The Merry Wives of Windsor and Elizabeth I: The Welsh Connection

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We all understand how scholarship is a building process. As critics and scholars in later days analyze and critique, they usually borrow from earlier critics and scholars. Ideas previously proposed are expanded and extrapolated and qualified; however, this process can be as debilitating as it can be rewarding. Take the case of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and, in particular, the character of Sir Hugh Evans. Because of the general harsh critical treatment this play has received, what may be a vital link between the English court and the play has been overlooked, its characters dismissed as shallow (pun intended).[1] I believe that two gentlemen, John Dennys and William Hazlitt, are largely responsible for the overall lack of scholarship and analysis of *The Merry Wives of Windsor.* Through both men's works, the process of criticism and discussion about this play has been delimited even to the present day.

John Dennys' famous "Epistle Dedicatory" in his reworking of the *Merry Wives*, *The Comic Gallant* (1702), contains his account of the catalyst of the play's original composition: "This Comedy was written at [Elizabeth's] Command, and by her direction, and she was so eager to see it Acted, that she commanded it to be finished in fourteen days; and was so afterwards, as Tradition tells us, very well pleas'd at the Representation."[2] For centuries, this particular passage colored any consideration of the play.

The origin of Dennys' story is not known with any amount of certainty—no documentary evidence exists which supports the now-canonical origin of the play—but modern day scholars have recently qualified Dennys' version with an argument first posed by Leslie Hotson in 1931. Hotson, in *Shakespeare Versus Shallow*, cites evidence that *Merry Wives* may have been first performed and indeed written specifically for the Garter Feast of 1597.[3] Later critics, such as William Green in his Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives*

of Windsor, have expanded this argument to the point of saying that "to the Elizabethan, the *Merry Wives* was Shakespeare's Garter play."[4] As recently as 1997, Giorgio Melchiori, in his *Shakespeare's Garter Plays*, treats *Merry Wives* as an expansion of said 1597 Garter entertainment, still linking the play with that precise date and occasion.[5]

An earlier critic, William Hazlitt, played no small role in minimizing Hamlet-like scholarship via his discussion of the *Merry Wives* in 1817. His work, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, dealt with every known play in the Shakespearean canon at the time, including *Merry Wives*. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *Merry Wives* had enjoyed remarkable success on the English stage; however, after the early 1800s, the play nearly disappeared from the theaters. I believe Hazlitt's damning of Falstaff as "a designing, bare faced knave, and an unsuccessful one"[6] drastically altered people's perceptions of the play. "We should have liked [the play] much better, if any one else had been the hero of it . . . Sir John himself, by no means, comes off with flying colors . . . Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is not the man he was in the two parts of *Henry IV*. His wit and his eloquence have left him."[7] And Hazlitt does not reserve his comparative criticism for Falstaff alone: "Nym, Bardolph, and Pistol, are but the shadows of what they were."[8] These passages make the comparison between the characters of the history plays and the characters of this comedy, a comparison that continues to plague and discourage modern-day scholars. Hazlitt also characterizes the play and its main character, Falstaff, as "faint sparks of those flashes of merriment,"[9] a perception still widely held today.

But to analyze this play, one must rise above Hazlitt's perception and return to the play's composition. Green argues that the Garter Feast of 1597 was the occasion for the writing and first performance of *The Merry Wives* because Lord Hundson, patron of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, was being inducted into the Order of the Garter that year; hence, the play was commissioned by him as a sort of tribute to Queen Elizabeth. Melchiori reinterprets this origin story by arguing that the Garter entertainment remains merely as an echo in the fuller (and later) *Merry Wives*, but even he is unwilling to relinquish the connection altogether. Thus, the Garter feast story and Dennys' fable have a certain amount of charm, but I wish to discuss something besides charm, something far more striking about these two stories of *primeras causa* which should affect any interpretation of the play: the presence of royalty. Both stories of origination are linked **directly** with Elizabeth herself,

both stating that the play was written with the intention of performing in the immediate presence of the Queen. But what is her connection with the characters or action of the play?

I suggest that the strongest evidence for this association may be found in "Sir Hugh Evans, a Welsh parson." For centuries, Evans has been labeled as foolish, a caricature. Based only on his regional accent, Evans has been determined a fool not only in speech, but in heraldry, something that would have seemed odd to Evans's "contemporaries." Critics cite Evans's accent as reason for dismissing his character as nothing more than a comic bit part: "Got" for "God," "petter" for "better," and "fery" for "very"; "Evans . . . is a man who 'makes fritters of English,'" according to Anne Barton, echoing Falstaff's own characterization of the parson.[10] Also, Evans's actions in the play have been considered mere buffoonery. For example, the opening scene of the play shows Shallow, a country justice, and Slender, his cousin, raging about an offense given to Shallow by Falstaff. As Shallow exclaims his family honor, Shakespeare introduces the play's earliest humor by having Evans pun on the Shallow family coat: [11]

Slender. All his successors (gone before him) hath done't;
and all his ancestors (gone after him) may. They may
give the dozen white luces in their coat.
Shallow: It is an old coat.
Evans. The dozen white louses do become an old coat well; it
agrees well, passant. It is a familiar beast to man, and
signifies love.
Shallow: The luce is the fresh fish, the salt fish is an old coat.
Slender. I may quarter, coz.
Shallow: You may, by marrying.
Evans. It is marring indeed, if he quarter it.
Shallow: Not a whit.
Evans. Yes, py'r lady. If he has a quarter of your coat,
there is but three skirts for yourself, in my simple
conjectures.
But that is all one. (1.1.14-30)

The Riverside edition takes a standard approach to this passage: "Evans misunderstands *coat* (as a garment) and *luces* (as *louses*)"; and, referring to the word *passant*, "perhaps Evans means *passing*, i.e., exceedingly; if so, he unintentionally enriches his picture of the old coat and the lice by using the heraldic term for 'walking.'"[12] However, taking into account the theories of the play's composition, all of which revolve around the personage of Elizabeth, Evans's words and actions might take on an altogether different significance.

Even if neither Dennys' nor Hotson/Green's theory of composition is completely true and even if Melchiori is correct, the theories indicate that, for **whatever** reason the play was written, it seems to have been written with the Queen in mind. The text itself provides evidence for this assertion, mentioning "the radiant Queen" (5.5.46), impossible if the Falstaff and other characters are the same ones living and cavorting with Prince Hal in the Henry IV plays. In addition, the 1602 Quarto's title page states, "As it hath been divers times acted by the right Honorable my Lord Chamberlain's servants both before her Majesty and elsewhere."[13] And perhaps most strongly in support of this theory, there is the famous "Garter speech" in Act 5 by Mistress Quickly, a paean to the Garter, which inevitably calls to mind the elaborate ceremonies of the Most Noble Order:

> The several chairs of order look you scour
> With juice of balm and every precious flow'r;
> Each fair installment, coat, and sev'ral crest,
> With loyal blazon, evermore be blest!
> And nightly, meadow-fairies, look you sing,
> Like to the Garter's compass, in a ring.
> Th' expressure that it bears, green let it be,
> More fertile-fresh than all the field to see;
> And *'Honi soit qui mal y pensé'* write
> In em'rald tuffs, flow'rs purple, blue, and white,
> Like sapphire, pearl and rich embroidery,
> Buckled below fair knighthood's bending knee. (5.61-72)

Even if the Welsh connection to Elizabeth was made later than the 1597 entertainment, both her ancestry and Welsh honor cannot be so easily dismissed. No matter when Evans is incorporated into this obvious Garter Entertainment, how unlikely that Shakespeare would have included in a play written with such obvious royal consideration a character that might have offended the Queen. If Evans was written to be portrayed as a foolish buffoon, how might a Queen who is herself Welsh react? Although Elizabeth rarely overtly displayed her Welsh heritage, she also never completely removed herself from it. After all, the Dragon of Wales, which Elizabeth took from her father and changed from red to gold, remained as a supporter of her royal coat of arms; Wales, with England, comprised the term "Great Britanny"; and, at the Garter Feast of 1597, the very one at which this play may have been presented, a Welsh noble received the Order. Would a playwright compose a play to be performed before the Queen and include a Welsh character in it without taking into consideration Elizabeth's Welsh bloodline? Unlikely.

Additional and directly applicable evidence for my argument can be found in *The Overburian Characters, to Which is Added a Wife.* Sir Thomas Overbury and "other learned Gentlemen" composed this book of *character*s in the very early 1600s, including "A Welshman . . . Above all men he loves a herald and speaks of pedigree naturally."[14] How odd that Evans, a Welshman, would so diverge from this contemporary description. I believe that Evans does not deviate from the Overburian description, but, in fact, fully supports it. Nor is this the only example of the Welsh propensity for heraldry. In John Earle's later (1628) character "A Herald," "Hee is an Art in England, but in Wales Nature, where they are borne with Heraldry in their mouthes, and each Name is a Pedegree."[15]

To demonstrate and defend this interpretation, one merely need return to the opening scene of the play. Shallow and Slender have shown **themselves** to be buffoons—Shallow with his pompous praise of both himself and his family; Slender with his equally pompous praise of Shallow and equally fatuous speech. A great deal of the humor in this scene comes from Evans's ability to insult Shallow and Slender without them realizing it. (Perhaps his ability is too subtle for our less heraldically-sensitive age, a reason that many seem never to have seen it.) If we return to the words of *The Overburian Characters*, Evans is in his element when discussing heraldry. His "misunderstanding"—indicated by the Riverside, the Oxford edition of the *Merry Wives*,[16] and critics for nearly two centuries—can be seen as complete understanding, not only of the heraldry involved, but of the ignorance of the nobles to whom he speaks. His "unintentional" puns should instead be seen as intentional if subtle jibes at persons with little to no knowledge of heraldry. And putting Evans's knowledge in the context of the play's occasion, the Garter induction ceremony, merely elevates his knowledge above all of those around him.

To demonstrate, let me focus on the perplexing line delivered by Shallow in this opening passage: "The luce is the fresh fish, the salt fish is an old coat." The Riverside edition glosses this line with "Shallow's meaning has not been satisfactorily explained."[17] In light of my differing interpretation of Evans's place in this scene, I believe the fact that Shallow's line is difficult, if not impossible, to explain is support for an alternative interpretation of Evans's character. His "mistakes," when seen as intentional, contrast with Shallow's incompetence when speaking of heraldry. In fact, Shallow's understanding is **so** poor that his one declaration about coats of arms is indecipherable. Even now, hundreds of years

later, his statement has not been "satisfactorily explained."[18] Perhaps it was never meant to be explainable at all, but it is also likely that a knowledge of heraldry at least as good as a Welsh Parson's might help.[19]

The joke that Shallow makes is on himself. The "lousy" old coat is better than a "fresh water" coat, a point that escapes Shallow but not Evans, who makes the play on "luces" and "louses" so that this old coat of some 300 years becomes infested with lice *passant*, an heraldry term for "walking"—that is, crawling through the coat and perhaps caught in a compromising situation of human beasts and "love." Thus Evans is making a fool of the ignorance of his companions, who seem not to know the difference between "old" coats and "new" ones. How timely was this joke? In the two decades before the 1590, the number of new grants of arms reached nearly 1,500 in the 1570s and '80s, according to Edward Elmhirst.[20]

Thus, it seems most likely that Evans is amused by the lack of heraldry displayed by Slender and Shallow, not only because they are flummoxed by "old" and "new" coats, but also because "quartering" is not possible merely to Slender; any male entitled to bear arms who then marries an heraldic heiress (a woman whose father is an armiger without male heirs) may "quarter" the coat for his own heirs. As Evans notes, Slender would "mar" any coat by marrying with it, and he makes the clever point by literalizing the "quartering" a "coat" which he discusses as if it were an actual article of clothing. Thus, is it Evans who is the fool, or is he the one who demonstrates the incompetence of a couple of idiots proud of their "old" coats but who have no true conception of what a coat of arms actually means?

Still, it might be difficult to support this new interpretation of Evans if the first scene were an isolated instance of intelligence. It seems unlikely that the sum total of Evans's humor could be attributed to his pronunciation of English, but most critics have done just that; however, Evans's accent is not nearly so pronounced as that of Fluellen, the Welsh character in *Henry V*. And, in the 1602 Quarto of the *Merry Wives*—the one closest to its composition and performance—Evans's accent is almost nonexistent. But perhaps his greatest defense is his foreign counterpart in the play, Dr. Caius. The French doctor's speech is nearly incomprehensible at times and never easily understood. If left on its own, Evans's speech might indeed have been notable and laughable, but in contrast to the good doctor's French/English garble, Evans could serve as a speech therapist.

A more striking demonstration of Welshman's fundamental intelligence, however, occurs later in act 1, scene 1. Slender says to Shallow, "But if you say, 'Marry [Anne Page],' I will marry her; that I am freely dissovl'd, and dissolutely," to which Evans responds, "It is a fery discretion answer, save the fall is in the word 'dissolutely.' The word is (according to our meaning) 'resolutely.' His meaning is good" (1.1.250-256). Here, Evans actually corrects **Slender's** usage of his native tongue but does so in quite a tactful way, demonstrating that, although Evans' mastery of the English language is by no means complete, it also cannot be considered nonexistent.

Similarly, Evans's scene with young William Page in act 4, scene 1 (not appearing in the 2006 Utah Shakespearean Festival production) also has a juxtaposition of good speech and poor. Both Evans and William struggle through their discussion of Latin, but both appear as Latin scholars compared to Mistress Quickly, with her uneducated yet unabated interpositions. For example, Evans asks William, "What is 'fair,' William?" William replies, "*Pulcher.*" "Polecats?" interjects Quickly, "There are fairer things than polecats sure" (4.1.25-29). Another example:

> *Evans:* Remember, William, focative is *caret.*
> *Quickly:* And that's a good root. (4.1.53-54)

Lastly, although William does not perform as admirably in the lesson as might be hoped, Evans leaves Mrs. Page with, "He is a good sprag memory" (4.1.82), far kinder than he might have said, lending a certain depth to his character that many seem to have ignored merely because of his speech patterns.

In the following scene, Mistresses Ford and Page attempt to smuggle Falstaff out of their house past the angry eyes of their husbands. When Falstaff emerges *disguised like an old woman*, Evans comments, "By yea or no, I think the 'oman is a witch indeed. I like not when a 'oman has a great peard. I spy a great peard under his muffler" (4.2.192-194). The other gentlemen fail to notice anything strange, and it seems striking that only he notices something awry, showing that he is by no means the dullest of wits in the play. Though Falstaff's disguise is neither adequate nor professional, it functions well enough to thwart the jealous Ford and his reluctant band. Evans, however, the one Welsh character, is the first to see through Falstaff's masquerade, albeit obliquely. He may not discover Falstaff, but at least he knows when a woman is not a woman.

Finally, in the last act, after the exposing and humiliation of Falstaff, all of Evans's righteous anger comes flooding out in a

torrent directed at the fat knight, who is, according to Evans, "given to fornications, and to taverns, and sack, and wine, and metheglins, and to drinkings and swearings and starings, pribbles and prabbles" (5.5.158-160). And, despite the fact Evans is still no match in wits with even a humiliated Falstaff, Shakespeare makes it clear that Evans has no need to be a wit in this case. Falstaff accepts his defeat with, "I am not able to answer the Welsh flannel" (5.5.162)—a line also cut in the 2006 USF production.

At this point, let me be clear: I am not arguing that Evans, normally relegated to buffoon, is actually portrayed by Shakespeare as the model of high comedy or wit; but I do believe that Evans plays a more significant role in the play than that of a simple stereotype. And I believe this is so, in part, in deference to the Tudor Queen for whom the play may have been written and performed.

Even William Hazlitt, who thoroughly dismissed the character of Falstaff, comments favorably on Evans: "Sir Hugh Evans . . . is an excellent character in all respects . . . He has 'very good discretions, and very odd humors' . . . [he] shows his 'cholers and his tremblings of mind,' his valour and his melancholy, in an irresistible manner."[21] And perhaps the inordinate amount of emphasis that the play places on Queen Elizabeth, including, I feel, its Welsh parson, is, in fact, what spurred John Dennys to write his now infamous anecdote about the composition of the play. Perhaps for Dennys, as for us, it was difficult to ignore the enormous presence of the Queen within the play, and he must have felt, as I do, that this emphasis could not have been unintentional. Perhaps Shakespeare **did** compose this play at the direction of the Queen; perhaps not. In any case, she and all she stands for, including her Welsh ancestry, cannot be dismissed from the content of the play. And though Evans is by no means the focal character of the play—for if he were it would be titled something along the line of, *A Most Pleasant and excellent conceited comedy of Sir Hugh the Welsh Knight, with notable appearances by Sir John Falstaff and the various and sundry Merry Wives of Windsor*"—neither should Evans be dismissed from the content and context of the play. The Welsh connection, both inside and outside the play, gives reason for a reexamination of his role and his place in *The Merry Wives of Windsor.*

Notes

1. From the outset, I must acknowledge the invaluable guidance and assistance given by Dr. James F. R. Day of Troy University, whose work in heraldry informed a number of passages in this paper.

2. John Dennys, *The Comical Gallant, 1702* (London: Cornmarket, 1969).

3. Leslie Hotson, *Shakespeare Versus Shallow* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1931).

4. William Green, ed., *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (New York: New American Library, 1979), 5.

5. Giorgio Melchiori, *Shakespeare's Garter Plays: Edward III to Merry Wives of Windsor* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994).

6. William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays, in the Appreciation of Shakespeare: A Collection of Criticism, Philosophic, Literary, and Esthetic*, ed. Bernard M. Wagner (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1949), 68.

7. Hazlitt, 68.

8. Hazlitt, 68.

9. Hazlitt, 68.

10. Anne Barton, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1962).

11. All quotes from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are from G. Blakemore Evans, ed., *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

12. See *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 290 n.

13. W. W. Greg, ed., *The Merry Wives of Windsor, 1602* Shakespeare Quarto Facsimiles (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

14. Thomas Overbury, *The Overburian Characters, to Which Is Added, a Wife* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1936).

15. John Earle, *Micro-Cosmographie; or, a Piece of the World Discovered; in Essays and Characters* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

16. T. W. Craik, ed., *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

17. See *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 290n.

18. In 2005, David Chandler—in "The 'Salt-Fish' Crux in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," *English Language Notes* (March 2005: 1-14—writes his entire article on this one line alone, working his way through centuries of unclear criticism to arrive, ultimately, at a bawdy joke. While arguably comprehensive and somewhat pedantic, Chandler's conclusion is not necessarily persuasive.

19. Shakespeare, himself the beneficiary of a recent grant to his father, would have known that his own "new" coat was a touch suspect in the pantheon of older arms; indeed, in 1602, his own coat is cited by Ralph Brooke, York Herald, as an example of an improper grant. This case is mentioned in *The Riverside Shakespeare's* appendix on Shakespeare's arms, where the Folger copy of Brooke's manuscript lists the arms as that of Shakespeare, "ye player."

20. Edward Elmhirst, *Merchant's Marks* (London: Harleian Society, 1959).

21. Hazlitt, 68.