

## Merry Wives of Windsor Fairy Lore and Historical Significance

A common theme within many of Shakespeare's comedies is the aspect of fantasy and fairies. Several of the comedies travel to different settings that contain fairylore and magic that oftentimes hold an underlying message. However, in the play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* there is not an alternate setting that involves fantasy and fairies. Instead, the characters create their own fantasy characters in the modern London of the time period. To understand more about fairylore in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Shakespeare comedies in general, we can examine how fairies represent social class, women's behavior and roles in society, the aspect of lust, Queen Elizabeth's representation as the Faerie Queen, and do an overall close reading of the end of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Before looking at concepts of fairy lore in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* an in depth discussion of Act 5 Scene 5 is vital. This scene begins with Falstaff being taken into the woods by Mistress Ford and Mistress Page. Falstaff then proceeds to be attacked by the "fairies" in the woods who are actually children and civilians dressed up in costumes. This scene truly shows how fairies are typically seen since Falstaff is so afraid of them. He states "They are fairies; he that speaks to them shall die" (V, v. 50). Additionally, Mistress Quickly has a monologue about being a good person and housewife, by encouraging the fairies to complete certain tasks at Windsor castle. The fairies then proceed to sing a song reprimanding Falstaff for his lustful desires and sins. They sing "Fie on sinful fantasy, fie on lust and luxury, lust is but a bloody fire" (V,V. 100). Prior to the scene, Falstaff can be seen making sexual advances towards Mistress Ford and Page in an attempt to take their money. At the end of the scene, the joke is revealed and everyone becomes friends, with Mistress Page inviting everyone including Falstaff to her house

for dinner. This scene with the aspect of fairies and fantasy is almost out of the place with the rest of the play so what significance does it have historically?

The belief in fairies during the time of Shakespeare was typically seen as something juvenile. Because of this, those of higher class usually did not believe in fairies and mythical creatures. According to an article entitled “Why Does Puck Sweep?: Fairylore, Merry Wives, and Social Struggle” the belief of fairies was more of a middle class idea. Therefore, since the scheme in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was put on by women, this has a lot to say about how Shakespeare views women and housewifery. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is usually seen as a “feminist” play since there are many women characters that are portrayed in a stronger light. However, the article by Wendy Wall offers a new perspective. Oftentimes, fairies in literature during Shakespeare’s time would idolize housewifery and punish those who did not follow this expectation. “They sometimes punished bad housewifery, sometimes worked laboriously, and sometimes simply danced among the trenchers in the kitchen as magical footnotes to the materiality of the house” (Wall, 2001). Furthermore, the fact that women were the ones who devised the scheme that involves fairies shows that they were viewed as lesser than those of higher class. It was stated in the article “Since citizens in this plot enact a project devised by housewives, *Merry Wives* makes the gendered aspect of fairylore congenial to middle class self identifications” (Wall, 2001). Analyzing this aspect of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* adds more to how it was viewed as a comedy during Shakespeare’s time, and how significant fairylore is in regard to the play.

Another way that fairies had a significance within *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is how they punish/encourage lust. In the play, Falstaff’s lust is seen as a disgusting thing by the majority of the characters, and the entire scene that involves fairies sets out to punish him for his

desires. In the Folio version, Pistol is dressed as a fairy and begins the “torturing” of Falstaff due to his lust for Mistress Ford and Mistress Page. Additionally, the fact that Queen Elizabeth is represented by the fairy queen shows that fairies punish lust. This is because she is referred to as the virgin queen in history and many pieces of literature. Despite these facts, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which is another of Shakespeare’s comedies portrays fairies in an entirely different light. For example, Puck is seen going on many sexual escapades and encourages chaos throughout his entire character arc. Seeing these two different representations of fairies in Shakespeare’s comedies truly gives readers something to think about regarding the history of fairylore.

Queen Elizabeth who was mentioned previously plays a huge role in fairylore in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* even though she isn’t specifically mentioned. Queen Elizabeth was usually portrayed by the fairy queen in older literature. She was idolized during her time and many of the plays and poems written were presented before her in an attempt to impress her. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* the fairy queen is played by Mistress Quickly who is seen as a lower class figure. It has often been wondered why a lower class figure would portray Queen Elizabeth. It turns out that Shakespeare’s plays that were performed at court had several attendees from the middle and lower class, so showing this character playing a higher position of power appealed more to the audience at the time. Furthermore, Mistress Quickly playing the Faerie Queen relates back to the previous issue of housewifery and fairies. Mistress Quickly is seen as a housewife. So her playing Queen Elizabeth promotes the idea that all women should be housewives and consider it their main goal. A quote from the article “Pageantry, Queens, and Housewives in the Two Texts of TMWW” states “Both versions of the play include boastful lines about Quickly’s strong domestic skills, and both could imply that her temporary rise to

queenly status models the way that women of all ranks can use housewifery to demand respect” (Kolkovich, 2012). Since Queen Elizabeth was such a role model to women during Shakespeare’s time period, it is extremely important to consider how her portrayals in literature impacts the overall message of the text.

Examining the aspects of fairy lore and the history surrounding it during Shakespeare’s time can be extremely interesting to consider, especially when it has so much to do with women’s roles in society. Looking at how women were portrayed in regard to fairylore definitely causes readers to think about *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in a different light. In addition, the shaming and encouragement of lust within fairy lore shows how different plays portray fairies and the messages they attempt to convey. Finally, Queen Elizabeth’s role in fairy lore particularly for women is extremely important since she was such an idolized person at the time. Clearly, fairy lore and its historical significance is important to take into consideration when reading Shakespeare. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is definitely a unique comedy play because of the way it presents fairies and aspects of fantasy in general.

## References

Kolkovich, E. Z. (2012). Pageantry, Queens, and Housewives in the Two Texts of “The Merry Wives of Windsor” . *Oxford Journals* , 63(3), 328–354.

Wall, W. (2001). Why Does Puck Sweep?: Fairylore, Merry Wives, and Social Struggle. *Oxford Journals* , 52, 67–106. <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/3648647>