



Falstaff

Music by Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto by Arrigo Boito

Based on Shakespeare's
The Merry Wives of Windsor

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford, England shortly before April 26, 1564. He died in the same village on April 23, 1616. His christening occurred on April 26, and historians prefer to place his birth on the 23rd, to align his birth with his death, but he probably was born a few days earlier. It also helps that April 23rd is the Feast day of St. George, England's patron saint.

Shakespeare came from a Catholic family at a time when it was becoming dangerous to be a papist. His father was a prominent citizen, rising to the position of mayor. His subsequent fall from eminence may well have been a consequence of the religious tensions of the time. At any rate, Shakespeare made it his life's ambition to restore the family to its former position, something he achieved through the fame and fortune he secured through his work as a playwright and actor.

Shakespeare was educated at the Stratford school and his plays reflect the topics he studied there. The country life of Stratford is also present in his works, even when they are set in exotic places. This is especially true of the few plotlines which were drawn from his own imagination. The majority of his works were based on earlier versions by other authors. It is likely that he served as a household instructor/entertainer during early manhood, but we have no concrete evidence of this. It is also likely that he joined a troupe of traveling actors when they visited Stratford, short one performer. However it happened, we find him in London, leaving wife and children behind in Stratford, but not abandoning them. He made regular visits home and lavished his income on their welfare.

He first came to prominence as a poet, but was soon the best-known playwright in London, attracting the envy of some, but the general admiration of most. He collaborated with other playwrights, but often wrote alone. Certainly, his great plays are the product of a single sensibility. He began with comedies and histories, but gradually moved into the nobler realm of tragedy, producing the greatest poetic dramas in the English language. He retired from the stage and returned to live out his days with honor in Stratford. Before finally retiring, he collaborated with John Fletcher on several plays when the younger man was engaged to replace him as the King's Men's resident author.

Shakespeare's dramatic creations are of such an exceptional nature that some scholars have tried to assign their authorship to others, especially some lesser poets and noblemen who had university training. The reasoning being that only someone with a college degree would be capable of such dazzling work. This is a pointless exercise, as Shakespeare had the same education as Ben Jonson, an acknowledged playwright, who, incidentally, was indebted to Shakespeare for getting his plays accepted for performance. There is also the fact that the plays demonstrate an intimate knowledge of both the theatre and the men who made up his acting company. It is fairly easy to portray the nobility and to cobble up information on foreign lands. What is not so easy for a nobleman is to understand country life to the ground, which was one of Shakespeare's great dramatic strengths.

Shakespeare was simply a unique genius, rather like Mozart, whose musical inspiration and creations are inexplicably beyond that of other composers, even as Shakespeare's works stand at the pinnacle of poetic drama.

The Merry Wives of Windsor by Shakespeare

There is an old tradition in English theatre that "Merry Wives" was written in response to a royal request. Queen Elizabeth so enjoyed the antics of the rascally, fat knight, Falstaff, in the "Henry IV" plays, that she expressed a desire to see him in love. Shakespeare, her favorite playwright, obliged with a script in two weeks' time. The author cobbled up several sequences from other plays, as was his custom, but he also included many details from his life in Stratford, including his memories of a Welsh schoolmaster who worked there when the poet was in his teens. The play fairly glows with the atmosphere of English country life and it includes references to several topical events.

While Falstaff is somewhat diminished - as Shakespeare originally conceived him, he would be far too intelligent to fall in love or be taken in by the plots against him - he becomes the center of much fun and the play's verbal music and high spirits have made it a popular comedy and a frequent subject for operatic treatment.

The play begins outside the home of Master George and Mistress Margaret Page. Justice Robert Shallow and his cousin, Abraham Slender, are complaining to Sir Hugh Evans, a Welsh parson, that they have been wronged by Pistol, Bardolph, and Nym, companions to Sir John Falstaff. Page brings Falstaff outside to settle matters and a kind of peace is cobbled up. Master John Ford's wife, Alice, joins the company. All are invited in to "drink down all unkindness." Shallow, Evans, and Slender remain outside to discuss the possibility of Slender wooing young Anne Page, George's daughter. He is, at best, a ridiculous and reluctant suitor. Anne is also being pursued by a Frenchman, Dr. Caius. Evans asks Mistress Quickly, housekeeper to Dr. Caius, to intercede with Anne for Slender. She is already speaking to Anne for Dr. Caius and, when the doctor finds that Evans has asked her to intercede for Slender as well; he challenges the Welshman to a duel. To further complicate matters, Mistress Quickly also agrees to speak up for a third wooer, Master Fenton. Meanwhile, Falstaff, residing at the Garter Inn, is obliged to discharge his followers in order to save money. The Host of the Inn agrees to hire Bardolph as a tapster. Falstaff then asks Pistol and Nym to bear love letters to Margaret Page and Alice Ford, hoping to ensnare their love and their husbands' incomes. The two men refuse, so Falstaff discharges them and sends his page. Nym and Pistol decide to tell Page and Ford of Falstaff's plan.

Act II begins with Alice Ford reading Falstaff's letter. She is appalled at his proposal. Margaret Page enters with an identical letter and the two decide to punish the knight for his audacity. They send Mistress Quickly to Falstaff, asking him to keep a rendezvous with Mistress Ford the next day at 11, when Ford will be out of the house. Nym and Pistol then tell Ford and Page of the plot. Page laughs it off, but Ford is a jealous man, Ford goes to Falstaff in disguise as Master Brooke, offering the knight money to seduce Mistress Ford. When Falstaff tells him he already has a rendezvous with her, Ford can barely contain his fury and decides to catch the two of them together.

Act III begins with Sir Hugh Evans arriving at the site for the duel, only to discover that he and Caius have been sent to different places. When the two meet, the Host of the Garter is able to make peace between them. Slender continues to sigh for "sweet Anne Page" and gets her father's consent to marry. Her mother is still holding out for Dr. Caius. Both reject the suit of Master Fenton for lack of income and his former association with the wastrel Prince Hal and Poins. Falstaff visits Mistress Ford and has barely begun his wooing when Mistress Page bursts in to tell them that John Ford is coming home with a group of men ready to rough up the fat knight. The two hide him in a large basket of laundry and instruct servants to take the heavy load and dump it into the Thames River. Ford enters and searches the house. Finding no one there, Ford is still not convinced. Delighted by their success, the merry wives decide to try another trick and send Mistress Quickly to Falstaff to make another appointment. Reluctantly, he agrees. When Ford comes to see him, Falstaff tells

of his narrow escape and of his plan to visit Mistress Ford again. Ford vows that the lecherous knight will not escape him again.

In Act IV, Falstaff once again appears at Ford's house, only to be interrupted again by her husband, who paws through the laundry. The two women disguise Falstaff as a woman and, when Ford sees him, he is told she is Mother Prat, the fat witch of Brainford, a person he despises. Ford chases the disguised Falstaff out of the house, beating him as he goes. Deciding that things have gone far enough, the two women tell their husbands of their treatment of Falstaff and Ford apologizes for doubting his wife. Page suggests that they try one more trick. Alice Page reminds them of the old legend of Herne the Hunter who haunts Windsor Forest. They will urge Falstaff to meet them at midnight underneath Herne's Oak and they will disguise all the children and adults as goblins to frighten and torment the old sinner.

As they agree to this plot, two more are added. Master Page plans to have Slender elope with Anne during the confusion; Mistress Page plans the like for Dr. Caius. Fenton reveals to the Host of the Garter that Anne has told him of the plots and that she intends to elope with him.

At the opening of Act V, we see Falstaff, dressed as Herne the Hunter with a pair of antlers on his head. He meets the two merry wives at midnight and almost immediately, the three hear the sound of spirits in the woods. The two women run away and Falstaff cowers below the tree. The disguised fairies run in and start to pinch and poke the hapless knight. Nym and Bardolph are disguised as Anne and are taken away by Slender and Caius. Fenton takes the real Anne by the hand and they leave. As Bardolph leans close to Falstaff, the knight smells his breath and realizes that he is being tricked. As the plot is uncovered, everyone has a good laugh at Falstaff's expense. Then both George and Alice Page discover that they have been tricked as well, as Anne and Fenton, now married, return. Master Page, ever one to see reason, decides there is no use lamenting what has happened and invites everyone, including Fenton and Anne, Falstaff and his retinue, to his home to "laugh this sport o'er by a country fire."

About the Play

Most critics seem to agree that the play was written hurriedly and most likely at the request of Queen Elizabeth. It was probably given its first performance before the queen on April 23, 1597, at Westminster, one month before the second Lord Hunsdon, patron of the Chamberlain's Men, was to be received into the Order of the Garter.

While the story may have been adapted from an Italian novella - most likely Giovanni Fiorentino's "Il Pecarone" - it is filled with local places: Windsor Castle and Forest, the great oak, Datchet Mead, the road to Frogmore, even the castle ditch. The characters are of the court and countryside, making this the most English of Shakespeare's plays. There are several references to individuals who

would have been familiar to a royal audience, including a duke of Germany (Count Mompelgart) who had made something of a fool of himself. There is also reason to believe that the Host of the Garter was based on a real person. "Merry Wives" is noted as the Shakespearean play with a higher proportion of prose than poetry. It was quite popular in its day, then disappeared for a while, but has been in steady performance since 1720. Among the composers who have used the text as a basis for opera are Otto Nicolai ("The Merry Wives of Windsor"); Giuseppe Verdi ("Falstaff"); and Ralph Vaughan Williams ("Sir John in Love").



Background Information on composer Giuseppe Verdi

The great Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi was born in La Roncole on October 10, 1813. Displaying considerable talent from a very early age, he was assistant organist at the small local church by the time he was ten. In 1836, Verdi completed his first opera, *Roccester*. The music from this work only survives in the composer's next opera, *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio*, which opened at La Scala in 1839. His next opera, *Un Giorno di Regno* was a complete failure and Verdi wanted to cancel his La Scala contract and give up music altogether. The manager of La Scala, Bartolomeo Merelli, persuaded him to persevere and write his next opera - *Nabucodonosor*. This opera came to be called *Nabucco* and premiered in 1842 to great acclaim. His next two operas, *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata* and *Ernani*, secured Verdi's reputation as a major figure in the music world. Between 1844 and 1850 Verdi composed at a tremendous rate. *Luisa Miller* in 1849 and *Stiffelio* in 1850 demonstrate Verdi's maturing style and more flowing musical line. During his "middle period" Verdi wrote three of his most successful operas: *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, and *La Traviata*. In 1859, Verdi wrote *Un Ballo in Maschera* which, like several of his other works, aroused the ire of the censors who objected to the representation of a rebellion against a monarch. From 1861-65, after Napoleon III drove the Austrians from northern Italy, Verdi was elected to represent Busseto in the newly-formed Italian parliament. During this time he wrote *La Forza del Destino* and *Don Carlos*.

In 1870, he accepted a commission to write an opera for the opening of the Suez Canal. The opera, *Aida*, premiered in both Cairo and Milan in 1871. Following the success of *Aida*, Verdi retired to his estate Sant'Agata. In 1875, the death of the great Italian novelist and patriot Alessandro Manzoni moved Verdi to complete a requiem mass that had originally been intended to honor his noted compatriot, Gioacchino Rossini. Verdi was drawn back to the opera by his publisher, Giulio Ricordi, who introduced him to the celebrated Arrigo Boito. They both worked together on *Otello*, which premiered at La Scala in 1886. Verdi's last opera *Falstaff*, was the only other comedy he had written since the disastrous *Un Giorno di Regno*. . In

January, 1901, Verdi became ill while staying in Milan. City officials spread the streets around his hotel with straw so that the sound of the horses' hooves would not disturb him. He passed away on January 27, 1901, and was buried at the Casa di Riposo, a retirement home for elderly musicians that was established by Verdi himself.

The Creation of Falstaff

"It is not often that a man's strength is so immense that he can remain an athlete after bartering half of it to old age for experience; but the thing happens occasionally, and need not so greatly surprise us in Verdi's case," said George Bernard Shaw of *Falstaff*. By the 1890s, even after some 15 years of retirement from opera, Verdi's reputation as the preeminent composer of Italian opera was as secure as it had been for decades. After the premiere of *Otello* in 1887, the world assumed it had heard its last from Verdi. But in 1893, he astonished everyone by ending his operatic career with a return to a genre that had previously eluded him: the comic opera. "Falstaff" was Verdi's first comic opera since *Un Giorno di Regno* - and according to legend was prompted in part by Rossini's assertion that "Verdi was incapable of writing a comic opera." After two years of working in secret on an opera they affectionately toasted as "Fatbelly," Verdi and Boito unveiled *Falstaff* and resoundingly put to rest any doubt of Verdi's comic ability. Falstaff had long been one of Verdi's favorite characters and Boito's libretto is one of the most brilliant adaptations of Shakespeare in opera. Condensing *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and incorporating aspects of *Henry IV*, Verdi's opera captures through music of surpassing virtuosity both the delicacy and wit of Shakespearean comedy as well as the prodigious personality of Shakespeare's rotund antihero.

Cast & Characters

Sir John Falstaff – (Baritone) An overweight, drunken, conceited, bumbling, penniless knight who loves a good scheme almost as much as good food and drink.

Alice Ford – (Soprano) A good-looking, well-to-do townswoman. She's the wife of Ford, mother of Nannetta—and the object of Falstaff's false affection. Together with Meg she plans to teach Falstaff a lesson.

Meg Page – (Mezz-Soprano) A good humored, happily married woman who Falstaff tries to seduce for her money. She and Alice scheme to disgrace and humiliate the amorous Falstaff.

Mistress Quickly – (Contralto) The witty town gossip. She is the go-between in the merry wives' plot against Falstaff, carrying messages between the two married ladies and the ridiculous knight.

Nannetta – (Soprano) The beautiful daughter of Alice and Ford, deeply in love with Fenton. Her father has promised her to the ridiculous old Dr. Caius.

Fenton – (Soprano) A village teenager in love with Nannetta.

Ford – (Baritone) Alice's husband and Nannetta's father, a loving but jealous man. He is terrified that his wife will cuckold him with Falstaff, and has promised his daughter's hand in marriage to Dr Caius—whether she likes it or not.

Dr. Caius – (Tenor) A phony doctor who Falstaff delights in outwitting. To pay Falstaff back for his pranks, Caius joins forces with the jealous Ford—and plans to marry the lovely Nannetta in the process.

Bardolfo – (Tenor) One of Falstaff's lackeys and drinking buddies. When Falstaff vows to stop paying for Bardolfo's food and drink, Bardolfo joins the plot against his patron.

Pistola – (Bass) One of Falstaff's lackeys and drinking buddies. When Falstaff offends him, Pistola informs Ford of the knight's plans to seduce Alice.

Synopsis of Opera

ACT I - Sir John Falstaff, a rogue knight, drinks enormous quantities of ale at the Garter Inn with his two cronies, Bardolph and Pistol. Dr. Caius accuses them of picking his pocket the night before, but they ridicule him. Falstaff, short of funds, plots to woo the wives of two wealthy men. He writes identical letters to the two women, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford. Feigning shock at such debauchery, Bardolph and Pistol refuse to deliver the letters. Falstaff throws them out of the inn and orders his page to deliver the letters. Meg Page and Alice Ford compare their love letters from Falstaff and discover they are identical. Assisted by their neighbor, Dame Quickly, and Mistress Ford's daughter Nannetta, they plan to teach Falstaff a lesson. Meanwhile, Bardolph and Pistol disclose Falstaff's treachery to Mr. Ford. Joined by Dr. Caius and Fenton, Nannetta's sweetheart, they plot revenge against the rogue knight.

ACT II - At the Garter Inn, Dame Quickly tells Falstaff that Mistress Ford would like to see him that afternoon. Bardolph and Pistol, once again in Falstaff's favor, introduce a disguised Ford to the Knight as "Signor Fontana," who offers to pay Falstaff to help him win Mistress Ford's favors. Falstaff accepts and the two men leave together. Back at the Ford house, Dame Quickly tells the ladies that their revenge is under way. When Nannetta complains that her father has promised Dr. Caius her hand in marriage, the women promise to help her marry her beloved Fenton. Falstaff arrives and clumsily woos Alice. He must hide behind a screen, however, when Mr. Ford, Caius, Bardolph, and Pistol arrive to search the house for the Knight. When the men leave the room, the ladies hide Falstaff in a laundry basket full of dirty clothes. Ford returns and is incensed to hear the sound of smooching from behind the screen, but it turns out to be Nannetta and Fenton. Alice orders the servants to empty the laundry basket into the river Thames, and all assemble to laugh at the soaked and humiliated Falstaff.

ACT III - Falstaff returns to the Garter Inn to drown his sorrows. But Dame Quickly convinces him that Mistress Ford indeed desires his company. The plan for Falstaff to meet Alice in the park at midnight is overheard by Ford and Dr. Caius, who arrange for Falstaff's come-uppance and Caius' marriage to Nannetta that very night. Falstaff and Alice rendezvous in the park. The knight begins his clumsy wooing, but spooky sounds in the dark interrupt him. Alice flees and Falstaff falls to the ground in terror as the entire company, disguised as supernatural creatures, tortures Falstaff until he promises to change his evil ways. Ford, revealing his true identity, blesses the union of two disguised couples, one of which he believes to be his daughter and Dr. Caius. However, unmasking reveals that Ford has actually married his daughter to her beloved Fenton, and Caius to Bardolph! Ford finally blesses the union of Nannetta and Fenton. Everyone agrees that "all the world's a jest."

Questions for Before and After Seeing Falstaff

- Have you ever experienced jealousy so strong that you acted in a way that surprised you?
- You will discover that each character in the play has positive attributes and flaws. What is your best trait and what is your most troubling flaw?
- Have you ever played a prank? In fun? To be mean? How did you feel after the prank was played?

After the Play

- What was your favorite prank in the opera and why? Do Alice Ford and Meg Page go too far in getting back at Falstaff? Not far enough? Why or why not?
- The women in the opera are strong and smart. What are the boundaries of their freedom within their society? Do they feel free within themselves?
- Did you discover that each character in the opera has positive attributes and flaws? What is each character's best trait? What is his/her most obvious flaw?

Other Classroom Activities

- Using a first person voice different than your own, write a monologue about playing a trick on someone whom you believe deserves to be taught a lesson. Make sure the audience knows why you feel the way you do. Invent a fun scenario and resulting story based on how you plan to be successful.
- Using a first person voice different than your own, write a monologue about someone your age that is being told by his/her parents whom they should/must date. Build the story so it has an event – so there is a high point where the main character makes a decision based on how she/he feels. Let us see then

listen only to their own heart (or not) and honor their own feelings (or decide not to).

- Using a first person voice different than your own, write a monologue about someone important to you whom (for no real reason except your own insecurity) you do not trust; of whom you are suspicious (even though they have really not done anything wrong); whom you believe is betraying you (and the audience knows is not). Have in mind Master Ford and how he mistrusts his wife – how funny his exaggerated suspicion is and how Shakespeare is setting him up to be made a fool of later in the play.