

Teaching *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in the Wake of the Murder of Sarah Everard

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When Sarah Everard left a friend's house near Clapham Common, south London, to walk home on March 3rd, 2021, little did she know that what clothes she was wearing, what colour her outfit was, what shoes she had on, and how she conducted herself while in public would be national news and constitute crucial details repeated in almost all reports on her murder. Reports on her disappearance, on the discovery of human remains later confirmed to be hers in woodland near Ashford, Kent, and on the subsequent arrest of a Metropolitan Police officer in connection with her murder almost never fail to mention the same details. Sarah, we are repeatedly told, wore bright clothing, had trainers on, called her boyfriend on the way home, and stuck to well-lit streets. In short, as one report put it, she 'did everything she was "supposed" to do as a woman out walking.'

At the time I was teaching *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to my undergraduate students as part of a module on Shakespeare as text and performance. With its focus on performance as an important aspect of 'doing' Shakespeare, one of the module's aims was stressing the relevance of the 400-year-old plays to the lived experiences of the students and to the issues they engage and which persist in the 21st century. Like many people who followed the developments in the investigations, I was deeply distressed by the details of the murder. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* presented itself to me as the perfect opportunity to open up a discussion with my students (a mixed gender group) about misogyny, sexual assault, gender-based violence against women, rape culture, and victim blaming. Victim blaming. Because at the heart of reports stressing the fact that Sarah Everard 'did everything she was "supposed" to do' lies an implicit assumption that women who don't are perhaps to blame when they find themselves victims of violence, that women in short skirts or shorts, in high heels, and not in a conversational mood to ring anyone, women who choose less well-lit streets for their journeys back home somehow invite (and deserve) violence.

At the heart of *The Merry Wives* lie similar problematic assumptions that seem to have been internalised by the play's titular characters. Approached by the impoverished knight, Sir John Falstaff, as potential sources of financial succour (since, as 'the report goes [they have] all the rule of [their] husband[s'] purse' (1.3.352)) and sexual gratification, the wives' first impulse seems to be (as seems to be the case with the reports on Sarah's death) to blame not the lecher, but their own public presence, performance, and behaviour. 'What an unweighed behaviour hath this Flemish drunkard picked [...] out of my conversation, that he dares in this manner assay me?' wonders Mistress Page upon reading the love letter Falstaff sends her (2.1.18-21). 'Why, he hath bot been thrice in my company! What should I say to him? I was then frugal of my mirth', she elaborates before seeking divine forgiveness for a sin she doesn't seem to be exactly sure as to its nature: 'heaven forgive me!' (2.1.21-2), a comment that modern editors, testifying to its ambiguity, sometimes suggest it refers to the preceding statement and sometimes to the following one. Her concern with her public presentation, her potentially 'unweighed behaviour', her 'conversation', and 'mirth' is later on elaborated on when she tells her gossip, Mistress Ford: 'It makes me almost ready to wrangle with my mine own honesty. I'll entertain myself like one that I am not acquainted withal. For sure, unless he knew some strain [i.e. disposition] in me that I know not myself, he would never have boarded me in this fury' (2.1.75-9). Mistress Ford's reaction to the sexual assault and to the invasion of her boundaries that Falstaff has carried out here is to turn her gaze, in Natasha Korda's memorable words, inwards, to look into herself, to scrutinize her conduct, and to question her own, not the man's, behaviour. Swiftly, the play moves on to the women's plans to take revenge on the knight ('Let's be revenged on him' (2.1.81)). Although demonstrating their agency and highlighting their sense of offense at being approached thus, this swift turn to the revenge plan leaves those misogynistic assumptions and internalised sexist views about women's alleged complicity in gender-based assault unexamined and unchallenged. Not in my class.

In the wake of the murder and as the disturbing details were slowly unfolding, *The Merry Wives* offered an excellent opportunity to open up a discussion with my students about those assumptions and to help them engage with the play in a way that makes it their own and speaks to their very real concerns surrounding sexual assault, rape culture, misogyny, and

gender-based violence against women. I opened the session by asking students to identify the underlying assumptions behind both the reports on Sarah Everard's murder (I shared links to the articles cited here in advance, so that they had a chance to read through in their own time) and Shakespeare's wives. The aim was to develop students' close reading and critical thinking skills as well as to highlight the continuity of those harmful assumptions and the persistence of those tendencies to blame victims of gender-based violence. Having identified the problematic nature of the wives' internalised assumptions about themselves and the way the play seems to treat these assumptions as unproblematic, the students were then asked to address this problem by intervening in the text, taking ownership over it, and changing this problematic aspect. Students were invited to take part in a creative writing exercise designed specifically to respond to the omissions in the text. The results were astonishing.

I modelled the activity on The New York Times' publication in 2016 of imagined 'deleted scenes' in Shakespeare's plays, scenes that might have been but aren't there. I gave specific guidelines to help my students: What might Mistress Ford and Mistress Page have discussed between announcing their plan to take revenge on the knight in Act 2, scene 1, and their next appearance together in Act 3, scene 3? What might the women's responses to the letters have been had they unlearned the sexist assumptions that they seem to have internalised from the patriarchal society in which they live? What would a scene between two women faced with gender-based assault look like if they were unwilling to accept societal double standards or to embrace victim-blaming? I also suggested that students can work on the existing scene should they wish to and intervene in it in a way that benefits from the discussion we had about its problematic nature. I suggested that they can delete lines, rewrite others, and incorporate their own writing within it if they liked. To help students with this exercise, I offered Moll Cutpurse from Thomas Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* as an example of a female character from early modern drama who, when faced with a similar situation to the Windsor wives', reacts differently and speaks out in defence of women's right to socialise freely without being shamed and judged sexually available for doing so. I shared the lines Moll delivers to the bewildered 'lecher', Laxton, in scene 5 while drawing her sword 'To teach thy base thoughts manners' before she proceeds to berate him in the following words: 'Thou'rt one of those/ That thinks each woman thy fond flexible whore:/ If she but cast a liberal eye

upon thee,/ Turn back her head, she's thine; Or among company,/ By chance drink first to thee, then she's quite gone,/ There's no means to help her' (72-7).

In response, students wrote short pieces that focused on debunking the internalised victim-blaming that Shakespeare's text treats as unproblematic. One student suggested that, after Mistress Ford wonders: 'Why, he hath not been thrice in my company! What should I say to him? I was then frugal of my mirth', Mistress Page should reply: 'Stop it with this victim-blaming nonsense! He is a lecher and the fact that he sent me an identical letter too shows it is not really about you. It is about him and the way he views women!'. Another student suggested that a later line by Mistress Page, from Act 4, scene 2, should be brought forward and used here: 'Wives may be merry and yet honest too'. The student incorporated the line into a piece of creative writing she has written in response to this exercise, stating: 'You were his host. You were generous and hospitable, and he has violated your trust and hospitality. Why talk you of 'mirth' as if it were a crime? Should women now police their tone and be grumpy to avoid suspicion and accusations of encouraging lechers? No, my dear. Wives may be merry and yet honest too. And we are going to learn this lesson the hard way'. My personal favourite was by a male student. It read: 'I have been your friend for years, Alice, but never knew you adopted those harmful views. What next? Shall we be killed on the streets and be blamed for our murder, too? Shall reporters ask what we were wearing? What we were doing out there late? On our own? Why didn't we stick to well-lit streets? No. Our sisters are reclaiming the streets. We need to reclaim our right to be merry and sociable too on those streets'. A group of three students produced a 'deleted scene', based on their work early on in the module on gossips (female friends) and the pamphlets written to deal with the threat they were thought to pose to patriarchal society. The scene featured the two Windsor wives and the soon-to-be third wife: Anne Page. The students suggested this scene should appear after the existing final scene and right after the men exit. Mistress Page and Mistress Ford want to make sure Anne has learnt a lesson about women's right to access public spaces without being judged or attacked. The students pointed out that the scene should take place in Windsor Park, thus stressing the women's presence outside the domestic sphere shortly after midnight and their being unaccompanied by men. As to what the three wives would do? Students said: celebrate Anne Page as the next resourceful, clever, independent Wife of

Windsor and express pride that she allowed no one to deprive her of her right to choose her husband.

Teaching *The Merry Wives* in the wake of the murder of Sarah Everard meant opening up discussions about important challenges women are still facing in the 21st century as well as encouraging the younger generation to be part of the solution through their sense of justice, their critical thinking skills, their creativity, and their active and productive engagement with Shakespeare.

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