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# Redefining Virtue in Shakespeare's Merry Wives of Windsor

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Redefining Virtue in Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*

by

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**Introduction:**

Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a play of social justice. It is a staging of the type of power that women can harness in spaces of extreme limitation and violation. The female characters in this play, specifically Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, are able to use tools of oppression meant to keep them subordinate to men to achieve their personal objectives. Their aims are simple: they wish to live quiet lives, make their husbands happy, positively represent their home as good hosts, and carry out an existence too calm to be worthy of the Shakespearean stage. All of this is shattered as a possibility in one moment—the moment John Falstaff pens and delivers two identical love letters suggesting they contravene their marriage and cheat on their husbands. In this essay I wish to show how Falstaff's letters interrupt the Merry Wives' intention to live unobtrusive, contented, and honest lives, thus creating a pressure to find an agency—a way—to protect themselves so that they can prove that they are virtuous. Their efforts to protect their good names to maintain normalcy ultimately exceed their expectations and add to the working definition of virtue to which they adhere. Therefore, The play itself, through the plot, becomes a counter code of conduct for audience members who were familiar with current codes by the likes of authors such as Juan Luis Vives, who would not have approved of the Wives' merriment.

What I aim to do in this work is show how Mistress Page and Mistress Ford transform the definition of Virtue to create a counter code of conduct for women. I will explain the codes of conduct that existed, and the types of expectations that women were required to meet. An understanding of the contradictions inherent in the codes of conduct that existed during original performances of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* will reveal the types of difficult decisions Mistress Page and Mistress Ford had to make when faced with the predicament of Falstaff's slanderous

letters. What makes the Merry Wives unique is that they chose to take an active approach to fighting against injustice, rendering it necessary to analyze their “will” and the ways that they harness “agency” in an effort to protect their good names. By both violating and obeying rules of femininity, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford transcend their initial goal to protect their virtue, changing its definition to include merriment, wit, and even self-defense. The women make a joke out of the men in their space who try to debase them and this proves to be one of their greatest assets for protection and transformation in the play. This shift from a passive “virtue,” to a capitalized and active “Virtue”—one that is accepted by the husbands in the play—was completely antithetical to what was deemed appropriate in society.

Virtue, as it was defined in popular codes of conduct of the time period, was nearly impossible to achieve. Conduct Code books were published with the purpose of creating rules women had to follow in order to maintain a good standing in society; they were a type of “how to” instructional work that provided step-by-step advising. Juan Luis Vives, a leader of the conversation concerning proper feminine behavior, claimed that a woman would be considered debased despite operating in all ways good and pure if her thoughts could be proven sullied. Vives advised women to be chaste in all ways by stating, “Be not proud, maid, that thou art holy of body if thou be broken in mind, nor because no man hath touched thy body if many men have pierced thy mind” (103). In this segment from Vives’ code of conduct for women, even if a woman behaved purely and managed to only think unblemished thoughts, if it appeared—which merely indicates if she were accused—that man had “pierced” her mind then she would not be considered virtuous. The contradiction in this concept lies in the fact that women simultaneously had control and did not have control over their virtue. Analysis will reveal that the Merry Wives are not only fighting against the danger of Falstaff’s letters, but society’s reaction to such an

accusation. The possibility of the knowledge of Falstaff's letters being made public would ruin the merry wives' reputation even if their husbands were to trust that the indictment is false—which would not be the case for Master Ford who behaves impulsively throughout the play as a result of his unwarranted jealousy. Being exposed as women who created doubt even in one person enough for him to make an advance is as convicting as the act itself. This indicates that not only did a woman have to avoid thinking about other men, but she also had to prevent a man from interpreting that she was thinking about him. The impossibility to measure this, made it equally impossible to remain unseen if a man chose to gaze upon a woman in this impure way. Falstaff reveals the fragility of their image. In the backdrop of their lives is the community's suspicion of a women being or becoming a “whore.”

The Merry Wives want to thrive within their patriarchal social order; the last thing they want is to be unjustly defined as “whores.” They truly want to live up to Vives' definition of virtue because it embodies power and standards that the people in their society respect. The women yearn to be in compliance and it is their “will” that compels them to adopt an active approach to protecting their good name. The Merry Wives present the reality that when the structures of power around them make a demand, they will reach that demand by any means necessary, but they will not allow patriarchy to leave them utterly vulnerable and damaged in the process. A good example to connect the Merry Wives to other female characters who did the same is Helen in *All's Well that Ends Well*. In this Shakespearean work, much criticism has befallen Helen as a result of her active pursuit of her desires. She desires to follow the “rules” prescribed by society to gain a marriage to the man that she wants. In order for her to do so, she must also break some of the rules and plan a bed trick that traps Bertram, consummating a marriage between them. Both Helen and the Merry Wives are forced to look outside the limits of

their social structure to also remain within the bounds of social feminine norms. Kathryn Schwarz acknowledges, “Texts such as *All’s Well at Ends Well* revise this misogynist discursive system, imagining women who turn to the structures that define them—patriarchy, hierarchy, romantic comedy—and themselves pose the question: ‘What do *you* want?’” (202). To add to Schwarz’s analysis, not only do the Merry Wives, like Helen, turn to their patriarchal system and ask what it wants, they also show how *they will* deliver. That means that some aspects of Vives’ codes “will” be followed, and others “will” have to be disregarded to reach the objective by their own terms.

In the process of using their “will” to achieve the “wants” of their patriarchal order, the Merry Wives create a shift in the meaning of virtue itself. No matter which body experiences harm from injurious speech, all marginalized groups that have the “will” to assimilate to the impossible standards set by society, rigged with the intention of preventing any real progress, have their degree of non negotiables. These non negotiables are the things that a particular group are not willing to sacrifice no matter how much pain and struggle it experiences. In the Merry Wives’ effort to prove their virtue, they refuse to give up having fun along the way. Their merriment, their wit, is their primary tool to achieve success in this play; thus their repetition of notions of virtue to reach their goal is never a pure repetition because merriment violates Vives’ rules. Mirth gives the Merry Wives agency not only to maintain control of their environment, but also the actions and reactions of the men around them. Judith Butler theorizes about “context” in terms of the way that injurious speech is interpreted by the person to whom it is meant to injure. She explains that “the ‘illimitability’ of context simply means that any delineation of a context that one might perform is itself subject to a further contextualization, and that contexts are not given in unitary forms” (Butler 148). This recontextualization can happen

when injurious words, such as “you are a whore,” which are meant to trap a woman, are repeated and recontextualized to ultimately shift the reality. This shifting creates new spaces that produce a generative force where there was not one initially. For the *Merry Wives*, the generative force created as a result of such a shift is the redefining of Virtue to include that which they were not willing to give up—joy!

The *Merry Wives* refuse to be victims of this social robbery, and they use their bond to create an agency—one which they would otherwise not achieve if they were alone—to reclaim their reputation as “good women” and to retain control for the purpose of remaining in the backdrop of the social landscape—unmentioned and unseen. Their agency comes from understanding the contradictions inherent in their position. Financially, for example “one obvious area of contradiction was the varied ways in which married women performed the roles of provision and exchange nominally expected of their husband” (Shephard 90). Women’s agency, therefore, lay in the cracks of society’s contradictions. Women could remain unnoticed when they worked within these contradictions, which made it a source of agency. My paper will reveal that once the women are attacked with this unwarranted social slander, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford use contradictions as a fuel to guide their jests and move the plot, and it is through these jests that the meaning of virtue is redefined.

Thus the play represents a counter-code of conduct for women in which virtue is represented as: a woman’s right to live unnoticed, a contradiction with cracks in logic that give women the agency to protect themselves, and a multifaceted way of life that includes cleverness and independence from men or society. Through an analysis of *Merry Wives of Windsor*, I will prove that the strategic use of female friendships enables the women to behave in obedience and disobedience to the requirements of a “good” woman (female norms), the demand for a woman

to submit to a man's will (male authority), and the responsibilities of a woman within the private sphere (domestic duties). Through this acceptance and rejection of cultural concepts, the merry wives portray a method of gaining female agency to manipulate situations and turn a mirror towards men, which allows the merry wives to remain safely under society's radar, reject unwanted advances by their own technique, and develop a counter code of conduct for the safety of a woman's virtue. Virtue is redefined in this play because the merry wives use friendship to display new avenues for the protection of female reputation that the system itself lacked. I use the word "display" rather than "create" because the pragmatic approach to protecting virtue in *Merry Wives* was not a new concept, so much as it was an affirmation of the resourcefulness of virtuous women who thrived in Shakespeare's society.

### **Section One: *Merry Wives* as a Counter Code of Conduct for Women**

*Merry Wives* ultimately provides an alternate code of conduct for feminine virtue, one that does not reject action or agency, but which does assert a new way of being virtuous. This counter code of conduct provides a way of living that is more pragmatic, as it humanizes the women who live with the kinds of struggles that Mistress Page and Mistress Ford experience. The Merry Wives complicate Juan Luis Vives' definition of virtue because they show that in order to create the illusion of following some of his rules, those rules must be broken. For example, once Falstaff wrote those love letters to the Merry Wives he in an instant transformed them from living in compliance with the rules of virtue, to being twice in violation of *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*. If their first offense is the accusation of wantonness and an openness to receiving a letter like that from Falstaff, their second offense is being forced to seek support from each other rather than their husbands. As Vives' work states, a woman



must have, “chastity and great love toward her husband. The first she must bring with her forth of her father’s house. The second she must take after she is once entered in at her husband’s door; and both father and mother, kinfolks, and all her friends left, she shall reckon to find all these in only her husband” (112). Falstaff’s letters become an accusation because instead of society investigating the validity of these letters, society would have surely immediately charged the Merry Wives as guilty. The audience knows that the women are innocent, but for the characters in the play Falstaff’s accusation is enough to create suspicion that the women were engaging in unchaste behaviors, even if these behaviors included something as benign as a glance or a clever remark. Also, the Merry Wives end up having to further break Vives’ rule of only looking toward their husband in order to maintain their image once the letters are delivered, which forces them to turn to their friends for support because they literally cannot turn to anyone else for support—least of whom their husbands. This is not to say, necessarily, that the women are in violation of Vives’ definition of virtue because they are friends, but it does show that women could not live strictly by Vives’ code of conduct by only relying on their husbands for support, and be guaranteed a life of good reputation. Once a reputation was challenged, passively looking to a husband would also not guarantee the protection of virtue; women had to be active to protect themselves.

There are women who have already expressed frustration, which paved the way for this play. In fact, writers such as Jane Anger enumerate the reasons why a counter code of conduct was needed. Jane Anger’s essay “Her Protection for Women” is an antecedent to *Merry Wives* that has also spoken in defense of feminine virtue; a compare and contrast of the two reveals that Shakespeare’s work does more than express a frustration, but also shows that a woman is virtuous when she uses her agency to actively protect herself against an attack. Jane Anger

writes, “The Lion rageth when he is hungry, but man railleth when he is glutteth. The Tiger is robbed of her young ones when she is ranging abroad, but men rob women of their honor undeservedly under their noses. The Viper stormeth when his tail is trodden on, and may not we fret when our body is a footstool to their vile lust?” (179). Anger compares animal interactions to violent male behaviors against women: the hungry lion and the wrathful man, the tiger who loses her babies in travel and the man who steals a woman’s honor, and the snake who lashes out and a woman’s reaction when her body is violated in any way by a man. The Merry Wives share this frustration, as expressed when Mistress Ford states “What tempest, I trow, threw this whale, with so many tuns of oil in his belly, ashore at Windsor?” (2.1.56-7). The “whale” in this metaphor is Falstaff, who has interrupted their lives and is now in the way. They are also expressing how unattractive and unappealing he is by saying that he has “tons of oil in his belly.” Part of their anger comes from the audacity that he has, to think that they would ever have an interest in a man as unpleasant as him. In similar fashion to Jane Anger, Mistress Ford’s tone is frustrated, as she uses the violent verb “to throw” in reference to a storm washing a whale to shore. It is also worthy to note that not only do both Jane Anger and Mistress Ford use animal metaphors to describe the violent imposition of male behavior against women, but they also pose these comparisons within a rhetorical question. This further conveys the tone of frustration. The main difference, however, is that Jane Anger and Mistress Ford are directing their questions in two different angles of the same problem. Anger’s question expresses her reaction to being violated as the viper “stormeth” when disrespected, and Mistress Ford’s question speaks to the circumstances that caused her to be violated as she mentions the “tempests” that empowered Falstaff and brought on this issue. Jane Anger is showing how men become angry in the same ways that animals become angry, and both she and Mistress Ford in this example are showing

that women have every right to get angry too. In a way, *Merry Wives* continues the task that Anger's work started by showing how a woman's "will" and "wit" are not only what make her virtuous, but help her channel her anger into something generative to protect her virtue when it is threatened.

The most famous lines of *Merry Wives* reveal Jane Anger's point: female virtue and female wit are two parts of the same whole, and must exist together. After completing their second jest Mistress Page makes a statement that articulates the transformation of the concept of women's virtue: "We'll leave a proof, by that which we will do, wives may be merry and yet honest too." (4.2.99-100). The first half of this moral is often cited in much of the scholarship composed on this play. The word "merry" in this example possesses multiple connotations. "Merry" indicates joyous, as well as clever and cunning, as is seen by the intricacy of their ploys against Falstaff and the lighthearted tone with which these plans are executed. Honesty is a valued feminine norm, and they proved that they might be "honest" and still have moments of being shrewd. The second half of this quote, though not always included in scholastic discussion, is equally—if not more—critical to their point: "We do not act that often jest and laugh; 'tis old but true: 'Still swine eats all the draff'" (Shakespeare 4.2.101-102). The editorial notes for this last line state that this old saying means those who "efface themselves are the real malefactors" (Melchiori 248). Not only can women be merry and honest, but the women who do not defend themselves and behave meekly—women who "efface" themselves by not prioritizing their self-preservation—are the ones who commit the biggest crime, a crime against their own well being. Mistress Page, though in some versions of the play speaks these lines on stage alone, delivers a moral that contradicts what everyone in the audience understands when they consider virtue; Juan Luis Vives would not support this example of virtuous behavior. The merry wives

prove that virtue cannot exist if the ability to be cunning when necessary is not there. The type of agency it takes to be cunning is open to being interpreted as “unchaste” behavior by Vives. The dilemma that the women in the play experience reveal to the audience that there was no better way to protect themselves, and part of what makes a woman virtuous is that ability to protect who she is using merriment, jokes, and cleverness.

Some scholars say that the *Merry Wives* must be at least in part to blame for the treatment they receive from Falstaff, insinuating that such an advance would not have occurred without signs of openness from the women. These scholars hold the *Merry Wives* to a code of conduct resembling that of Vives, and what they do not realize or acknowledge is that Mistress Page and Mistress Ford represent a new code of conduct for women. The *Merry Wives* should have the right to be joking in nature, to share a smile with their male counter parts, or show their intelligence through their witty remarks. The play reconstructs an understanding of female virtue, and because they are successful in transforming their husbands’ view of them by the end of the play they should be interpreted with this new definition of virtue rather than the interpretation of virtue used by scholars who call them too “merry.” Anne Parten, for example, describes their behavior as excessive; though she does not admit support of traditional definitions of “impurity,” she expresses that the *Merry Wives* must have exhibited enough “merriment” to make them culpable. In Parten’s analysis of the shaming ritual in the play, she expresses the following: “the wives have failed—for at least one observer—to project an air of unimpeachable chastity,” which makes humiliating Falstaff necessary to prove their innocence (189). One redeemable aspect of her claim is the insinuation that the women are always on trial, constantly working to prove their virtue; it is continually their job to “project” their perfection to remain out of public discourse. However, she does not acknowledge the impossibility of projecting

perfection, especially when on-lookers have malicious intent. She attempts to argue that Falstaff's letters are a result of the Merry Wives' failure. She believes that the women have to take "some degree of responsibility for Falstaff's bold advances" (Parten 188). Falstaff's fabrication of the two love letters is a result of his desire, not copious merriment of the women in this play. The Merry Wives' treatment of Falstaff, both before and after the threat of his letters, does not indicate that they failed to make their chastity "unimpeachable," but rather that having an "unimpeachable chastity" is proven not by what a man says, but how a woman responds. Their ability to use wit to prove their goodness earns them "unimpeachable" trust from their husbands, and complicates the existing definition of virtue at the time.

Not only did *Merry Wives* provide a clear action plan for women who are attacked by male advances, but it also provided a window of advice on how to deal with their chary husbands. In Act Four, after the women have revealed the truth of their tricks to their husbands, Master Ford states, "Pardon me, wife. Henceforth do what thou wilt:/ I rather will suspect the sun with cold/ than thee with wantonness. Now doth thy honor/ stand,/ In him that was of late an heretic,/ as firm as faith" (4.4.6-9). Throughout the play the women had to act on their will in secret in order to gain the agency necessary to protect themselves. As a result of their wise use of agency, Master Ford has given them permission to act freely on their will in public in the future. Since so little of this play is written in verse, the fact that these lines of Master Ford are in verse adds to the solemnity of his words. After all, Mistress Ford states that they are willing to go so far with their jests as they can without compromising their honesty: "I will consent to act any villainy against him, that may not sully the chariness of our honesty" (2.1.87-9). They successfully instilled trust in their husbands by taking action against injustice without compromising their integrity. Master Ford has so much confidence in his wife that he expresses

he will believe her even when all signs suggest that she might be unfaithful. However, in order for Master Ford to have this firm faith in them, the Merry Wives needed to have the firm faith in themselves first. The women knew that they could not take action that would compromise their honor, but they also knew that because they believed in themselves they could not sit by and allow so much to happen to them without acting any “villainy” against their abuser. Thus, virtue according to the Merry Wives means having faith in oneself to take action against abuse—even if it were a risk—using wit and without violating one’s honesty.

Not only do the interactions and successes of the wives, but other elements of the play’s content, indicate that the plot of the story allows the play to deliver a clear message to the female members of its audience. The setting and storyline of the play is valuable socially because it provides an avenue for reconsidering the concept of virtue during the era in which it was performed. Graham Holderness identifies two ways that this play is different from other Shakespearean works: it has a modern setting with a location close to home, and it was designed for a middle class—rather than upper class—viewership (27). Unlike other Shakespearean cuckoldry plays such as *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello* and even *Cymbeline*, the present time, close-to-home deviation of *Merry Wives of Windsor* creates an opportunity to convey ideas that have strong relatability. It is worth considering the effect of a mass audience—because the number of middle class men and women outnumbered that of the noble class—watching a play about female characters defending their virtue by duping their husbands and assailer. As Holderness suggests, “honesty and virtue remain essential: but here the ‘warrant of womanhood’ seems to extend into a much more proactive communal responsibility to show up and shame the would-be seducer, and to prove that women are actually better at everything than men” (Holderness 32). Mistress Page and Mistress Fords’ actions are not merely to send a moral

lesson and amuse themselves in the process, but to prove something of themselves as well.

Composing a play with a central idea that supports women being cunning to protect their honor provided an alternative way to consider virtue; thus it affirmed its female audience members, who may have related to the need for astuteness in order to maintain good standing in society, and presented a tangible example of an innovative way to think about virtue itself. At the very least, *Merry Wives of Windsor* brought an important conversation to the veritable social table.

To further this idea of the way content in *Merry Wives* informs a discussion of virtue for a working class audience, it is significant that the characters in the play resemble the audience members. Mistress Page and Mistress Ford live comfortably enough that they do not need to engage in everyday housework. Mistress Ford has, for example, someone who is able to do her laundry for the family. However, neither woman is part of a noble class. As Rebecca Olson points out “class is an important element of the unique treatment of jealousy in *Merry Wives*: unlike Shakespeare’s other jealous husbands, Mr. Ford is neither noble nor explicitly associated with nobility,” which means that the way Mistress Page and Mistress Ford handle this jealousy could be a reflection of “the cultural climate in which it was performed” (Olson 176). The codes of conduct of Juan Luis Vives is nothing more than a theory for both working class women like the merry wives and the general audience watching, who do not have the luxury to be passively virtuous because of their daily routines. Exposing that Vives’ conduct book is not necessarily practical, expresses that practicality must be incorporated in a working class—and in all class—definition of virtue.

An indication of the audience for which this play is intended, is revealed in the way the content of *Merry Wives* is commonly staged. In the quarto and folio versions of this play, there are distinct setting differences. Holland references scholar Leah Marcus who noticed that the

Quarto version had more urban descriptions, and the Folio version had more rural ones; Holland continues by stating that the history of set designs “have transformed Shakespeare’s specific depiction of a very small town (little more than a village in our modern sense of its size) on the edge of fields in Folio into a historically vaguer and a more immediately recognizable image of a community, one typified by their conventionalized images of Elizabethan streets.” (8). This is a conscious—or subconscious—insistence to support the urban setting because it hits home. This practicality of virtue is such an important redefinition for members of the urban sphere that staging the play lends itself, and almost insists, that the story is told with this matching backdrop.

Not only does the content allow the play to make a statement about virtue, but the form of the play also provides a redefinition of what it means to be virtuous. In *Merry Wives of Windsor* Shakespeare experiments with a new type of play, the Jonsonian Humors play. One major difference Shakespeare incorporates is the type of dialogue had among his characters. Grace Tiffany acknowledges that all Mistress Page and Mistress Ford speak prosaically in this play, rather than in verse, and their charming and inventive language “like their plots, is ultimately directed toward destruction rather than creation: the puncturing of Falstaff’s silly fantasy of himself as a lover” (256). Tiffany is correct in acknowledging that their language has a destructive power in the play in terms of what it does to Falstaff, and it is worthy to note that this is an element of form that connects to a specific type of play; additionally, their language is generative on the level of what the play is doing in society. The form of the plot, in terms of the style of language, allows the play to redefine the normative definition of feminine virtue.

In addition to the form and content of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* playing a key role in redefining the common definition of virtue during the time period, the comedic genre also subverts common cuckoldry stories, ultimately proving to the female viewers that *real* virtue is



not something that can be taken away unjustly. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* uses the genre of comedy to subvert the common cuckoldry story to “dissolve the anti-feminist tenets of cuckoldry by revealing wives to be faithful, husbands uncuckolded, and lusty would-be paramours foolish, horned and worthily chastised” (St. Pierre 104). In some ways this play is a presentation of empathy, and a declaration that it is possible to right the wrongs of unjust circumstances like the ones faced by Mistress Page and Mistress Ford. Unlike other cuckoldry comedies, *The Merry Wives* creates an end of perfection, in which everything is made perfect because everyone receives what they deserve. This play is able to “believe this anti-feminist stereotype keeping the play free from all suggestions that cuckoldry is something to be feared” (St. Pierre 107). It also shows that virtue, real virtue, is not something that can be taken away unjustly as well. Given the understanding of Shakespeare’s audience, *The Merry Wives* gives an example of one way to counter this anti-feminist stereotype, and male adversaries who compare to Falstaff.

## **Section Two: Invisibility and the Benefits of Living Under the Radar**

Though the Merry Wives redefine virtue in this play, their real goal is to find a way to maintain their current status as women living invisible in society. Living unnoticed and under society’s radar was ideal for women of the time period because it protected them from the threat of public shaming, or death. The ability to live unnoticed created a safe space for a woman to exist without being accosted by any outside forces. *Merry Wives* takes on a unique perspective of the protection of invisibility because the play ends with all loose ends tied neatly together. Unlike other Shakespearean works, “rather than stage a reunion between a once-jealous husband and wife whose “death” he had a hand in,” the play “ultimately reconciles Falstaff with the larger community” (Olson, 175). It is true that *Merry Wives* ends uniquely because the accused women

do not die an unjust death. However, it is not necessarily true that Falstaff is “reconciled” with the larger community. At the end of the play, the Merry Wives are able to turn the tables and shame Falstaff for his attack against them, and the women cause the death of his ego. Unlike the unjust deaths of righteous women in other Shakespearean plays, this play justly kills Falstaff’s pride. They do so by teaching him a lesson. As Mistress Page questions of him after reading his letter, she asks if Falstaff is “one that is well-nigh worn to pieces with age, to show himself a young gallant?” (2.1.17-8). The Merry Wives spend the entire play posing these rhetorical questions in the backdrop of all their actions. Each jest, uses language to jab at Falstaff in a manner comparable to his assault on their honor. They have also called him an “unwholesome humidity” (3.3.35-6), and a “dishonest varlet” (4.2.97). Mistress Page and Mistress Ford’s use of insults is an example of ways the Merry Wives insult him using the type of language that reflects the type of vile accusation he tried to cast in their direction. Since they do not have his male authority. If the Merry Wives were transparent with their husbands at the onset then the two women may have suffered some degree of public shaming. Luckily, by the fortune of having this invisibility, they are not only able to cleverly ask him “who do you think you are?” through their jests, but by the end of the play they no longer need this protection and are able to call him directly a “puffed man” (5.5.151). By the final trick against Falstaff, the women have gained access to some of that male authority in the form of destroying Falstaff’s dignity with audaciousness even more potent than his letters.

In a scene between Mistress Page and Master Ford, Mistress Page is able to support her friend who is physically absent without repercussion. When Mistress Page inquires where her friend is, Ford responds by stating “Ay, and as idle as she may hang together, for want of company. I think if your husbands were dead you two would marry,” to which she responds “be

sure of that-- two other husbands” (3.2.12-5). Mistress Page is responding to Master Ford’s caustic tone. He has yet to say anything positive about his wife up to this point in the play, and Mistress Page retaliates with subtle passive aggression to defend both herself and her friend. Mistress Ford technically invisible because she is physically not there. Mistress Page will not allow Master Ford to say anything that will slander her character and take her out of the socially invisible place where she currently resides due to her good standing as a wife and woman. Master Ford’s comment is only a slight offence, as it is not the type of comment that will cause any major conflict in the plot, but their bond protects both of them in that moment because Mistress Page is compelled to protect Mistress Ford from verbal abuse.

One way that the Merry Wives’ invisibility protects them is by forcing the men around them to seek invisibility. After Falstaff has hidden himself in the buck basket during the first trick, Mistress Ford is able to demand to his servant, without a moment’s hesitation, “Go, take up these clothes, here, quickly. Where’s the cowl-staff?—Look how you drumble! Carry them to the laundress in Datchet Mead; quickly, come” (3.3.135-7). The Merry Wives’ invisibility is an offensive strategy that places the men around them in a defensive position because the women are actually forcing Falstaff to hide. He becomes part of the clothes Mistress Ford demands to have “them”—the dirty laundry—carried out of the house. Whereas the Merry Wives have been victims of objectification, their plan has hidden Falstaff to the point of being disguised as an object. This mastery of the domestic space is part of their invisibility; by contrast of being absent in the public sphere, the Merry Wives have dominated their private sphere and can thus carry out such a trick. Decades of the Merry Wives’ successful inconspicuousness has both protected and prepared the women for this moment. Their wit, greater than Falstaff’s wit, turns

circumstances out of his favor causing him to reach frantically for hiding—an experience had by all the female characters in the play at one point or another.

After the first jest, when Master Ford searches for Falstaff and cannot find him, he too has to hide—he hides his intentions. Once he has entered the home and cannot find Falstaff, he says, “I cannot find him. Maybe the knave bragged of that he could not compass” (3.3.184-5). In this moment the tables are turned away from the Merry Wives toward Falstaff. Ford could not prove that Falstaff was in the house, thus the Merry Wives are free, even if just for the moment. By making Falstaff invisible in the moment when Master Ford is trying to incriminate them, they protect their own invisibility for a little while longer. By this point, Master Ford no longer feels comfortable speaking plainly about his inclination because he has been made a fool, and he proceeds to hide his intentions. When Mistress Ford responds to him by saying “you use me well, Master Ford, do you?” and he responds with “Ay, I do so,” the audience is to understand that he still does not wholeheartedly believe that she is innocent (3.3.187-8). The Merry Wives’ invisibility is powerful because they make themselves impossible to indict in the moment when an assailant wants to blame them. The women have to consistently engage in jests that turn the attention toward the men in this play to protect themselves against further attack, and by doing so they force the men around them hide themselves either physically or emotionally.

Unlike the men who turn to hiding for a quick escape, being invisible gave the Merry Wives a freedom that was hard to hide. Since Mistress Page has lived under the radar and has this freedom, her husband is suspicious of her cheating. The play indicates that she is not someone another man would pursue, as his initial response to hearing about the letter is “why, sir, my wife is not young” (2.1.101). At this point he did not see his wife as worthy to be courted

by another man, and once the possibility infects his mind he cannot handle it. If Mistress Ford is old and not beautiful but still being pursued by another man, then—in Ford’s mind—she is either being unfaithful or there is something about her demeanor that makes her valuable in the eyes of another man. Either way, he is suspicious, as his “why” has been answered by another man. As Jonathan Goldberg points out, Ford’s jealousy with his wife is the result of a fear “that if she is not his she becomes her own; that is, it is as though having sex outside of marriage is having sex with herself” (375). Goldberg’s idea is that because another man desires Mistress Ford she is not fully hidden behind Master Ford. To take this thought one step further, she has a freedom and it comes from having lived under the radar for all this time. She is happy with herself and this is emoted through her merry disposition in the short instances when she interacts with other men as a hostess. Since it is impossible to completely hide her happiness, it is being used against her. The very freedom she has enjoyed threatened her freedom during the play. Having freedom as a result of being invisible became problematic for Mistress Ford once her comfort and confidence made her noticed. Obviously, Falstaff does not understand and believes that Mistress Ford was coming on to him, but what he was picking up on, in reality, was this freedom and inner strength.

Although Mistress Page and Mistress Ford create moments when their male counterparts feel compelled to go into hiding, their experience with Falstaff is proof that a virtuous woman’s ability to live invisibly was fragile. Returning to the moment Mistress Page reacts to Falstaff’s letter, she reflects and asks the rhetorical question, “What unweighed behavior hath this Flemish drunkard picked—with the devil’s name!—out of my conversation, that he dares in this manner assay me?” (2.1.18-21). What this reveals is that Mistress Page understands the severity of the situation. Even though she knows she has done nothing wrong, she immediately reflects on their

experiences and uses the first person “my” and “me” as if her behavior created this reaction in him. Mistress Page is aware that one stipulation of living a life under the radar is the threat that any word shared with another man is open to his interpretation. If a man interprets a simple conversation to be a lecherous advance, then her status as invisible is severely compromised with minimal options to protect herself in a way that allows her to return to her status as invisible. Furthermore, by describing Falstaff as a “Flemish drunkard” she reveals that a woman can become impure by public perception as a result of an impure man’s ill intentions.

Regardless of this contradiction between the standard set for achieving invisibility and the means to maintain invisibility, the Merry Wives were not only aware of this contradiction, but they wanted to live up to this standard anyway because it afforded them an easy freedom. As Mistress Page continues to reflect on her interaction with Falstaff that may have caused him to get the wrong impression of her she states, “why, he hath not been thrice in my company! What should I say to him? I was then frugal of my mirth—heaven forgive me!” (2.1.21-24). These lines do two things for the audience: they provide a truthful encounter between Mistress Page and Falstaff because she makes these statements on stage alone, and characters are usually honest when they are speaking to themselves; also, it shows how deep is her understanding of this “freedom” that is now in jeopardy. The use of the exclamation point after “Company!” indicates an emphatic tone. She is frustrated because there is a lot at stake in this; her emotionally charged reaction shows that she has something to lose. When she makes this cry for forgiveness, what she is really crying for is mercy. One could read this line with even a twinge of irony. The irony is that even in such an unjust moment she is policing herself the way society polices her. By reflecting on how “frugal” she was of her “mirth” she is trying to answer her own question, “what should I say to him?” to set the stage for her defense. She is putting herself,

for an instant, on trial to defend herself even though she is well aware of her innocence. If Mistress Ford's words are interpreted as a call for mercy, and a frustration with the result of trying and failing to protect this freedom, what mistress Page and mistress Ford decide to do in an effort to restore their invisibility reveals why it is ideal in the first place.

The Merry Wives were invisible, but not lonely, and they had a better chance of sustaining a life of invisibility because of the friendships they formed with other women who lived under the radar as well. Women who were considered virtuous because they remained unnoticed were part of an underground society that only allowed membership those who were also unacknowledged by the greater patriarchal community. For example, women who were able to progress through the stages of their life successfully enough to be married, upkeep a home, and grow a family were given admittance to this sub-society where times and spaces allowed them to be alone in the company of other women. In his study of Women in early modern England, Bernard Capp notes that “a circle of close friends, or ‘gossip network,’ was almost essential for the smooth running of the household” and “women turned constantly to their friends and neighbors for advice or assistance, making the home a social as well as domestic space, and would linger to exchange news whenever they met acquaintances in the street, shop, or market” (Capp 51). In this way women had their own type of sisterhood, fully equipped with secret spaces in private to communicate, and public codes of behavior that allowed them to “linger” in public spaces to share news. Therefore, this invisibility provided space for sociability with other women—a membership that was desirable because it was necessary. *Merry Wives* creatively depicts Capp's concept in a particular moment when The Fords and the Pages are together in the beginning of the play. Ford gives his wife an attitude, and Mistress Ford acknowledges his attitude and shares an aside with Mistress Page after being invited to the Page

household for dinner. Mistress Page privately says to Mistress Ford on stage, “Look who comes yonder: she shall be our messenger to this paltry knight,” to which Mistress Ford responds, “Trust me, I thought on her: she’ll fit it” (2.1.142-146). The women are speaking of Mistress Quickly. This scene is short, but significant because it shows the audience exactly what Capp is talking about in terms of female networks. Aside from their husbands, the women are each other’s allies in the public sphere. In this scene Master Ford has just given his wife a strong attitude in front of Page and Mistress Page, and although Mistress Ford responds to her husband, it hardly bothered her. She and her friend are so engrossed in their own thoughts, and the benefit of their invisibility is displayed publically on the stage for the audience to understand. Mistress Ford does not need to stress over what her husband is feeling because she and her friend are devising a plan in secret to rectify their current situation.

The friendship between Mistress Page and Mistress Ford exists in the contradiction that in order for a woman to be part of this underground networking community of female bonds she must also be virtuous by proof of absence in the larger networking male community. The play makes use of the first interaction between Mistress Page and Mistress Ford to reveal this tension. Mistress Ford enters the stage distraught and after Mistress Page inquires what is bothering her she states, “O, woman, if it were not for one trifling respect, I could come to such honour!” (2.1.38-39). Mistress Ford’s panic comes from the “trifle” of Falstaff’s letter, which now challenges her “honour.” It is also a verbal irony in that being courted by a knight is traditionally supposed to be an “honour.” Only Mistress Page could provide such comfort, as from the following response: “Hang the trifle, woman, take the honour! What is it? Dispense with trifles: what is it?” (2.1.40-41). The bold sarcasm used between the two women shows the emotional benefit of having this female network. Below the sarcasm is the real fear of this



threat, and the humor gives the audience the sense that the women are worried, but confident; this double emotional valence shows that the situation has the potential to be incarcerating, but because of this tension it can also be freeing. It is a moment when the women can be themselves, using their wit while also grappling with this incredible fear. This initial interaction, therefore, sets the tone for the remainder of the play because it shows the audience that this female bond is sourced from invisibility. Their cleverness is what they use to complete their jests, their jests could only occur as a result of their bond, their bond could only come from their good standing in society, and their good standing in society could only come from their ability to remain under the radar for all these years.

Invisibility also provided choice for the Merry Wives because it gave them the ability to decide to take revenge in the form of playful jests. Under the auspices of their invisibility, the merry wives are able to privately make a pact to fight back against Falstaff. Mistress Page says, “let’s be revenged on him” (2.1.83). The women are able to decide to act on their desire to rectify the wrongs they receive in the form of revenge. The men in this play, Falstaff and Master Ford in particular, have an obvious independence, and they do not have the same restraints as their female counterparts. However, the play indicates that so long as the merry wives live under the radar, they are able to maintain a level of self-sufficiency that not only prevents them from relying on other men to live—as they do not recruit male assistance in their revenge—but transcends what the status of a virtuous woman looks like. Their invisibility is the catalyst for their tenacity, their urge to solve the problem without their husbands’ support. If Falstaff had made his letters public, the women would have been robbed of their choice, and solving their problem self-sufficiently may have been more difficult, if not impossible. This is proven by

Master Ford's reaction to the gossip of these letters. He does not feel comfortable outright attacking his wife, so he feels compelled to make plans to lock up his wife.

Another benefit of invisibility is that it granted more time when needed. This need to be invisible in order to acquire more time to make decisions is not an unheard of action for women in Shakespeare's plays. In *Twelfth Night* a ship wrecked Viola finds herself in a challenging situation after learning that her father has died and her brother is missing in action. Her declaration is an "if only I could be invisible" type of statement as she says she wishes she could become a servant and "might not be delivered to the world, / Till I had made mine own occasion mellow, what my estate is" (1.2.39-41). She ultimately resigns to disguising herself as a male servant for Count Orsino. Viola desired invisibility to have the chance to come up with a plan to manage her current destitute status, and this disguise is the vehicle, which allows her to do so. Similar to Viola, the Merry Wives also need this invisibility so that they can gain time to plan their tricks. If Viola's mechanism to achieve this is her physical disguise, the Merry Wives' agent is their friendship; their friendship is what helps them use their invisibility to access more uninterrupted planning time. Their bond, their invisibility, and their plans are all connected.

Proof of this friendship giving the Merry Wives more time occurs when Master Ford talks to Master Page about the accusation. When Master Ford asks him if he heard about the letters, Master Page responds with "I do not think the knight would offer it, but these that accuse him in his intent towards our wives are a yoke of his discarded men-- very rogues, now they be out of service" (2.1.156-9). Though this does not seem like a direct defense of the Merry Wives, it is important to note that Master Page does not for an instant think that the accusation against the women could be true. His lack of a reaction is telling. And this reaction stems from the trust he has in his wife. When Master Ford pushes his thinking by asking what he would do if the

letters were real, Page continues to respond by saying “I would turn her loose to him, and what he gets more of her than sharp words, let it lie on my head” (2.1.165-167). Though this is an obtuse way of looking at Master Page’s belief that *both* the Merry Wives are innocent, what he believes is true for his wife is also what he believes could be true for Mistress Ford. As he says earlier, the ill “intent” comes from Falstaff’s side of the conflict. Nothing in Master Page’s tone indicates any guilt or doubt in the wives. Due to the fact that the Merry Wives have lived good and honest lives, their friendship has been able to develop in the time spent under society’s radar. With this close friendship, Master Ford is unable to incriminate his wife in a conversation with Master Page. Master Page is not convinced that his wife would ever cheat on him, and with that he is also not strongly convinced that Mistress Ford would cheat either. Mistress Ford receives Master Page’s trust by extension of his trust in Mistress Page, and their bond is what allows them to maintain this invisibility to plan their first trick.

In the lapse of time in which Ford undergoes this disguise and has a conversation with Falstaff, the audience can make the inference that the Merry Wives have used this gap to devise their first jest. Upon finishing his conversation with Page, Ford states: “Well, I will look further into’t, and I have a disguise to sound Falstaff. If I find her honest I lose not my labour. If she be otherwise, ‘tis labour well bestowed” (2.1.213-216). While it is true that the Merry Wives have to go to great lengths to protect themselves throughout the play, their good standing and friendship at this point in the play forces Ford to first test his doubts in secret. By the time the next act begins, the Merry Wives have received ample time to prove that Ford’s labour was *not* “well bestowed,” as noted from his failure to convict his wife in the first plan. Thus, their friendship provided time and opportunity to divert their male counter parts—in this instance, Master Ford—and devise well constructed and clever plans.

### **Section Three: Agency as a Mode for Preserving and Redefining Virtue**

The Merry Wives use their bond to protect their virtue, and redefine virtue to accommodate the following: wittiness, friendship, and assertive rejection of a man's inappropriate advances. The women use their will to harness an agency that allows them to maintain and transform their circumstances. Turning again to Schwarz, understanding the power of a woman's "will" she explains, "As the faculty that realizes abstract designs, will exemplifies the doubled and divided nature of agency: it functions both as a useful tool and as an independent, potentially renegade force" (2). "Will," as Schwarz illuminates, is the "faculty" of the Merry Wives' agency because they have the inherent urge to maintain their good name as virtuous women and by possessing that desire they ultimately transform the meaning of virtue to include wit, friendship, and playful rebuffing of male advances. Their agency has a "doubled" nature because the power they develop throughout the play grows simultaneously from their compliance with standards of virtue and from each jest; their definition of virtue becomes a "force" to be reckoned with by the end of the play as a result of their new power to openly use their cleverness, female relationships, and playfulness to reject Falstaff's audacious advances.

The Merry Wives take action every chance they get despite their husbands, and this is made evident from the inception of their plan. When the women first encounter each other with the letters they are livid, of course, and know that they have to do something when they see their husbands approaching from a distance. As they see their husbands approaching they withdraw as Mistress Page says, "Let's consult together against this greasy knight. Come hither" (2.1.96-7). Though simple, this statement is the first action the women take against Falstaff in the play. In that moment they had to make a decision as to whether they were going to approach

their husbands and tell them the truth, drop the matter and hope it goes away, or conspire as a team to come up with a plan of action to fight against the injustice. Agency is a tool, and they choose to actively pursue their wishes. When Mistress Page says “Together” it is a specific partnership—one that does not include their husbands. When she adds “come hither” she is removing the two of them from male presence, which is a physical act that supports their plan to remove the marring of their virtue by Falstaff’s letters.

Agency is also a tool when the women engage in their private asides while in the midst of their husbands. The audience sees that the women only share with their husbands what they want to, and between each other they process their next moves. In Act 2 when the women greet their husbands, Master Ford greets his wife with such negativity. When Mistress Ford asks why her husband is melancholy he snaps back at her as he responds defensively, “I melancholy? I am not melancholy. Get you home, go” (2.1.13-8). Though Mistress Ford tells him that he has “some crotchets in thy head now” her focus on his temperament is of little interest to her. Immediately after this dialogue with her husband, Mistress Page shares an aside with Mistress Ford and whispers, one imagines, “Look who comes yonder: she shall be our messenger to this paltry knight,” which Mistress Ford confirms is a good idea (2.1.142-4). This shows that the women are only mildly interested on what is occurring with their husbands in that moment because their minds are fixed on their plan. Their asides show their agency because they are emotionally disconnected from Master Ford’s verbal violence and they are wasting no opportunity—even one that requires them to plan in front of their spouses—to exert their will.

Agency is their powerful tool when they combat injustice with cunningness, using the proper conversations with the proper people to ensure that their plan unfolds to the degree they need. The Merry Wives interact with Robin, Falstaff’s servant, in a way that makes him feel

favored. Mistress Page is complementary to Robin, even flirtatious, to draw him into her and their plan of action against his master. When Robin reaches Mistress Ford's house before the first trick she calls him a term of endearment: "You little Jack-a-Lent, have you been true to us?" to which he responds, "Ay, I'll be sworn. My master knows not of your being here, and hath threatened to put me into ever-lasting liberty if I tell you of it; for he swears he'll turn me away" (3.3.23-28). Mistress Page has been able to win over Robin with her kindness, her merriment. Robin is responding to Mistress Page's wishes as if she were his master, revealing how potent of a force is their agency because once she uses her active kindness it becomes something evergreen. Robin is willing to take the chance of getting caught and being put to death by Falstaff. Mistress Page's pleasant conversation with Robin created a relationship that is now working itself in her favor. This highlights that kindness and merriment mixed with the active pursuit of one's goals is the best combination to inspire people to action.

Flirtatiousness is even a rhetorical strategy the Merry Wives use to propel action in their jests. The women are constantly able to manipulate Falstaff in all three of their jests, as he is the person who deserves to be manipulated. When Falstaff enters Mistress Ford's home for the second time the staging of Mistress Page and Mistress Ford shows the rhetorical strategy that make their agency a tool. Falstaff has just asked if Mistress Ford's husband is nearby and she responds with, "He's a-birding, sweet Sir John" (4.2.7). Mistress Page is hidden somewhere on stage and says within so that only the audience can hear "what ho, gossip Ford, what ho!" (4.2.8). What the language and staging shows in this scene is strong strategy. Language is a tool in this scene, as Mistress Ford's use of the term of endearment "sweet" is just the type of emotional language that will feed into Falstaff's belief that she wants him, and Mistress Page's act of essentially cheering on her friend in the background tells the audience that they are

carrying out the plan well. In this scene their agency turns from a tool to a force beyond their control when Master Ford actually does come to the house and the women have to disguise Falstaff as the Witch of Brentford. Once their jest picks up in momentum it takes on a life of its own and the women are no longer using their rhetoric to move the plan, but rather to keep it in the direction in which they want.

Ironically, the Merry Wives are willing to question their own honesty to build a case in favor of exerting their will in this play. This is evident in Act 2, when Mistress Page questions herself by stating, “It makes me almost ready to wrangle with mine own honesty. I’ll entertain myself like one that I am not acquainted withal. For, sure, unless he know some strain in me that I know not myself, he would never have boarded me in this fury” (2.1.75-80). Mistress Page defines herself to be so true, that she is ready to “wrangle” with her conscience, to question if there is something subconscious that she may have done that put her in this position. If she were dishonest then there would be nothing to reflect upon because she would be well aware of the “strain” that caused his pursuit. Furthermore, her use of the nautical term “boarding” conveys the imagery of piracy, which conveys that his love letters are a violation and a form of robbery. This feeling of violation, and its resulting self-doubt, is the fuel that drives their will in this play. The truth of their faith, and the fact that his attempt to take their good name incites a “fury” inspires them to protect their virtue by any means necessary. The source of the Merry Wives’ *will* comes from this irony that they are *willing* to stage a defiance of male authority in order to comply with the rules of proper female conduct; in this way they both are and are not virtuous. In their commitment to being faithful, they prove that when presented with a requirement to which they consent they *will* maintain that standard by any means necessary. The

attack on their virtuous lifestyle is what creates their will to advocate for themselves in the face of injustice.

The merry wives act in compliance with virtue and against his incursion into their privacy to teach Falstaff a lesson, stemming from their *will* to embody ideals of female conduct. Once Falstaff violates them they feel the urge to do more than exemplify these codes of conduct; they wish to also make an example out of Falstaff because it is unjust, criminal and manipulative. Pistol understands Falstaff's skewed perception of Mistress Ford, as he says of Falstaff's description: "He hath studied her well, and translated her will-- out of honesty into English" (1.3.46-7). The pun on "well" and "will" could mean that Falstaff studied her "will" closely and "translated," or converted, her "will" from honesty to lasciviousness. There is another possible pun "on English and the verb 'ingle' meaning 'to cuddle': Falstaff has transformed Mistress Ford from an honest woman" into one who is "responsive to his advances" (Melchiori 148). In this beginning scene Pistol is not agreeing with Falstaff's description of Mistress Ford as a lewd woman, but he is able to acknowledge what Falstaff is doing to Mistress Ford's "honesty." As a result of Falstaff's male authority and delusion he felt comfortable slandering Mistress Ford in front of other men. The Merry Wives are driven to deliver the message that Falstaff cannot translate their will and destroy their image on a whim.

They not only wish to set the record straight and prove that they are virtuous, but they also want to ensure that Falstaff never approaches a woman in this way in the future. The women say before their first trick, "we'll teach him to know turtles from jays" (3.3.36-7). In the editorial notes "turtles" is a representation of faithfulness and "jays" represent immoral behavior and "looseness" (Melchiori 215). The text indicates that the Merry Wives are teaching him a general lesson about women in terms of how to "know" a certain category of women, making the



lesson bigger than simply themselves. Thus, they also have the will to use rhetoric as a tool to ensure that Falstaff never tries to do something like this again in the future. If we consider further the ways that their “will” is both that tool and a renegading force, their intentions are for the protection of all women. They are renegades in that their will connects to social justice.

When Falstaff puts them in this predicament, the Merry Wives use his language as the material to harness their agency. For example, when Mistress Page states, “If he come under my hatches, I’ll never to sea again. Let’s be revenged on him. 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” she has internalized his attack and made the decision to respond in an enabling way (2.1.82-87). Her initial response is not to be a victim, but to be “revenged.” She also plans to show him “comfort” and “lead” him in the direction of their choice. She adds that they will manipulate him until he has “pawned his horses,” which means that they will get him to give up something of significance to him, just as he is trying to get them to forfeit their virtue. The Merry wives are hurt by his attack, but they are not stymied by it. In her work *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Judith Butler theorizes that when someone says something hurtful, “The injurious address may appear to fix or paralyze the one it hails, but it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response” (2). When one individual attacks another verbally, there is something positive that can come from the victim; in fact, the victim of this offense has the choice of whether she wishes to be a victim by silently accepting the attack, or not be a victim by responding to the attack in some way. Though Falstaff’s love letters have the potential to do great harm to the merry wives, they are able to create something generative from their ill-treatment by turning the attack into an empowering force. His assault “enables” the women to demonstrate their agency. The play supports the rhetorical notion that

“the gap that separates the speech act from its future effects has auspicious implications” (Butler 15). On the level of the plot, because the women were able to use their mistreatment to gain agency, that “gap” between the time when they were slandered and the moment when they revealed the truth to their husbands created a space for positive future relationships. The women were able to solidify their innocence--surpassing their intentions--as a result of having their innocence threatened. Thus, their virtue is preserved and transformed not only because they had the will to do so, but because they obtained the agency by needing to make the choice to act on their attack rather than simply receive it.

At times the Merry Wives are able to preserve their virtue by simultaneously obeying and disobeying the social paradigms of the time period. For example For example, during their second jest Mistress Ford says to Master Ford when he storms in to check the buck basket, the place where the Merry Wives hid Falstaff during the first trick, “God be my witness you do, if you suspect me in any dishonesty,” to which he demands “Well said, brazen-face, hold it out!—Come forth, sirrah!” and when he finds nothing in the basket and she asks him “are you not ashamed? Let the clothes alone” (4.2.125-131). When she says that God will be her witness if he finds any “dishonesty” she is being both honest and dishonest. She means “honesty” as in her honesty as a faithful wife, but in reality she is also being “dishonest” by having Falstaff hidden somewhere else in her home. When she asks him if he is “ashamed” for his behavior, she is indicating shame as it relates to believing that his wife would cheat, but she understands that the buck basket was a critical part of the previous jest. In this scene Mistress Ford shows that the Merry Wives will reach the demands of their society by any means necessary, understanding that at times they will have to move around their parameters to stay within them. Mistress Ford was aware that feminine norms included being passive to their male counterparts, submitting to male

wishes, and elevating male status by supporting male authority; thus, she could not tell her husband no when he demanded that she “come forth” with what he ordered. Conversely, they also knew that male norms allowed men to behave impulsively, give directives, and react to their emotions, making it impossible to respond to match his tone aggressive tone when he calls her “brazen-face.” It is difficult to fully follow a code of “normal” feminine behavior, when “normal” male behavior could leave a woman susceptible to all types of abuse. In this scene Mistress Ford protects herself by giving Master Ford what he wants and also keeping from Master Ford what she also knows he wants—to know where Falstaff is—to deliver a strong message about her honor.

In their first jest, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page have two minds in sync as they carry out their plan,. Their understanding of each other, as well as the private sphere provides the perfect circumstances to follow and break domestic rules for the purpose of putting Falstaff in his place: among a pile of dirty laundry. When Falstaff comes to Mistress Ford’s house for the first time, and the women are fully engaged in their jest, they practically finish each other’s sentences as they move from the first stage of the trick to the second. When it comes time to bring out the basket of laundry that Falstaff will hide in, all Mistress Page has to say is “Quickly! Quickly! Is the buck-basket—” to which Ford interjects, “I warrant.—What, Robert, I say!” (Shakespeare 3.3.2-3). Their relationship with each other renders full sentences unnecessary, demonstrating how in tune they are with one another. By both of them having a deep understanding of this shared space and manipulating the domestic sphere in this way, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford are able to use their friendship to mock Falstaff unmercifully. They make such a fool out of him in this scene that he is both physically and metaphorically turned into a piece of dirty laundry that is sent away to be washed clean. The

message here is that he is a greasy man with equally soiled intentions, and these women are using their friendship to cleanse him of his filthy ways. Successfully finishing part one of their tricks with these subtle witty articulations provides a clear example of how strong friendship is an asset to maintaining virtue, which Vives' conduct codes did not include.

The Merry Wives make a mockery of Falstaff, and other men in this play, to show that a major part of virtue is not only friendship, but wit as well. Natasha Korda explains well part of the female focus in these jests against Falstaff by acknowledging that their task in this play is greater than simply proving Falstaff's love letters are fake. She states that although the "aim of the wives' schemes of revenge is to punish Falstaff for his wantonness, it becomes clear that the greater ideological burden of their task is to prove that their gaze is sufficiently disciplined" (Korda 93). Korda makes an excellent point here, showing that the wives have not given Falstaff the leer of invitation. To extend her analysis further, the women are doing more than simply proving that their gaze is "disciplined." They are challenging the discipline that is being questioned by using their mastery of the private space to make a joke of the attacker. The women already know that they are virtuous. They also know the run of their household. By tricking Falstaff in a way that uses materials within their household, the women prove that not only do they understand that they have been put in the extenuating position of proving that they are not guilty of what Falstaff is accusing, but that they also understand the dynamics of the spheres of their society more than their male counterparts. The women dupe all the men in this play within the household, which shows that their virtue lies in the fact that they have a self-awareness that is greater than their male counterparts. This self-awareness is not only what inspires their will, but also enables them to employ the wit needed to wield their agency to protect their virtue, thus showing that this wit is an essential component of virtuousness.

In the Merry Wives' second jest against Falstaff, the women use their cleverness to create a matrix of male authority. When Falstaff is disguised as a woman Master Ford is able to wield his male authority and inflict bodily harm. He even identifies the disguised Falstaff with characterizations that he does possess, stating "out of my door, you witch, you rag, you baggage, you polecat, you runnion...I'll conjure you, I'll fortune tell you!" (4.2.174-6). In the version of the play edited by Giorgio Melchiori, it stays in the notes that a "rag" is a worthless person, a "polecat" is a type of whore, and when he says he'll "conjure" him it means that he will trick him (252). In this parodic scene Master Ford is using his power against Falstaff who, though male, is abused only because he is disguised as a woman. Using this technique of publically submitting to male authority allows the merry wives to turn the structure of male authority on itself. The Merry Wives have used their wit as a tool, and it turned into a force beyond their imagination. They turned patriarchy on itself because one leader of the system is unknowingly attacking the other. The Merry Wives' exertion of female wit shows that their will can cause harm without them having to wield physical force. It became a force that incited Master Ford's aggression not against them, but against the exact man they wished to see receive his due treatment. Ford delivered the punishment that they could not administer themselves in that moment.

In this scene the Merry wives' cleverness also exposes how abusive the patriarchal system of society could be toward women, and privileging toward men, which made wit necessary to maintain virtue. When the merry wives dress Falstaff as the Witch of Brentford, the way their plan unfolds creates a situation in which Master Ford is able to give a disguised Falstaff the type of physical reprimand that he does not feel confident doling out when Falstaff is undisguised. Compellingly, when Master Ford wishes to speak to Falstaff directly about his wife, he can only do it when he is disguised as another man. Even while disguised as Brook,

Master Ford is not comfortable revealing his true feelings about Falstaff's pursuit of Mistress Ford, as upon hearing about the situation with the buck-basket he states, "In good sadness, sir, I am sorry that for my sake you have suffered all this" (3.5.114-5). His apology is an act to save face in the presence of another man, which leads to the question of why Master Ford feels the need to behave so condoling to Falstaff at all. Ford is willing to put Falstaff's suffering equally to his own, at least in his interaction with him, in order to protect his pride and hide his shame as an alleged cuckold. Ford is completely different when speaking to Falstaff as a man and when addressing him under the pretense of being a woman. Furthermore, Falstaff is so unacquainted with the amount of intelligence and "merriment" needed to survive as a woman that he is not prepared for the beating, nor does he know how to save himself from the abuse. In this scene patriarchy is turned on itself, showing how unsuccessful it is as a system and revealing how important it was for a woman to have enough wit to live a virtuous life.

The "Witch of Brentford" scene is an example of the manifestation of the Merry Wives' wit, but it is not an example of maliciousness. The women do have a desire to get their revenge on Falstaff, but the kind of punishment Falstaff received by Master Ford was greater than they expected to occur. There are scholars who have interpreted the Witch of Brentford scene as one in which the women put Falstaff in this position premeditatedly. Kristen Uszkalo buys into the idea that the women in *Merry Wives* have intentions that are not entirely innocent. Uszkalo states that "Mistress Page and Mistress Ford time Falstaff's arrival home. Under the auspice of protecting him from the furious Ford, they dress Falstaff as a witch" (25). While all of this is true, there is no indication that the Merry Wives had the intention to incorporate Master Ford into their second jest. Although they incorporate Master Ford in their plan once they know he is on his way, there is no indication that the women had intentions for their trick to unfold as it

did. Once the women receive word that Master Ford is on his way they rush Falstaff into women's clothing, but when Mistress Ford asks her friend, "But is my husband coming?" Mistress Page responds, "Ay, in good sadness he is, and talks of the basket too, howsoever he hath had intelligence" (Shakespeare 4.2.86-88). If the women timed their trick, would they need to talk about whether or not Master Ford was actually on his way? Would they not know this already? The way this second plan was executed does not seem to be entirely premeditated. This shows that the women are clever, and they are flexible; it shows that they are angry and willing to put Falstaff in compromising positions for the sake of carrying out their plan, but it does *not* indicate that they are malicious. Their action in this scene is a testament to wit showing virtue, not a marring of their character.

The Merry Wives' show their virtue as good and faithful wives throughout the play, and they show that virtue and playfully rejecting male advances can go hand in hand. For my purposes, the word "advance" could be Master Ford's jealous advances to incriminate the merry wives, or Falstaff's lustful advances throughout the play. In the second scene of the fourth act of the play, when Mistress Page and Mistress Ford ultimately decide to confess to their husbands their jests, they show the playfulness with which they rejected Master Ford's jealousy throughout the play. If they kept this jest to themselves not only would they have shared a good laugh privately amongst each other, but they would also have been confident that Falstaff will not bother them further. This should be enough satisfaction, as their goal was to protect their virtue, after these two jests their good names are still in tact. With regard to Falstaff, Mistress Page states with confidence, "the spirit of wantonness is sure scared out of him" (4.2.198-9). Falstaff should be too scared to approach them with lustful advances again. However, the women decide to tell the truth of their ruse to their husbands. When Mistress Ford asks if they should confess,

Mistress Page says, “yes, by all means, even if it be but to scrape the figures out of your husband’s brains” (4.2.204-5). When she says “by all means,” that indicates an assuredness, as if it is the morally correct action to take and the one that she planned to do all along. Doing so “even” if just to “scrape the figures” out of their “husband’s brains” indicates that the women have done a good job of developing the jealousies in at least Master Ford’s head, and part of what they would have to “scrape out” or mend would be the heightened suspicion that their jests ultimately put in there to begin with. Since the husbands should not have had the jealousy, and the doubt, at the beginning of the women have had fun not only tricking Falstaff, but tricking them as well. Furthermore, by deciding to tell their husbands their plan they are able to incorporate them in Falstaff’s rejection. It is their playfulness that conforms the community to their will, which shows that part of what makes a woman virtuous is her playful rejection of unwarranted jealous advances-- jealous advances in this instance.

Not only do the merry wives demonstrate the power of their will and redefine their virtue by playfully rejecting their husbands’ jealous advances, they also emote the enjoyment from rejecting Falstaff. They use their agency to put Falstaff in compromising positions in each of their jests, and once the whole community joins in for the final trick they are able to finally able to reject him out in the open. While in the forest, as Falstaff is disguised as a male deer with horns, Mistress Ford turns down Falstaff in his most vulnerable moment as she says “Sir John we have had ill luck, we could never meet. I will never take you for my love again, but I will always count you my deer” (5.5.116-8). These lines are full of irony. The women did have “ill luck” at the beginning of the play by receiving his letters, and in their two earlier jests they actually did have to “meet” them; there is a possible double meaning of the word “meet” with a possible sexual insinuation of never having a sexual encounter with him. For her to say that she will



never take him as her love “again” addresses his convoluted belief that there was a fire in her heart for him to begin with. Also, to always think of him as her “deer” may address his horns, as she will always see him as a cuckolded! The verbal irony in these lines has a playfully aggressive tone, rejecting him without pain or anger, but still achieving the efficacy they wanted. With the entire community supporting their efforts, the merry wives reshape the definition of virtue by showing that a highly effective way to make their virtue constant is to use playful measures that include the community because it sends the message to their accoster and the crowd that they are victors of their circumstances, not casualties. Had the women used a somber tone to tell Falstaff how they felt, they would have delivered the idea that women whose virtue is challenged are victims of circumstance, rather than agents of change and guardians of their good names.

**Conclusion:**

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* a powerful a credo, a declaration, for all women; this was true for its original performance during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and it reigns true today. Just because a person feels victimized, does not mean that she has to be a victim; one can feel violated, but one does not have to be violated; one can feel fearful, but one does not have to be fearful. Conduct codes of the time period operated on a system of fear. If a woman wanted to have virtue the expectation was for her to manage circumstances that were far beyond her control. These codes used fear as its primary motivating force, and this force incarcerated. The Merry Wives provide their own code of behavior and it does more than motivate through fear; as with all good coaches, it instructs women to use what they receive—victimization, violation, fear—and harness negative energy to reaffirm their virtue and redefine what it means to be virtuous. The

tools used to oppress them must also be the tools used to transform them into their greatest defenders.

In their efforts the Merry Wives prove that the risk of using agency to protect oneself may create the risk of appearing guilty, but the act of passively allowing life to impose injustice will make one guilty. Virtue and tenacity are not mutually exclusive; once more, virtue and joy are also not mutually exclusive. What this means is, since the Merry Wives were innocent, they *had* to defend themselves because if they allowed that present moment to be their destiny then they would have suffered and experienced an unjust social death. Worse than this, their unfortunate end would have been the example set forth for an audience with women similar to them in attendance. However, by their choice to take this risk and take the action necessary to overcome their oppressors, they delivered the message that despite what the patriarchal system says, a woman can be virtuous and tenacious, and they can be virtuous and joyful.

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