity apart from their husbands, which made it possible for them to challenge their husband's authority" (Dusinberre 88). Mistress Page challenges her husband's authority by plotting against him in the final scene arranging for their daughter Anne to marry Dr. Caius instead of Master Page's favored suitor Slender. Mistress Ford, aware of her husband's jealousy, deceives and humiliate Master Ford in front of his friends proving that he can't control her actions or behavior. Compared to other witty women in Shakespeare plays, these three wives more openly oppose male authority by taking action against it rather than simply verbally opposing it. You may want to make this para two. It is far too long. Don't begin a new para after an indented quotation as you originally had here.

Although society was evolving during the 16th century, young women were still regarded as property by their parent(s) regarding how little their opinion mattered when they came of age to marry into another family. Dusinberre discusses this issue noting "Under the system of arranged marriage a woman has to reject the world's assessment of her property worth, if she is to keep any human dignity. (124). Charles Frey also discusses this issue in regards to how fathers

treat their daughters in Shakespeare plays when negotiating arranged marriages stating "Shakespeare concentrates upon the perversity of father's claims to direct their daughters' destinies in marriage" (296). Besides Anne Page, other daughters of Shakespeare that are subjected to arranged marriages include Juliet in *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although all three of these women recognize that their status either conflicts or trumps the statuses of their lovers, they reject the men their parents deem suitable for them in favor of sharing a life with the men that make them happy. All three women's fathers pressure their daughters to marry men against their will selecting suitors from an equal or higher ranking class or men they believe possess honor and prestige. These fathers, believing they know best when it comes to selecting partners for their daughters, end up causing their daughters more misery leading them to rebel against their families. Though this ends in tragedy for Juliet, both Hermia and Anne Page end up with the men of their choosing by the end of the play. While Hermia is placed into a predicament dictated by fairies that eventually leads to her marriage with her lover Lysander, Anne controls her own fate by defying her parent's wishes using their plans against them in order to secretly elope with Fenton. Anne Page stands apart from other Shakespeare daughters as she successfully escapes the arranged marriages her parents plan for her and marries her lover Fenton without having to sacrifice anything dead to her. She takes control of her life and, as a result, is rewarded with happiness without sullying her reputation in the town of Windsor.

Mistress Ford, like Anne Page, plots to humiliate others in order to avoid an undesirable fate. Deplorably pursued by Falstaff and accused of adultery by her husband, Mistress Ford desires to uphold her chaste image in Windsor and decides to humiliate both Falstaff and Master Ford in order to draw attention away from the accusations. Dusinberrre discuss the importance of

chastity to women stating, "In the ethics of courtly love, honour is to a man as chastity is to a woman, a condition of life essential to his self-respect and his sense of identity as an individual, but intangible, and dependent not so much on innate virtue as on the reputation for virtue among the men" (33). Desdemona in *Othello,* also accused of adultery, spends her last moments refuting Othello's accusations and defending her chastity. Desdemona's pleas go unheard though as she is murdered by her husband without the opportunity to plead her case in front of others. Her virtue is restored, though, thanks to her friend Emilia who informs Othello as she dies that Desdemona remained faithful to him till the end. Mistress Ford, although accused of adultery by her husband, has the opportunity to protect her reputation without the fear of losing her life. She plots to foil her husband's plans in unveiling her supposed unfaithfulness by remaining one step ahead of his plots ensuring that he ends up humiliated and she keeps her chaste reputation. Chastity to women characters in Shakespeare plays remains a high priority as they struggle continuously with their reputations throughout different plays. A lesson that can be learned from reading many of Shakespeare plays is that a good reputation can be easily sullied, but can be difficult to restore. All three wives in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* fight for both their reputations and their desires, considering them equal in value and unwilling to sacrifice one over the other.

Mistress Page, Mistress Ford, and Anne Page fit in amongst Shakespeare's other headstrong women characters as passionate, assertive, and witty wives. They show that women can be merry, yet humorous and witty too without sacrificing their good reputations or giving up their desires. They embody the values women considered important during the Renaissance, while also revealing the injustices real women faced in a patriarchal society. These wives all stand out as strong independent women who deserve more critical attention in scholarship over the men characters, especially Falstaff, in the play. I was inspired to write this thesis out of the

lack of scholarship dedicated to the wives in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and hope that in the future scholars will consider revisiting this play noting how important the wives' roles are to the play as a whole and analyze how their strong characters compare to other popular women characters in Shakespeare's other plays. There is a need for scholars to revisit the scholarship done on this play and plenty of unexplored topics that have yet to be discussed. I argue that a call for more critical attention centered on analyzing these wives is warranted as their value to the play and to the continued to efforts in analyzing Shakespeare characters is crucial.

# Notes

[i] Scholarship on Falstaff includes include Jan Lawson Hinley in his article “Comic Scapegoats and the Falstaff of The Merry Wives of Windsor,” Anne Barton in ‘‘Falstaff and the comic community,” Hygh Grady in ‘‘Falstaff: Subjectivity between the Carnival and the Aesthetic,’’ Ian Frederick Moulton in ‘‘Fat Knight, or What You Will: Unimitable Falstaff,” and Jeanne Addison Roberts in ‘‘Falstaff in Windsor Forest: Villain or Victim?’’.

[ii] Scholarship includes thematic studies include Maurice Hunt’s article “’Gentleness’ and Social Class in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*” and Colleen Marie Knowlton-Davis’ article "Horned Gods, Horny Men, Witches, And Fairies: Pagan Remnants in Shakespeare's The Merry Wives of Windsor.”

[iii] Other scholars who have stated they have a compatible relationship include Jeanne Addison Roberts and William Green.

[iv] According to the *Oxford Shakespeare Concordances: The Merry Wives of Windsor*, different forms of the word honest are used twenty-eight times.

[v] Critics who commend Shakespeare for his portrayal of women include Juliet Dusinberre, Gayle Green, and Tina Packer.

[vi] Scholars who acknowledge that Anne is a wife at the end of the play include Jennifer Higginbotham and Rachel Prusko.

[vii] Scholars who believe that the laws in Renaissance England do not represent the function of the wife in the family include Mary Prior and Susan Amussen.

[viii] Scholars who question Fenton’s intentions include Rachel Prusko, Peter Grav, and Elizabeth Kolkovich.

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