



Mistress Page.

MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR, ACT 4, SC. 2.

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MISTRESS PAGE.

By closely studying the characters of Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, one may detect a distinction, but it is a distinction almost without a difference. They are women of about the same age, the same position in life, of very similar temperaments and tastes—social, merry-hearted, fond of broad jests, but none the less chaste for that—and, moreover, friends, of long and confidential intimacy. It is certainly clear that Mistress Page is quite subordinate to Mistress Ford in the contrivance and execution of the novel self-avenging which has made them famous: it is Mistress Ford who grants Falstaff an interview at her own house during her husband's absence, and then sends him off, concealed in a basket of soiled linen, to be "dumped" into a foul ditch; it is Mistress Ford who, with excuses and cajolery, induces him to repeat his amorous visit, only to betray him to a sound drubbing from her enraged lord; and still Mistress Ford, who accords him an assignation in Windsor Park, and allows him one treacherous embrace before the dire consummation which occurs there.

We conclude, however, that this superior boldness on the part of Mistress Ford arises, not from a character dissimilar in that respect to that of Mistress Page, but rather from the constant

temptation she finds in her husband's jealousy, to play upon his weakness; as she says to her friend:

I know not which pleases me better—that my husband is deceiv'd, or Sir John.

And again:

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* * * O that my husband saw this letter! it would give eternal food to his jealousy.

Mistress Page, on the other hand, is evidently serious in her resentful reception of the insulting missive; her comments, as she reads it, are full of indignation, unalloyed by a trace of vanity:

What! have I 'scaped love letters in the holiday time of my beauty, and am I now a subject for them? Let me see.

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What a Herod of Jewry is this?—O wicked, wicked world!—one that is well-nigh worn to pieces with age, to show himself a young gallant! What an unweighed behavior hath this Flemish drunkard picked (with the devil's name) out of my conversation, that he dares in this manner assay me? Why, he hath not been thrice in my company!—What should I say to him?—I was then frugal of my mirth:—Heaven forgive me!—Why, I'll exhibit a bill in the parliament for the putting down of men. How shall I be revenged on him? for revenged I will be.

Contrast this with Mistress Ford's jolly *double-entendres*—though she becomes serious enough when she discovers that Falstaff is not even honest in his infamous overtures:

Mrs. Ford. O woman, if it were not for one trifling respect, I could come to such honor!

Mrs. Page. Hang the trifle, woman; take the honor. What is it!—dispense with trifles;—what is it?

Mrs. Ford. If I would but go to hell for an eternal moment or so, I could be knighted.

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Here, read, read!—perceive how I might be knighted.—I shall think the worse of fat men as long as I have an eye to make difference of men's liking. And yet he would not swear, praised women's modesty, and gave such orderly and well-behaved reproof to all uncomeliness, that I would have sworn his disposition would have gone to the truth of his words.

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How shall I be revenged on him? I think the best way were to entertain him with hope.

Mrs. Page. Letter for letter—but that the name of Page and Ford differs!—To thy great comfort in this mystery of ill opinions, here's the twin-brother of thy letter: but let thine inherit first; for I protest mine never shall. I warrant he hath a thousand of these letters, writ with blank space for different names, (sure more;) and these are of the second edition.

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Mrs. Ford. Why this is the very same—the very hand, the very words! What doth he think of us?

Mrs. Page. Nay, I know not; it makes me almost ready to wrangle with mine own honesty. I'll entertain myself like one that I am not acquainted withal.

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Let's be revenged on him; let's appoint him a meeting, give him a show of comfort in his suit, and lead him on with a fine baited delay, till he hath pawn'd his horses to mine host of The Garter.

Mrs. Ford. Nay, I will consent to act any villainy against him, that may not sully the chariness of our honesty.