The Merry Wives of Windsor
New Critical Essays

Edited by
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We dedicate this book to the memory of Jeanne Addison Roberts
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Women’s agency and the gossip network in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

*Cristina León Alfar*

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a cozening knight and a jealous husband assume without question the availability of female bodies to adulterous liaisons, revealing their confidence in the cultural narrative of female inconstancy. Falstaff attempts to write a story in which he is the recipient of the wives’ sexual and economic favors. Ford, like Troilus, Claudio, Iago, Othello, and Leonato, is all too ready to believe such a story. But here, as Phyllis Rackin has reminded us, Falstaff and Ford become, respectively, “the butt of... jokes” and “the object of... neighbors’ ridicule” (Rackin 2005: 63, 70-71). This is in no small measure due to the merry wives’ refusal to allow Falstaff to “turn [their] virtue into pitch” (Othello 2.3.253). They reject Falstaff’s story, prohibiting him, in fact, from writing it. Appropriating Falstaff’s narrative for their own ends, they turn it back on him, wresting it away from male control. The wives are very clear about their narrative, asserting, “Wives may be merry and yet honest, too” (4.2.94). While the women wish to be seen as virtuous, and therefore as performing an appropriate early modern femininity, I argue that that is less important than their refusal to allow Falstaff to determine how they are seen either in the social world of Windsor more largely or by their husbands at home. Regardless of the patriarchal underpinnings of their valorization of female honor, their desire to control their narrative, to occupy a position of simultaneous merriment and honor, constitutes a discursive shift that, as Judith Butler argues, constitutes the site of agency within a system of oppression that ought to prohibit such agency (see variously *Gender Trouble. Bodies that Matter. The Psychic Life of Power. Excitable Speech*). Both Butler and Elizabeth Grosz have pointed to the reciprocal nature of power, subjection, and resistance. As Butler argues,

Assuming power is not a straightforward task of taking power from one place, transferring it intact, and then and there making it one’s own; the act of appropriation may involve an alteration of power such that the power assumed or appropriated works against the power that made that assumption possible. Where conditions of subordination make possible the assumption of power, the power assumed remains tied to those conditions, but in an ambivalent way; in fact, the power assumed may at once retain and resist that subordination. This conclusion is not to be thought of as (a) a resistance that is *really* a recuperation of power or (b) a recuperation that is *really* a resistance. It is both at once, and this ambivalence forms the bind of agency...

(By Butler 1997: 13)

Following Butler, I argue that women’s agency in the period must be tied to the structures of power that officially demand their subjection. That it is so need not undermine their acts. For, as Butler shows, agency exceeds the purposes of power, leaks out beyond the intents of power, at the same time that agency is contingent on power (Butler 1997: 15). The wives’ joint outrage at Falstaff’s presumption and their refusal to repress their merriment to adopt a more demure life alters the discourse on female virtue, opening the possibility for a revision of “proper femininity” and deconstructing the binary between virtue and mirth. Thus, I read the wives as both subject to the discourse of sexual honor and as finding a ground on which to “shift it” (Callaghan 2007: 10) when they declare that they “can be merry and yet honest, too” (4.2.94).

Through the power derived from their bonds, Mistresses Ford and Page not only make their point to Falstaff about the availability of the female body but also bring voice to a concept of female behavior that is contradictory in the time period, that of the merry and honest wife. I take this claim further than that of Ina Habermann, whose initially similar argument on the power women may assert when responding to slander takes another popular route in readings of the play, which is to argue that the women’s agency is something about which the play is anxious. I argue, instead, that the communal spectacle that corrects the erring Falstaff is staged as a celebration of the wives’ agency; as a spectacle dependent on the bonds forged between these two women, it authorizes a view of a marital bond strengthened by a female driven mirth. While the play does nothing to unbind marriage, it does rework the terms under which marriages function. Ford must disavow his obsession with his wife’s fidelity. Freeing her to “Henceforth do what thou wilt” because “Now doth thy honour stand / In him that was of late an heretic, / As firm as faith” (4.4.5, 7–9), Master Ford lays claim to a union with his wife that acknowledges her right to merriment and honesty. Moreover, while the play appears to champion chastity as “the principall vertue of a Woman” (Vives 2002: 51), I will in fact suggest that the wives make a counter claim asserting each woman’s right of control and ownership of her own body. They reject Falstaff’s assumption that their mirth – their appropriate actions welcoming him into their homes – implies their bodily openness. The play stages a larger issue than virtue, having to do with regulatory access to the female body that each wife wishes to retain for herself.

As Pamela Allen Brown has argued, to be merry in the sixteenth century implied serious laxity of moral character, including but not limited to, sexual promiscuity. While Brown is skeptical that the wives succeed at defending “innocent female mirth” (Brown 2003: 46), I want to reopen this question.
As Patricia Parker and Jeffrey Theis have shown, The Merry Wives of Windsor is a play interested in poaching: deer, wives, daughters, all one. But if the wives defend their right to be merry and virtuous, then we may say that they also defend their right of self-ownership, of self-definition and of self-betrayal. It is Falstaff’s assumption that he may have easy access to each wife (we must not forget, as a way of stealing from their husbands) that the play emphasizes and that both women frustrate. If, as Parker argues, “the notion of thieviz as adultery sounds throughout the period” (Parker 1996: 121), then the wives refuse their role as property, as stealable goods, asserting a right to their bodies and “consult[ing] together” (2.1.99) in order to retain that right. While neither wife wants to be seen as a whore, neither is prepared to forgo merriment. Indeed, each punishment they coordinate and put into action adds to their mirth, so much so that they cannot resist sharing it with both their husbands and the Windsor community. The wives’ bond is forged by a united rejection of Falstaff’s premise about their merriment and, consequently, through the network or community they form, the play stages an altered discourse on female virtue that opens the possibility for a revised notion of proper femininity that deconstructs the binary between virtue and mirth.

Bernard Capp’s When Gossips Meet: Women, family, and neighborhood in early modern England offers a rich history of female agency on which I wish to draw for my reading. There is no better example of the liberating and sustaining nature of female networks in Shakespeare than The Merry Wives of Windsor. Capp writes that despite the heavy risks associated with defensive strategies against abusive husbands (such as scolding, public complaints, separation, divorce, and murder)

[It] is clear that many women were nonetheless determined to play some part in shaping their own lives; they were agents as well as victims, and aware of several courses of action which held out at least some prospect of relief. While some turned to the law to curb a violent, wastrel or philandering husband, they mostly relied on their own efforts and the support of their kinsfolk, friends, and neighbors. … A woman’s best prospects generally lay in triggering the active support of her gossips by working with the grain of community opinion, appealing simultaneously to their compassion, solidarity, and self-interest. (Capp 2003: 125–26)

Without her gossip network, from which, as Capp shows, women understood they were accepted in the community (Capp 2003: 57), a woman was in a much weaker position to deal with conflicts of all kinds. According to Capp, friends were crucial in offering refuge to neighbors with abusive husbands and often testified as character witnesses to help clear a woman’s name (Capp 2003: 58). Mistress Ford’s and Mistress Page’s rejection of Falstaff’s narrative offers a glimpse of sixteenth-century female agency that is enabled by female bonds embedded in a gossip network. Like Capp’s historical examples, the merry wives work “with the grain of community opinion[,]” asserting their innocence and forming a group (that includes only Mistress Quickly, at first, but later also their husbands and many Windsor residents) in solidarity against the damage a man like Falstaff might do to any woman. This community that is formed, gives them strength and hope for relief not only from Falstaff, then, but also from the wrath of a husband such as Master Ford.

Women who did not wish to obey the tenets of marriage advocated by Juan Luis Vives that even an abusive husband ought to be suffered, for “if he be untruthiness means of hym selfe moved and hastyness striycke or beate the, thynek it is the correction of god, and that it chanuneth the as a punishment for thy synnes” (Vives 2002: 106), then, they might seek the assistance of neighbors, friends, and family. While both Vives (in The Office and Dutie of an husband) and Henry Smith (in his Preparative to Marriage) agree that a man should love and honor his wife and correct her with discretion, or not at all if he wishes to avoid earning her resentment, both also urge wives to obey their husbands and not to complain in public. The gossip network, therefore, while it does not directly threaten the institution of marriage, acts in opposition to standard definitions of obedience to husbands. Smith’s advice in comparison with that of Vives’, which is relatively measured in its vision of marriage as a union based on mutuality and reciprocity, warns women against complaining about their husbands:

for it becommeth not any woman to set light by her husband, nor to publish his infirmities. For they say, it is an evil bird that defiles his owne nest, and if a wife use her husband so, how may the husband use the wife? Because this is the qualitie of that sexe, to overthwart, & upbraid, & sue the preheminence of their husbands. Therefore the Philosophers could not tell how to define a wife, but to call her The contrary to a husband as though nothing were so crosse or contrary to a man as a wife. This is no Scripture, but no slander to many. (Smith 1591: 64)

Smith’s association of wives with scolding brings him to assert, carefully through citation of anonymous philosophers, that women cannot be defined or classified. In fact, wives are what they are not, and what they are not is husbands. But as Capp, Laura Gowing, Tim Stretton, Maria Cioni, and Martin Ingram show, such philosophies did not stop wives from seeking the assistance of law courts at one extreme or their gossips at the other, both public rather than private measures. Thus women navigated their conflicts within the limitations offered by official religious tenets or social customs, stretching those limits and creating spaces of agency and action as marital disputes demanded. They did not seem to see themselves as compromising their virtue by doing so. In fact, they were safeguarding that virtue.
While much criticism of the play asserts that their power comes from a reinscription of virtue and I grant that virtue remains a self-defining trait for the Mistresses Page and Ford—I want to go further and claim that their virtue is, in some sense, the point. Shakespeare’s cuckoldry plays repeatedly stage the lack of foundation on which men build their accusations. In order to make that point, wives must be virtuous. Thus a reaffirmation of virtue is a side issue to what is more interesting about the wives’ revolt against Falstaff. The wives are attempting to control a narrative about themselves that Falstaff produces against their wills. That attempt to control is an act of agency, one to which we used to believe early modern women were not only not entitled, but also which they were not even supposed to be able to imagine. But as so many historians and literary scholars have shown, imagine it and act on it, they did. Similarly, The Merry Wives of Windsor stages the wives’ agency as coming out of a discourse about female virtue that enables, in Butler’s terms, their acts, their efforts to control narratives about their bodies and minds. Like women in the period, therefore, whose lives both corresponded to and contradicted their culture’s assumptions and laws, the wives assert power over what can be said about them, recouping and resisting the primacy of virtue. It is not surprising, then, that power was seen by some men as threatening to marriage and gender hierarchies embedded in it. Capp points out that:

Male fears centered on the more insidious alleged effects of gossip networks: the undermining of control within the household, and the broadcasting of intimate family secrets to the world at large. If female networks were never the crude schoolhouses of subversion depicted by pamphleteers, they played a major and wide-ranging role in shaping women’s lives, and helped them negotiate rather than simply submit to a patriarchal world.

Capp accounts both for the support offered to women by their friends and to the potential disruption to the power dynamic between men and women such friendships pose. The power women gained in their relationships with one another threatened the status quo of male power and privilege. In The Merry Wives of Windsor the disorder threatened by the wives’ agency is demonstrated by Master Ford’s hostility toward and violence against Mother Pratt with whom he accuses of being “a witch, a queen, an old cozening queen!” (4.2.157). Falstaff, in disguise as this old woman, receives the beating of his life. Having forbidden her from access to his house, Ford reveals his anxieties about what women do when they visit one another and gossip as he charges Falstaff exclaiming, “Out of my door, you witch, you rag, you baggage, you polecat, you runton! Out, out! I’ll conjure you, I’ll fortune-tell you!” (170–72). Mother Pratt is a whore and a witch, who conjures and tells fortunes. Since she has already been banned from his home, we can assume she constitutes a threat to his sovereignty in it. However, the danger to the marital structure posed by Mistresses Ford and Page’s bonds with one another and other women fails to harm the marriage bond; and, in fact, the marriage bond is strengthened by virtue of the women’s insistence on the compatibility of merry-making with chaste female bodies. The play rejects Master Ford’s anxieties, incorporating him into the wives’ vision of virtue as compatible with merriment. Their mirth, of course, is the key to their narrative control and is also a crucial site of power in the gossip network they form.

The event that begins the women’s action takes place in Act Two, scene one, when Mistress Page asks the question: “What unwieldy behaviour hath this Flemish drunkard picked—out of my Conversations, that he dares in this manner assent me?” (21–24). She follows her question with the assertion that she was “then frugal with her mirth” which seems to conflict the period’s association of merriment with flirtation and sexual openness. But Mistresses Ford refuses this strain, placing the blame on Falstaff’s deceptive male nature, “yet he would not swear, praised women’s modesty, and gave such orderly and well-behaved reproof to all unconcerned that I would have sworn his disposition would have gone to the truth of his words. But they do no more adhere or keep place together than the Hundredth Psalm to the tune of ‘Greensleeves’” (52–58). Her indignation at Falstaff’s pretended respect for women surpasses concerns about her own complicity in his proposition. It suggests more that Falstaff has no right to assume her willingness to commit adultery, that he has no right to claim her body as open to his “love” (2.1.8–12). To reject that assumption is to reject her role as movable property, in Parker’s terms, and to assert her self-ownership. Her shock and outrage at Falstaff’s presumption merges with her desire, and that of Mistresses Ford, to teach Falstaff a lesson about women’s honesty. As the two women consult together to “revenge” themselves on Falstaff, any implication that they might be responsible for his assumptions is set aside in favor of a united effort to uncover his dishonesty.

Indeed, as they learn that they have both not only received letters from Falstaff, but also indeed the very same letters which he “writ with blank space for different names—sure, more, and these are of the second edition” (2.1.69–70), the play rejects a theme of men’s faithlessness to introduce a new one: the faithlessness of men. “I will find you twenty lascivious turtles” Mistress Page asserts, “ere one chaste man!” (74–75). And rather than blame themselves, Mistresses Page declares she will “exhibit a bill in the parliament for the putting down of men” (26–27). The scene works to unravel the neat association between women and inconstancy, substituting, instead, a link between men and infidelity. For there are no chaste men, according to Mistresses Page, and Mistresses Ford invokes her husband’s jealousy, a condition he suffers from perpetually and which the play makes great pains to mock as one harmful to the marital union. Mistresses Quickly remarks on the “ill life” Mistresses Ford leads as a result of her husband’s jealousy (2.2.85), and Master Page calls Master Ford’s jealousy “imagination” (as does Evans in Act Four, scene two) and “distemper” (3.3.203, 204), warning Master Ford that the man he seeks is
“nowhere else but in your brain” (4.2.145). Simultaneously contradicting and invoking “false as Cressid” as a state applying to all women who deceive their men (Troilus and Cressida 3.2.186), Ford finally promises to claim “as jealous as Ford” for all men who search an empty house for imaginary, adulterous lovers (4.2.148-49). The wives’ joint punishment of Falstaff also unveils Ford’s jealousy as both lacking in faith in his wife and as harmful to them both, as a social ill that exceeds the potential damage of female inconstancy.8

The wives’ perspective contrasts starkly with that of Falstaff whose plans are not only based on an inflation of his own charms, but also on a misreading of their behavior toward him:

I do mean to make love to Ford’s wife. I spy entertainment in her. She discourses, she carves, she gives the leer of invitation. I can construe the action of her familiar style; and the hardest voice of her behaviour, to be Englished rightly, is “I am Sir John Falstaff’s”. … Now the report goes she has all the rule of her husband’s purse; he hath a legion of angels. … I have writ me here a letter to her; and here another to Page’s wife, who even now gave me good eyes, too, examined my parts with most judicious oeilades. Sometimes the beam of her view gilded my foot, sometimes my portly belly. … O, she did so course o’er my exteriors, with such a greedy intention, that the appetite of her eye did seem to scorch me up like a burning glass. …

(1.3.39-44, 49-50, 53-57, 60-62)

Confirming Mistress Page’s assumption, Falstaff reads both women’s common and requisite hospitality as an open and particularly leering invitation to their bodies. Falstaff’s overlapping metaphors of the erotic of eating, of all women’s discourse, whether of the eye or the lips, as embedded in a natural propensity to allurement, as a constant performance of sexual temptation, is not just a comic realization of his excessive self-love. It is also a commonplace notion that must be established so that the binary between virtue and mirth can be unved as a figment of male imaginations. Falstaff’s configuration of monetary theft with cuckoldry, as Parker has shown, makes the wives into property (Parker 1996: 122), but it is precisely that “making” that I suggest the wives reject. It is not so much that they preserve their virtue; rather, they reserve for themselves the right of conveyance (in Parker’s terms). That we laugh at and dismiss Falstaff’s vision is crucial to the process of deconstruction, for his exaggerated view of his powers of attraction makes his behavior, rather than that of the wives, suspect.

Incensed by Falstaff’s presumptions, the wives plot immediately, as Mistress Ford puts it, “to be revenged on him” by “entertain[ing] him with hope till the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease” (2.1.60 61, 61 63), and in Mistress Page’s plan by “appoint[ing] him a meeting, give[ing] him a show of comfort in his suit, and lead[ing] him on with line-baited delay till he hath pawned his horses” (1.2.86-89); with these plans, finding courage and energy in their shared fury at Falstaff, they begin taking control over their reputations. Seeking to protect themselves from a “sully [to] the chariness of [their] honesty” (2.1.91-92) and to be “revenged on him” (2.1.28) for “dar[ing] in this manner to assay” them (2.1.23-24), the wives conspire to turn the tables and make Falstaff “know turtles from jays” (3.3.39). Their desire to live chaste lives may be culturally at odds with their merriment, but that contradiction does not stop them from pursuing their vengeance in the most entertaining way possible. The wives do not just theorize merry-virtue, they live it.

All Falstaff’s punishments are examples of the wives’ practice of simultaneous virtue and mirth. At their instigation the knight is subject to three humiliations.9 He is tossed out in a buck-basket as dirty laundry, disguised as an old woman only to be beaten black and blue by the jealous Master Ford, and costumed as Herne the Hunter, with horns on his head, only to be pinched and burned by fairies, angry husbands, and wives. Falstaff’s own description of his predicament in the buck-basket testifies to the wives’ wit:

Have I lived to be carried in a basket like a barrow of butcher’s offal and to be thrown in the Thames? … ‘Sblood, the rogues slighted me into the river with as little remorse as they would have drowned a blind bitch’s puppies, fifteen i’t h’ litter! And you may know by my size that I have a kind of alacrity in sinking. If the bottom were as deep as hell, I should drown. I had been drowned but that the shore was shelvy and shallow – a death that I abhor, for the water swells a man, and what a thing should I have been when I had been swelled! I should have been a mountain of mummy.

(3.5.4-5, 8-17)

While the speech is Falstaff’s, its comedy belongs to the wives, for his deep displeasure is evident in his comment that “ … if I be served such another trick, I’ll have my brains ta’en out and buttered, and give them a dog for a new year’s gift” (3.5.6-7). Not in the least entertained, he complains bitterly about the dangerous exploit of which he has been the object. However, the images he offers us, first of himself as a butcher’s discarded waste and then of the rapidity with which he expected to drown because of his size, is – in 20th century terms – cartoon-like in its comedy. The effect is increased as we step from envisioning his gargantuan splash to the actual event in which Falstaff found himself sitting only bottom deep in filthy, but blessedly shallow water. While it might be tempting to read the humor as belonging to Falstaff, his anger over the scrape and the curses he saves for the wives point to mirth as the property of the women. Thus the play’s action requires a fusion of concepts virtue and mirth that ought not to fuse at all.

Similarly, the beating he receives from Master Ford, who takes him for Mother Pratt, and a witch, gives Falstaff a lesson about visiting the homes of
married women that he learns with little levity, one he asserts “taught me more wit than ever I learned before in my life. And I paid nothing for it neither, but was paid for my learning” (4.5.57–59). The “wit” he displays in this complaint is not mirth so much as wisdom gained by such a beating. While he recognizes the comic sight he made and imagines how at court “they would whip me with their fine wits till I were as crestfallen as a dried pear” (4.5.93–94), he does not share in the jest. Having been nearly put in the stocks for being a witch, Falstaff determines that he has “suffered more for [the wives] sakes, more than the villainous inconstancy of man’s disposition is able to bear” (4.5.100–102). His remark extends the play’s interest in men’s inconstancy, which he seems to take for granted, applying it not only to villainy but also to men’s natural disposition. And while we may laugh at the notion that man’s villainous inconstancy ought to be able to withstand some degree of suffering, Falstaff is in earnest. There is no mirth in his experience of their punishments.

The wives, however, enjoy their prank thoroughly, and while they consider setting aside their revenge, they decide instead to share it with their husbands in hopes of a public shaming, for, says Mistress Ford, “methinks there would be no period to the jest should he not be publicly shamed” (4.2.205–6). Unable to envision an end to the hilarity more punishments would bring, they agree to a jest that will increase their mirth by sharing it with their husbands in one last climactic punishment that will bring the Windsor community together and “mock [Falstaff] home to Windsor” (4.4.62). This effort, we remember, is made not only in the interests of mirth, but also in the interests of virtue, a quality of mind and body that Juan Luis Vives makes clear is absent entirely if not present in both (Vives 2002: 28–31, 34). The wives’ entertainment of Falstaff, even to teach him a lesson, would not meet Vives’ definition of virtue, for it is too rough and too public to meet his criteria; yet the play makes no such moral division.

The putative rhetorical divide between virtue and mirth fails to take hold even in the play’s treatment of Master Ford, whose suspicions, though evidently part of his chronic state of jealousy, are awakened by Pistol and Nym and not by any specific behavior on his wife’s part (a pattern repeated in Shakespeare’s plays, with the exception of The Winter’s Tale). Ironically, he spends most of the play hunting down the lover, Falstaff, in ways that assist his wife and her gossip to revenge themselves on Falstaff, showing up just when he ought. But Master Ford’s jealousy cannot find its footing, for the play has not only already defined the terms under which the wives “entertain” Falstaff, but it has also rejected it in Master Pages’ refusal to sound the alarm, assuring his friend that “if [Falstaff] should intend this voyage toward my wife, I would turn her lose to him; and what he gets more of her than sharp words, let it lie on my head” (2.1.166–69). Unwilling to let anything “lie on [his] head” (172), Master Ford’s pursuit of his wife’s lover demonstrates the same unreasoned sexual suspicion that Shakespeare’s other husbands display. When Master Ford visits Falstaff the first time as Master Brook, and

Falstaff calls Master Ford “the jealous rascally knave her husband” (250–51), “the jealous witlessly knave” (257), and “cuckoldly rogue” (259), promising to arrange for Master Brook to have access to this knave’s wife, Master Ford recounts all the consequences of having a “false woman”:

My bed shall be abused, my coffers ransacked, my reputation gnawed at; and I shall not only receive this villainous wrong, but stand under the adoption of abominable terms, and by him that does me this wrong. But cuckold! Witto! Cuckold! The devil himself hath not such a name! Page is an ass, a secure ass. He will trust his wife, he will not be jealous I will rather trust a Fleming with my butter, Parson Hugh the Welshman with my cheese, an Irishman with my acquavite bottle, or a thief to walk my ambling gelding, than my wife with herself. Then she plots, then she ruminates, then she devises; and what they think in their hearts they may effect, they will break their hearts but they will effect. God be praised for my jealousy! ... Fie, fie, fie! Cuckold, cuckold, cuckold!

(2.2.275–79, 282–91, 294–95)

Equally enraged by being called a cuckold and determined to “proclaim [him] self what [he] is” (3.5.131), Ford makes it clear that every status symbol of masculinity is at stake in and vulnerable to his wife’s chastity. His wealth and property, the sanctity of his bed, his reputation are all threatened by his wife, who cannot be trusted with them because she is a woman. He is called “cuckold” and “wittol” not only by others who might know, but also even by the man who makes a cuckold of him. And these names are far more damaging than being called “Lucifer” (2.2.280). Consequently, compelled to search out the truth the better to control his wife’s plots, ruminations, and devices, Ford rushes home to catch his wife with Falstaff. Only a fool, like Master Page, would fail to keep such watch. His jealousy, for which he praises God, protects him by keeping his wife under control, a fact he plans to throw in the face of his friend, Page, whose trust of his wife must be proved not only dim-witted but also negligent of his property.

At the same time, however, the play rejects — has already rejected — Master Ford’s philosophy. While his wife is guilty of many things, including plots, ruminations, and devices, they are not of the kind Master Ford envisions. Like her embrace of contradictory traits such as virtue and mirth, Mistress Ford’s practice of plotting, ruminating, and devising does not make her guilty of adultery. And this is the lesson that Master Ford must learn before Falstaff’s final punishment can be performed. Confronted with the letters written to both wives and with the story of their merry punishments, Ford acknowledges his error and seeks his wife’s pardon:

Pardon me, wife. Henceforth do what thou wilt.
I rather will suspect the sun with cold
Thou with wantonness. Now doth thy honour stand
In him that was of late an heretic,
As firm as faith.

(4.4.5–9)

Ford’s apology makes her chastity as sure as the heat of the sun. Her honor is in his mind as secure as his faith in God. Ford must, along with Falstaff, be taught that wives can be merry, yet honest, too. And his recognition of those traits, of their capacity to exist simultaneously, is perhaps more important than any lesson Falstaff might learn. The play already anticipated this result in Act Four, scene two, in which, as I have already quoted, Master Ford asserts that “If I find not what I seek, show no colour for my extremity. Let me for ever be your table-sport. Let them say of me ‘As jealous as Ford, that searched a hollow walnut for his wife’s leman’” (146–49). In this regard, the narrative of female betrayal the play stages echoes and revises Troilus and Cressida’s vows of infamous loyalty and betrayal with one of a needlessly jealous husband.

I want to push this argument further, however, to suggest that as the couples join in their shaming of the “lecher” (4.1.132), the play entertains a vision of marital accord based on a rejection of male anxieties about female bodies and vile lechers. Page invites Falstaff to go home with them and have dinner, “where I will desire thee to laugh at my wife that now laughs at thee” (5.5.170–71) and Mistress Page agrees, “Good husband, let us everyone go home, / And laugh this sport o’er by a country fire, / Sir John and all!” (5.5.234–36). Asked by Mistress Page, “Now, good Sir John, how like you Windsor wives?” Falstaff admits “I do begin to perceive that I am made an ass” (5.5.105, 118). Made to wear the horns he attempted and failed to place on the foreheads of Masters Ford and Page, Falstaff ends the play in the position he hoped to secure for them— that of “knave, cuckold knowe” who “hath enjoyed nothing of Ford’s but his buck-basket, his cudgel, and twenty pounds of money, which must be paid to Master Brook.” (5.5.109, 111–14). The couples, in this regard, achieving Falstaff’s public shaming by joining forces, abandon their separate, gendered, bonds and “consult together” to discipline the thief who would disrupt their domestic worlds. I would like to suggest that Falstaff is only partially incorporated back into the community, however, and that the play ends by demonstrating the rewards for couples who bond with one another to defeat anxieties about cuckoldry. This is an end made possible only by the wives’ decisive action to preserve their honor, not because—in a traditional sense—they affirm their husbands’ ownership over them, or because their husbands are able to concede (in the person of Master Ford) that his wife is virtuous. Rather their anity and reconciliation is possible because he is able to give her back to herself. As I have already quoted above, Mistress Ford may “Henceforth do what [she] will” safe from her husband’s suspicion (4.4.5). And while Page warns him not to be “as extreme in submission as offence.” (4.4.10), the mirth which the wives fought to retain now is incorporated into the marital union, allowing the couples to mock Falstaff with one last punishment.

It is no surprise that Mistresses Ford and Page express shock and offense at Falstaff’s assumptions about virtuous women; both concede their behavior might invite such thoughts but crucially reject self-accusation in favor of teaching the knight a lesson. At the same time, their insistence on chastity is tested by one last joke when Mistress Page provocatively asks Falstaff in Act Five, scene five, “Why, Sir John, do you think, though we would have thrust virtue out of our hearts by the head and shoulders, and have given ourselves without scruple to hell, that ever the devil could have made you our deight?” (5.5.146–50). Mistress Page’s question makes virtue a choice for the wives, a trait they embrace but might risk for the right man. Sir John Falstaff is not that man, and that he thought he was makes him their joke. Their chastity, therefore, is not a function of marriage so much as of their desire, a state of body and mind they regulate rather than allowing it to be regulated from outside. Female bonds such as those staged in Merry Wives not only allow accused women to reflect critically on what is happening to them but they also offer a larger critical stance against male sexual tyranny. In Merry Wives, Ford’s jealousy and the abuse of power he displays as a result represent the orthodox stand on male ownership of female bodies, and while Mistress Ford does not overtly threaten that right, she also does not alleviate her anxieties by behaving with less merriment. Rather he must independently disavow those anxieties. In this regard the play stages a condition of power analyzed by Butler in which “[a]gency exceeds the power by which it is enabled. One might say that the purposes of power are not always the purposes of agency” (Butler 1997: 15). The wives’ rejection of the advances of a lascivious knight, on the one hand, reinforces traditional notions of female virtue, but on the other hand their methods do nothing to reinforce control of the marital union by the husband or to discourage the gossip network which threatens that control. Indeed, it is the network and the bonds inherent to it that open a new definition of innocent merriment.

Notes

1 Shakespeare, William. The Merry Wives of Windsor. Ed. T. W. Craik. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. 2.1.99. All citations of the play will be from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text. I would like to thank all those who have read and commented on this essay, including but not limited to (in response to differing versions of my work on the play) participants in two seminars at the Shakespeare Association Annual meeting (2011 and 2012).

2 See Philip D. Collington, “I would thy husband were dead,” whose argument on reading the play as a parody of domestic tragedy dedicates some time to reassembling Master Ford’s reputation as an unreasonably jealous husband (Collington 2000: 197-98) and also Veronika Pohl’s full-length article on the societal pressures on Master Ford’s masculinity.

3 While Anne Patten also argues that the women’s “campaign of revenge against Falstaff, however, is at the same time a campaign to defend and rehabilitate the concept of innocent feminine mirth”, she also spends enough time blaming the wives’ mirth for Falstaff’s assumptions that it undercut’s her claims of
rehabilitation. She is more interested in the anxieties of the play about their mirth than in the fact of the women's deconstruction of the binary.

4 See in particular Vives' assessment in The Office and duties of an husband that “the husband doth defend his wyves maieste with love and obedience, and the wife her husbands with honore & obedience. What shall I neede to saye ye concord causeth them to be esteemed wise and honest. And they must needs be good, saying they have loved so long togethe.”

5 See, for example, Brown, Better a Shrew than a Sheep, Natasha Korda, Shakespeare's Domestic Economies; Carol Thomas Neely, Distracted Subjects; Wendy Wall, Staging Domesticity.

6 I use the notion of the event in the sense described by Elizabeth Grosz: “Events are raptures, nicks, which flow from causal connections in the past but which, in their unique combination and consequences, generate unpredictably and effect sometimes subtle but wide-ranging, unforeseeable transformations in the present and future. Events erupt onto systems which aim to contain them, inciting change, upheaval, and asymmetricality into their order.” (Grosz 2004: 8). Lisa Jardine uses a notion of the event in her analysis of Othello which is both similar to and different from mine. For Jardine, the event is marked by “a spilling-over of private exchange into a public space (‘thau caule hir hoore to my face at the well griene [green]’) which alters the nature of the incident, and turns it from verbal abuse into event in the communal sphere” (Jardine 1996: 32-33). Thus the event occurs once an imputation of improper behavior (for Jardine and myself, adultery) has been made available to a wider community than, for example, a husband and a wife or, an accuser and an accused. My use of the event, of course, includes the sense provided by Jardine, but I want to go further both to define what constitutes the event and the agency it calls for that is located in the dramatic, theatrical moment of ununciation that is propelled by more than just a public utterance. Animated by the outrageous nature of the accusation, the event includes the act of defense, the simultaneous recuperation of and rebellion against the masculinist narrative enacted by the woman, who is the subject of the utterance (“you are a whore”), and/or her friend.

7 We need only think of Much Ado about Nothing for Shakespeare interest in male inconstancy. Balthasar sings a particularly significant song given that Hero will soon experience Claudio's loss of faith in her. “Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more, / Men were deceivers ever, / One foot on sea, and one on shore, To one thing constant never” (2.3.63-66). And both Jane Anger and Juan Luis Vives, to very different purposes, warn young women of the dangers of men's faithfulness.

8 See Wendy Wall who argues that Master Ford’s “attempt to patrol the home's purity in fact leads him to produce its tainting” (118); and Carol Thomas Neely, who argues that “[n]othing, possession and witchcraft are employed as figures of speech to expose Ford's and Falstaff's deceptions as pathology and eventually to exercise them” (Distracted Subjects 147). Coppelia Kahn asserts that Ford is more concerned about the names he will be called than about the actual possibility of his wife's infidelity (Kahn 1981: 129). See also Peter Holland's less optimistic reading of “community,” in which – as he examines the performance history of the play – he sees Master Ford as experiencing much more pain at the thought of his wife's disloyalty than Falstaff possibly can at all his punishments (Holland 2005: 12-14).

9 Stockton's reading of the play's reconsideration of Falstaff as the butt of Windsor's body politic is richly suggestive in regard to the wives' punishments.

10 References going back as far as 1387 attribute to "disposition" a "Natural tendency or bent of the mind, esp. in relation to moral or social qualities; mental constitution or temperament, turn of mind. Possibly of astrological origin: the description of dispositions as "natural, jovial, martial, venereal, mercurial" (OED) 12 April 2013).