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Falstaff the Woodman

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Folly and Politics

The revelry and farce that inform *The Merry Wives of Windsor* reach out to two sources of uneasiness. First, to the heartless discomforting not only of Falstaff but also of the unsuccessful lovers, Slender and Caius. Second, to an awareness of what Pistol calls "substance": Ford, he says, "is of substance good" (Shakespeare, *Wiv.*, I.iii.26), and substance, social substance, that is, cannot be accommodated. These political and material facts have to be set against any hope we may have of cheering ourselves up by seeing Falstaff as a mythic scapegoat whose fate serves as a ritual purgation of riot and disorder from Windsor or as a figure that leads its citizens from winter to spring.

The play's opening scene is a kind of induction, in that it sets a tone rather than beginning a story: Shallow claims that the injuries inflicted upon him and his estate by the deer-poaching,[1] as well as the riots of Falstaff and his crew, are compounded by the fact that he, Robert Shallow, Esquire, occupies a social rank only one below that of Sir John Falstaff, Knight. However, the Welsh parson, Sir Hugh Evans, slyly advises that the events did not

1 See I.i.62 and 87-88; see also Theis.

constitute a riot, an offence which would have gone to the King's Council sitting in the Star Chamber, but only "disparagements" (I.i.24), an affront to Shallow's sense of his own dignity. Shallow, of course, is not simply an aggrieved innocent: his "substantial" concern is to match Anne Page, an heiress, off to his ninny of a nephew, Abraham Slender.

Throughout the play we are aware of the solidarity of the burghers of Windsor when confronted by the depredations of the knight and his followers, Pistol, Bardolph and Nim. They obviously think of these as riff-raff, the dregs of the social order. It seems peculiarly fitting that Falstaff should be tipped from his buck-basket into the muddy ditch at Datchet Mead (which probably served as a sewer). Citizen aversion spreads equally towards the gentry: Fenton seems unacceptable as a match for Anne Page not only because of his former "riots" and "wild societies" (III.iv.8) but also because he is "too great of birth" (4)—and too scant of wealth.

Many modern productions, including the one at Shakespeare's Globe that drew in happy audiences over two seasons (2009-10), have gone for delight and missed any privy notes of melancholy or bitterness. In *2 Henry IV*, after all, Poins had called Falstaff "deal elm" (Shakespeare, *2H4*, II.iv.268), and when Falstaff does bounce back from adversity in *Merry Wives*, we may be more aware of pathos than able to delight in irrepressible energy and the *sprezzatura* of his linguistic invention. Indeed, in recent seasons, Shakespeare's Globe has tended to banish dull cares completely by the clap-along terminal jigs, which, all too often for me, signify the triumph of entertainment over awareness.

Either of these readings, of course, may be "authentic", in that we do not know the emphases of the earliest productions: as with *The Taming of the Shrew,* there is no "locating tone" (Jardine, p. 59). Perhaps the play was occasional—although claims for a secure date are contentious:[2] connections with the Garter feast at Whitehall Palace on 23 April 1597 at Windsor have long been abroad (see V.iii.59), and I deliberatively conjecture further connections with Lenten rituals (see below), the memories of which might even in late April have been quite fresh (Easter Day had fallen on 6 April that year). We might equally think of the play as a prelude to a marriage.[3] This kind of theatrical and historical uncertainty means that any generalisations must remain tentative.

2 See Sokol.

3 Compare the account of a *commedia dell'arte* troupe performing before a wedding in Germany (see Maxwell).

The Falstaff sequences are focussed on three acts of "baffling"—ritual displays of the wages of perjury. They constitute assaults not only upon Falstaff's dignity but also upon his honour. Falstaff quaintly acknowledges to Pistol the injuries to his honour:

> I, I, I myself sometimes, leaving the fear of God on the left hand and hiding mine honour in my necessity, am fain to shuffle [move evasively], to hedge [leave open a way of escape], and to lurch [avoid company]; and yet you, you rogue, will ensconce [conceal] your rags, your cat-a-mountain [wild cat] looks, your red-lattice [ale-house] phrases, and your bold beating oaths, under the shelter of your honour! (II.ii.17-22)

This is really about dignity rather than honour, and is a far cry from the fat knight's honour soliloquy in *1 Henry IV*.

Dr Caius is baffled too: after he has insulted her, Mistress Quickly dreams of a "fool's head" (I.iv.107) for him. That is the Folio reading: Oxford emended to "ass-head" (see Crane, ed., 1.4.106n.), but that emendation seems to me to be infected by memories of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Falstaff, of course, ends the play by confessing he has been made an ass (V.v.110) but enters wearing a horned buck's head, a more complex image than the head of an ass.[4] Unlike Falstaff, Caius is more of a fool than a beast.

Dramatic Form

The play combines two comic forms: as in New Comedy, young love triumphs over the humours of hypocrisy, maturity and custom. Fenton occupies the role of the *eiron*, the hero, even though Shakespeare allots to that role only a bit part. He does, however, eventually win Anne Page from his rivals, Slender and Dr Caius. Secondly, as in many other Shakespearean romantic comedies, Windsor with its adjacent forests—Herne's Oak is its synecdoche—creates a festive green world. The Host of the Garter Inn in Windsor is a kind of master of the revels that fill in the intrigue. Falstaff has migrated from the court and Eastcheap, morphing from a court knight to a Carnival King. "Am I a woodman, ha?" (V.v.21), he exclaims: I presume this is a boast to Mistress Page and Mistress Ford—a "woodman" was

4 See Stockton.

a hunter of women, as well as of deer.[5] The wives are saved from any response to his vaunted desire by the entrance of the Fairies.

This patterning may make us sceptical of the claim that the play amounts to little more than what Robert D. Hume calls "amusing antics".[6] Contrariwise, are we happy to consider the rituals at Herne's Oak as basically satirical, creating what Hume calls an "ambiguous critique", directed at a member of specific group, corrupt knights? The play's pattern of correction is locked up when, at the end and in Plautine fashion, Falstaff, like the humorous characters of *Bartholomew Fair*, is invited to a celebratory supper—or, more exactly, "to laugh this sport o'er by a country fire" (V.v.210).

Antics and satire, certainly, but these do seem to rest on bases or memories of rituals and myths. Perhaps there is no need to excavate them, but their existence may inspire theatrical designers or remind us of ways in which Shakespearean texts are not simply theatrically but also culturally embedded. Perhaps Shakespeare felt that tapping into the "body of Celtic or Teutonic rites and legends" (Laroque, p. 188) served some kind of authentication. His deployment of folk motifs—horns and cross-dressing—creates a kind of mythic substance. Yet, when analysing the buck-basket sequence, the cudgelling and despatch of the cross-dressed "witch of Brentford", and the pinching of the horned Falstaff, *historical* source- or analogue-hunting does create a surround sound but not one that cannot be keyed to evidential propositions. Shakespeare, after all, had proved himself perfectly capable of mythopoeic writing as early as *Love's Labour's Lost*, with its haunting juxtaposition of Owl and Cuckoo together with the songs of winter and spring.

As for "sources", there is little fixity. Communities across Europe invented their own ways to represent mythic themes. Northrop Frye, much indebted to J. G. Frazer, signalled the presence of these:

> In *The Merry Wives* there is an elaborate ritual of the defeat of winter known to folklorists as "carrying out Death", of which Falstaff is the victim; and Falstaff must have felt that, after being thrown into the water, dressed up as a witch and beaten out of a house with curses, and finally supplied with a beast's head and singed with candles, he had done about all that could reasonably be asked of any fertility spirit. (Frye, p. 183)

5 As in Shakespeare, *MM*, IV.iii.152. The conceit occurs several times in the first act of the anonymous pastoral piece, *The Maid's Metamorphosis* (1600).

6 For Hume's use of the terms "amusing antics" and "ambiguous critique", see esp. pp. 196–202.

However, modern scholarship must make us extremely sceptical of importing evidence of seasonal practice from continental Europe into accounts of early modern English culture. Ronald Hutton, writing in 1995, pointed to the almost total absence of evidence concerning pre-Christian seasonal rituals in the British Isles (*Stations*, p. 218). He also offers copious evidence throughout his book of decrees on the part of both Church and State to purge images and purify rituals as part of a wide-sweeping reformation of matters. Maybe it happened that nothing was caught in those particular trawls, or perhaps the so-called "Puritans" were not as vexed by them as might be believed. But I am emboldened to make some of the following claims by Shakespeare himself, who so obviously constructed an effect or rhetoric of mythical change around Falstaff in the *Henry IV* plays. There is no escaping the rhythm of the seasons, and all cultures seem to mark them with ceremonies. Moreover, it seems that the very patterns of drama contain or create mythic structures, and Shakespeare's language, charged as it is with figures, is certain, if I might invoke Lévi-Strauss, to bundle mythemes together.

The three bafflings are *analogues*—I am carefully avoiding historical or textural connections—of three archetypes: the carrying or driving out of Death,[7] the "burying of Carnival" and the "killing of the Tree-Spirit". Such rituals were celebrated in diverse parts of Europe on Dead Sunday, often the fourth Sunday in Lent (Frazer, pp. 397-98, 404-16). In many places a Death figure was thrown into water to the accompaniment of songs that proclaimed the death of winter and the coming of spring (Frazer, pp. 408-16). The fact that Falstaff is thus ritually despatched three times not only demonstrates, in the words of François Laroque, that "if you chase Carnival out through the door, it flies back through the window" (p. 236), but also reminds us of the eternal contestation of the powers of order and disorder. Shakespeare indicated as much at the end of *2 Henry IV*, when Falstaff, having been banished, boasts to Justice Shallow, "I shall be sent for soon, at night" (V.v.83).

The Buck-basket

There may be few glosses necessary to enjoy Falstaff in the buck-basket. The episode draws mainly upon *sotties*, *novelle* and *commedia*: the trope of the passionate lover hiding from the jealous husband was of ancient lineage, although I think

7 See Frazer, pp. 165ff., and Bryant, "Falstaff".

it is close enough to a story in *Tarlton's Jests* (Halliwell-Phillipps, ed., pp. 95-105) for the latter to be considered a source—perhaps Tarlton originally played Falstaff. In stage performance, the sequence probably depends upon *lazzi* practised by the servants John and Robert, who had to carry the fat knight in the basket. It is tempting to conjecture that "John" may have been the hired man John Sinklo or Sincler, who was renowned for taking parts that matched his distinctive skinniness (Gurr, p. 241). (Sincler could have—just—doubled this part with that of Slender, although they do appear in contiguous scenes, III.ii and III.iii.) Few spectators are likely to have remembered the moral tradition that emerges "in the medieval romance of Virgilius, based on the treatment of Socrates in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, [where] the philosopher is suspended in a basket from an upstairs window" (Bullough, ed., II: 8).

However, although a "buck" was a quantity of washing, mention of the word impels the jealous and fantastical Ford into imagining himself cheated by his wife and bearing the stag's horn of cuckoldry (III.iii.120-40), and the sequence seems to take place in a mythic time: Mistress Page calls Falstaff's diminutive page Robin "You little Jack-a-Lent" (20). Ben Jonson offered a graphic description of the use of this puppet-like scapegoat, associated with Lent. Basket Hilts is insulting Miles Metaphor in *A Tale of a Tub*:

> Thou cam'st but half a thing into the world,
> And wast made up of patches, parings, shreds;
> Thou, that when last thou wert put out of service,
> Travelled'st to Hampstead Heath, on an Ash Wednesday,
> Where thou didst stand six weeks the Jack-of-Lent
> For boys to hurl, three throws a penny, at thee,
> To make thee a purse. (IV.ii.45-51, modernised)

This therefore constitutes another myth of expulsion. Henry Machyn described a parade in 1553 that included the Jack figure (Pettitt, p. 194),[8] and its killing was sometimes ritually enacted at the end of Lent. Frederick Jonassen offers a plethora of allusions to the figure and the rituals, but it seems to me that the force of the line derives from the word "wit" in the second allusion to the figure: Falstaff later exclaims, "See now how wit may be made a Jack-a-Lent when 'tis upon ill employment" (V.v.116-17). "Wit", here as elsewhere, can denote the penis (Williams, *Glossary*, pp. 340-41), and Falstaff sees himself as a shrunken detu-

8 See also Hutton, *Stations*, pp. 172ff.

mescent comic butt to be assailed by all and sundry. In John Taylor's *Jack a Lent*, the figure of Shrove Tuesday was "a fat gross burden-gutted groom" (sig. B1^{v})—akin to Falstaff. Now he is vanquished in the annual battle with Lent, before he too is driven away (Taylor, *Jack a Lent*, sig. C2^{r}).

Frazer reminds us of another mythic association between the end of Falstaff and water: in *Henry V*, Falstaff, Mistress Quickly reports, died "ev'n at the turning o'th'tide" (II.iii.12-13), a correlation between the ebbing and lowing of water and life that goes back to Aristotle (Frazer, p. 45). In this play he is dumped in the "muddy ditch" at Datchet Mead, "close by the Thames side" (III.iii.11-12)—before the construction of Teddington Lock after 1810, still presumably part of the Tideway—and at this time muddy because the tide was out. As he reflects to the audience in soliloquy, this was a near-death experience:

> And you may know by my size that I have a kind of alacrity inn sinking. If the bottom were as deep as hell, I should down. 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. (III.v.9-14)

However, like the hero in a mummers' play, he comes back to life and lives to woo another day.

Cross-dressing and Beating

The beating of the Fat Woman of Brentford is another comical punishment. Perhaps this simply had the effect of analogous scenes in modern English pantomimes, but we have lost the sense of witnessing a painful shaming ritual in which a man was wearing women's attire.

In the visual arts, the shame is clearly brought out: examples include a painting of about 1585 by Bartholomaeus Spranger, "Hercules and Omphale", and a drawing by Rubens of about 1600.[9] These are obviously to do with "unmanning", and, over and beyond showing the hero about to be beaten with a phallic club, suggest symbolic castration.

That may be the reaction from "elite" culture, but in "the little tradition", in local communities, the effect may well have been different. In some ways, the

9 These are, respectively, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (http://bilddatenbank.khm.at/viewArtefact?id=1818 [accessed 16 June 2012]) and the Louvre in Paris: http://www.culture.gouv.fr/Wave/image/joconde/0095/m503501_d0106931-000_p.jpg (accessed 16 June 2012).

sequence recalls elements of charivari, of skimmington and "riding the stang", in that these were occasions that combined the penal with the festive (Ingram). How festive were these?

Bakhtin's observations on the role of the lower bodily strata in carnival are obviously pertinent here. Falstaff, disguised as the "fat woman of Brentford" (IV.ii.60), is addressed as "mother Pratt" (148): the name could designate buttocks. Falstaff is beaten like a schoolboy: "I'll pratt her", says Ford (150), and then he calls Falstaff a pole-cat, a creature both noted for its fetid smell and associated with "sluttery" (V.v.39). But, alternatively, the episode may not be carnivalesque: Ford may be beating the old "woman" because, as a witch, she may have made him impotent (Cotton).

There may be an allusion here to *Jyl of braintfords testament*, a poem in doggerel couplets by Robert Copland (1567) that tells how Jyl (referred to in the text as the "fat woman of Brentford") bequeathed a fart to all the wastrels of her acquaintance (Copland, sigs. Aiiii^{r} ff.). Nashe quoted the tale in the prologue to *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (Nashe, p. 149). Cue for loud theatrical farts each time Falstaff is whacked on the backside? In fact, he shuffles off the burden of shame by his wit and theatrical performance; he seems to be he asking the audience to applaud, just as the people of Windsor may have done had they been able to see the ritual enacted, an occasion when they could have rejoiced at the outwitting of the constable, an authority figure:

> I was beaten myself into all the colours of the rainbow; and I was like to be apprehended for the witch of Brentford. But that my admirable dexterity of wit, my counterfeiting the action of an old woman, delivered me, the knave constable had set me i'th'stocks, i'th'common stocks, for a witch. (IV.v.90-95)

Alternatively we might psychologise. Being beaten can give the victim a kind of mastery of the beater. We recognise this in Book III, Chapter 20, of Sidney's *Arcadia.* Cecropia starts to beat Pamela:

> For when reason taught [Pamela] there was no resistance … then with so heavenly a quietness and so graceful a calmness, did she suffer the divers kinds of torments they used to her, that while they vexed [hurt] her fair body, it seemed that she rather directed than obeyed the vexation. And when Cecropia ended and asked whether her heart would yield, she a little smiled, but such a smiling as showed no love and yet could not but be lovely.
>
> And then, "Beastly woman", said she, "follow on, do what thou wilt and canst upon me, for I know thy power is not unlimited. Thou mayst well wreck this silly body, but me thou

> canst never overthrow. For my part I will not do thee the pleasure to desire death of thee: but assure thyself, both my life and death shall triumph with honour, laying shame upon thy detestable tyranny." (Sidney, pp. 553-54).

Centuries *avant la lettre*, this narrative supports Theodore Reik's contention that a masochist's submission is a form of rebellion: "The purpose to obtain satisfaction *in spite of* all threats develops into the tendency to gain satisfaction *to spite all* threats" (Reik, p. 145; cited in Bromley, p. 562).

Another example from the period occurs in *The Nice Valour* (1622), a play recently attributed to Thomas Middleton. There Lepet ["the fart"], who inherited a fortune and purchased his gentry status, loves nothing more than a good kicking, and willingly submits to being beaten when he is at the court of the Duke. He publishes a table of masochistic postures, later to be enacted in a masque. His sadistic clown praises them:

> Oh, master, here's a fellow stands most gallantly,
> Taking his kick in private behind the hangings,
> And raising up his hips to it. But, oh, sir,
> How daintily this man lies trampled on!
> Would I were in thy place, whate'er thou art:
> How lovely he endures it? (Middleton, ii.468)

As James Bromley writes:

> His experience of violent subordination at court leads him to write and publish a book that he calls *The Uprising of the Kick and the Downfall of the Duello*. Lapet's model of submission interrupts the escalation of violence into lethal duels. As his book title implies, he wishes to replace the jockeying for position that characterizes the courtly duel with the pleasures of submission, thereby emphasizing the eroticism implicit in these violent encounters between men. (p. 569)

Horned Falstaff

Samuel Johnson observed, with a degree of superiority: "there is no image which our author appears so fond of as that of a cuckold's horns. Scarcely a light character is introduced that does not endeavour to produce merriment by some allusion to horned husbands" (Johnson, p. 186). But, I submit, there is more than merriment here. Claire McEachern has argued that it is important to remember

that the stag's horns of virility were visible, whereas the bovine horns of cuckoldry were invisible, and that

> horn humour was prevalent because it allowed a ludic response—collective laughter and even enjoyment—to the anxieties provoked by the Protestant theology of election. The cuckolds' horns, because they represent ignorance of one's own status, resonate with the uncertainties of soteriology, while other widely disseminated symbolic registers of the horn expand the leverage of the ludic response. (McEachern, p. 631)

A woodcut that accompanies the ballad entitled "Cuckold's Haven, or The Married Man's Misery" (to the tune of "The Spanish Gypsy"), which was licensed in 1638, illustrates something of this (Chappell, ed., pp. 148-53).[10] The ballad sports a head-verse:

> The married man's misery, who must abide
> The penalty of being hornified;
> We unto his neighbours doth make his case known,
> And tells [*sic*] them all plainly the case is their own.

This is a neat representation of a chronotope or social trope: the hornified husband morosely knows his bovine badge of shame is visible to all save himself; below him the horned devil capers before his wife; his house is badged by stag's antlers as an insecure haven for cuckolds, a place of sexual resort; and the *Sprecher* character (a cuckold himself?) lustily cries his warning, "Look Out", to the accompaniment of yet another horn.

Falstaff's horns constitute a signifier that is, to say the least, highly ambiguous. The Herne's Oak episode is described by the New Cambridge editor as "open, delighted, undefended theatricality" (Crane, ed., p. 22). That is the challenge, but isn't it odd that it begins with Mistress Page suggesting that the figure who deserves discomforting should be disguised as the eponymous Herne, a figure who, addicted to hunting, made a pact with the devil which led to his being condemned to practise his sport for ever? He

> Doth all the *winter* time, at still midnight
> Walk round about an oak with great ragg'd [wild] *horns*;
> And there he blasts the trees, and takes the cattle,

10 See also Simpson, p. 676, and Maus. A facsimile is to be found on http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/30036/image (accessed 26 May 2012).

> And makes milch-kine yield blood, and shakes a chain
> In a most hideous and dreadful manner. (IV.iv.27-30, emphases added)

He is, therefore, a winter spirit, and her tone matches that of Reginald Scot, who tells us how "our mothers maids haue so terrified vs with an ouglie diuell hauing hornes on his head, fier in his mouth, and a taile in his breech … and they haue so fraied vs with bull beggers, spirits, witches … *Incubus*, Robin good-fellowe, the spoorne [spectre], the mare, the man in the oke, the hell waine [i.e., a wagon from hell that might appear as an ominous portent in the night sky]" (Scot, pp. 152-53). Windsor's Herne may be the "man in the oke".[11]

Does the tone of this suggest that Mistress Page is mocking a primitive "folk" belief, speaking as if to a sophisticated child who knows the bogyman does not really exist, but likes to pretend he does? Was this designed for an elite and sophisticated audience? Or is it meant to insert a *frisson* of danger?

The same questions arise a few lines later:

> *Mistress Page.* The truth being known,
> We'll all present ourselves, dis-horn the spirit,
> And mock him home to Windsor. (IV.iv.60-62)

Do these lines, as it were, set out the rules of the charade, or is jest turning to earnest as the two wives plan both a kind of exorcism of Herne and a symbolic castration of Falstaff by cutting off the badge of virility that he rashly wears?

Page, in the prelude to the Herne's Oak sequence, also sees Falstaff as a horned devil, perhaps because he knows that, had Falstaff seduced his wife, he himself would have worn horns, the badge of the cuckold:

> The night is dark. Lights and spirits will become it well. Heaven prosper our sport! No man means evil but the devil, and we shall know him by his horns. (V.ii.9-11)

As for Ford, Pistol's repeated warnings (at II.i.97-99 and III.ii.32) to avoid the "odious" Actaeon, a figure of cuckoldry, do nothing to allay his freneticism.

A few lines later, however, Falstaff seems to be using the image to boast of his own phallic potency:

> The Windsor bell hath struck twelve; the minute draws on. Now, the hot-blooded gods assist me! Remember, *Jove*, thou wast a bull for thy Europa. Love set on thy *horns*. O power-

11 For links with the classical Jupiter Cernenus, far-fetched but suggestive, see Peake.

> ful love, that in some respects makes a beast a man, in some other a man a beast! (V.v.1-4, emphases added).

However, he is gloriously muddled: his self-presentation morphs from a bull into a stag, from Jove to Actaeon, who, presumably sexually aroused by his sight of the naked Diana (Phoebe in Ovid), was metamorphosed into a deer and dismembered by his own hounds (Steadman; Parten). As Golding translates: "They hem in on every side, and in the shape of stag, / With greedy teeth and griping paws their lord in pieces drag" (Ovid, III.301-2).

It was customary in the Renaissance to moralise the myth into an *exemplum* of the ravages attendant upon desire. Shakespeare translates the hounds into pinching fairies, with a glance at Lyly's *Endymion*, where, in IV.iii, Corsites is thus tormented for seeing the goddess Cynthia, also, of course, known as Artemis or Diana:

> Pinch him, pinch him, black and blue,
> Saucy mortals must not view
> What the Queen of Stars is doing
> Nor pry into our fairy wooing. (Bullough, ed., II: 56)

This softening of the Diana / hounds story notwithstanding, with a bitter irony Falstaff serves up a banquet of images of dismemberment shortly thereafter:

> For me, I am here a Windsor stag, and the fattest, I think, i'th'forest. Send me a cool rut-time, Jove, or who can blame me to piss my tallow. Who comes here? My doe?
>
> [*Enter Mistress Ford and Mistress Page*] . . .
>
> *Mistress Ford*. Mistress Page is come with me, sweetheart.
>
> *Falstaff*. Divide me like a bribed buck, each a haunch. I will keep my sides to myself, my shoulders for the fellow of this walk, and my horns I bequeath your husbands. (V.v.9-21)

The reference is to a buck offered by a poacher to a forester keeper and to the ceremony of "breaking the stag", a ritual cutting apart of the beast.[12] As staged, Falstaff is crowned with the horns he had desired for Ford. It is conceivable that this was followed by a horn dance—these were performed at various times, including winter (Hutton, *Stations*, p. 91; Gallenca). The Quarto text records that

12 See Theis.

the horns that were sounded immediately after this were the sound of hunters on his trail—although they conceivably could have been the rough music of a charivari. So this may be the kind of extemporal wit that audiences associated with Dick Tarlton (Bryant, "Tarlton"), but it also matches the tone of the eldritch humour we find in the comic scenes of *Doctor Faustus* (Bradbrook).

Pinching

Might we construe Falstaff's final baffling as another amorous (masochistic) game? Cleopatra tells Charmian, "The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch, / Which hurts, and is desired" (Shakespeare, *Ant.*, V.ii.289-90). The intention of the ladies of Windsor was to mock a fool, the aged Falstaff who thought he could take any woman. As we have seen, this stag's horns symbolised the myth of phallic potency, serving to unite men, as they do in the song in the hunting scene in *As You Like It*:

> *Lords.* What shall he have that killed the deer?
> His leather skin and horns to wear.
> Then sing him home,
> The rest shall bear this burden:
>
> Take thou no scorn to wear the horn,
> It was a crest ere thou wast born;
> Thy father's father wore it,
> And thy father bore it.
> The horn, the horn, the lusty horn,
> Is not a thing to laugh to scorn. [*Exeunt*] (Shakespeare, *AYL*, IV.ii.8-17)

Hutton notes that the donning of antlers or horns formed part of New Year festivities—another link with seasonal celebrations of rebirth or renewal (Hutton, *Rise*, p. 47; *Stations,* pp. 90-92). Was there some sort of horn dance enacted here?

The problem, of course, is that, in early modern shaming rituals, it was characteristic for the victim to become the hero. Hogarth, in 1726, gave us a famous engraving that shows Hudibras encountering a shaming skimmington.[13]

13 It can be accessed through the British Museum: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_image.aspx?objectId=1361456&partId=1&searchText=hogarth+skimmington&fromADBC=ad&toADBC=ad&orig=%2fresearch%2fsearch_the_collection_database.aspx&numPages=10&currentPage=1&asset_id=167992 (accessed 16 June 2012). See also Parten.

Here what seems to be the shirt of the victim's wife is born aloft on a cross-piece surmounted by horns. Yet a horn could designate an ornamental (helmet) badge of honour (*OED*, s.v., *n.*, 16). This is John Taylor on "A Bawd":

> And this is her comfort when she is carted, that she rides when all her followers go on foot, that every dunghill pays her homage, and every tavern looking-glass pours bountiful reflection upon her; the streets and windows are full of spectators of her pomp. Shouts, acclamations and ringing on well-tuned Banbury kettle-drums and barbarous basins [rough music], proclaim and sound forth her triumphant progress, whilst she rides embroidered all over like a lady of the soil, conducted in state out of the eastern suburbs, to set up her trade fresh and new in the west. (*Workes*, p. 101)

And in an early seventeenth-century frieze in Montacute House in Somerset, we see a riding where the culprit (or a substitute) is playing pipe and tabor while he is being ostensibly humiliated or stigmatised.[14] Keith Thomas demonstrated that "barring out", in which pupils locked out their school-master in order to gain an extra holiday, once a sometimes ferocious ritual of misrule, became a simulated one, celebrated with cakes and ale.

Similarly, throughout the seventeenth century, there are copious references to Horn Fair, held annually at Charlton in Kent on St Luke's Day, 18 October.[15] Everyone processed with horns on their head, to the fair where ram's horns, horn toys, and hornified gingerbread figures were on sale (Williams, *Dictionary*, pp. 668-69). "We're all cuckolds now". Satire morphs into celebration of delightful naughtiness. The tone matches the lyrics of "The Lusty Month of May" from Lerner and Loewe's *Camelot*:

> Tra la! It's May! The lusty month of May!
> The lovely month when ev'ryone goes
> Blissfully astray.

Perhaps there was something like that kind of softening in performances in Shakespeare's time—yet again, however, we have to avoid imposing a model of decadence upon history, a decline, to use the folklorist Jessie Weston's phrase, from ritual to romance.

14 See http://montacutehouse.blogspot.fr/2012/04/skimmington-ride.html (accessed 16 June 2012).
15 See *A New Summons*.

Yet if we impose a "hard" reading and see Herne's Oak as the third in a series of "driving out" rituals, we may, deliberatively, take issue with a generalisation about the play that Laroque, oddly, almost conceals in an endnote:

> In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* … the references to the myths of pagan antiquity are unlike those in *The Winter's Tale* … where they are connected with the idea of rebirth and the re-creation of the world. In *Merry Wives* they remain associated with an atmosphere of bourgeois farce. … First [Falstaff] is a stag with a noble head of antlers, then an ass, like Bottom, before he ends up totally stripped of the trappings of virility as a plain ox [as Ford brands him at V.v.111], the domesticated, castrated version of the wild and royal beast. The transition from stag to ox reflects … the decline from potential tragedy (the stage being a beast of the hunt, linked with the wild and the sacred) to the domesticated level of bourgeois comedy. (p. 282)

Walter Cohen suggests an "antiscapegoating outcome", noting a moral levelling and a resolution of hierarchies (p. 1231). My quarrel with these conclusions is that against this pattern derived from classical legends of correction, punishment and eventual forgiveness, there seems to be a counter-current composed of unwritten local rituals, beginning to be unlearnt, which, possibly seasonal in origin, make the play less closed. There are dangers in assuming that just because he was writing plays about citizens, Shakespeare was appropriating a "middle class" world view: he seems to have sensed, as did W. B. Yeats (addressing the question, "What Is 'Popular Poetry'?"), that bourgeois art might not resonate beyond itself.

I am not the first to attempt to excavate down to the ritual and mythic substructure of this play. I may have come up with a couple of new sherds, but what I conclude basically is that nothing is fixed or provable. Is *Merry Wives* a play about carnivalesque renewal or clarification, is it informed in contesting ways by classical myth on the one hand and seasonal ritual on the other, or is it a sign of the emergence of a bourgeois, possibly Puritan, mentality and the foreshadowing of bourgeois realism? We can pose these questions: answers are to be found only in the rehearsal room or in the pressures of theatrical performance.

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