

EVEN WHEN YOU THINK YOU ARE PULLING THE STRINGS, YOU MAY STILL end up as the butt of the joke: This is the lesson Sir John Falstaff learns when one of his harebrained schemes lands him in big trouble—or, more precisely, the River Thames, tossed out the window in a basket of dirty laundry! Falstaff was a character so memorable that playwright William Shakespeare included him in three plays: the sober histories *Henry IV, Parts I and II*, and the biting comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Yet it is primarily the last of these plays that inspired Giuseppe Verdi’s opera *Falstaff*. In this rollicking Shakespearean comedy of big personalities, and even bigger appetites, Falstaff towers over the other characters as he amuses himself eating, drinking, and chasing after women. But he doesn’t count on his intended victims, the wily group of women from Windsor, having schemes of their own.

For director Robert Carsen, however, Falstaff is much more than a simple buffoon. “*Falstaff* is a celebration of humanity,” he observes. “It distills into music all the greatest, warmest joy that we can share with each other.” Even when Falstaff’s intended victims, the merry wives, turn the tables on him, the story never deviates from good-natured fun. By the end of the opera, even Falstaff, humbled by his fall from grace can laugh at himself. Yet Verdi and Carsen also recognize that any good joke can still surprise. After a career spent crafting “serious” stage works, Verdi surprised the operatic world with a farcical adventure. And by setting *Falstaff* in the mid-20th-century, Carsen pokes fun at the social tensions in English society after World War II—and asks us to consider how Falstaff’s joke still resonates today.

This guide approaches *Falstaff* as an investigation of how musical comedy can be used to speak about societal issues, power dynamics, and relationships of all kinds. The materials on the following pages include a guide to Shakespeare’s play, an introduction to Verdi’s musical language, insights into the dramatic and visual messaging of director Robert Carsen’s staging, and classroom activities that will bring the opera’s music and story to life. By delving into *Falstaff*’s music, drama, and design, this guide will forge interdisciplinary classroom connections, inspire critical thinking, and help students to reflect on their own society through a comic lens in the manner of Verdi’s hilarious, heartfelt work.

THE WORK

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

An opera in three acts, sung in Italian

Libretto by Arrigo Boito

Based on Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV, Part 1* and *Henry IV, Part 2*

First performed on February 9, 1893 at La Scala, Milan

PRODUCTION

Robert Carsen Production

Paul Steinberg Set Designer

Brigitte Reiffenstuel Costume Designer

Robert Carsen and Peter Van Praet Lighting Designers

PERFORMANCE

The Met: Live in HD

April 1, 2023

Hera Hyesang Park Nannetta

Ailyn Pérez Alice Ford

Marie-Nicole Lemieux Mistress Quickly

Jennifer Johnson Cano Meg Page

Bogdan Volkov Fenton

Michael Volle Falstaff

Christopher Maltman Ford

Daniele Rustioni Conductor

A co-production of the Metropolitan Opera; Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London; Teatro alla Scala, Milan; the Canadian Opera Company, Toronto; and Dutch National Opera, Amsterdam

Production gifts of the Betsy and Ed Cohen/Areté Foundation Fund for New Production & Revivals and Harry and Misook Doolittle

Additional funding from The Gilbert S. Kahn & John J. Noffo Kahn Foundation and Mr. and Mrs. William R. Miller



HYESANG
PARK



PÉREZ



LEMIEUX



JOHNSON
CANO



VOLKOV



VOLLE



MALTMAN

The Metropolitan Opera Educator Guides offer a creative, interdisciplinary introduction to opera. Designed to complement existing classroom curricula in music, the humanities, STEM fields, and the arts, these guides will help young viewers confidently engage with opera regardless of their prior experience with the art form.

On the following pages, you'll find an array of materials designed to encourage critical thinking, deepen background knowledge, and empower students to engage with the opera. These materials can be used in classrooms and/or via remote-learning platforms, and they can be mixed and matched to suit your students' individual academic needs.

Above all, this guide is intended to help students explore *Falstaff* through their own experiences and ideas. The diverse perspectives that your students bring to opera make the art form infinitely richer, and we hope that they will experience opera as a space where their confidence can grow and their curiosity can flourish.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCING THE OPERA

The Story and Source: A synopsis for young readers, alongside information about the opera's literary forebears

Who's Who in *Falstaff*: An introduction to the opera's main characters

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Timelines: One or more timelines connecting the opera to events in world history

Musical Snapshot: A short introduction to an iconic operatic moment

Deep Dives: Interdisciplinary essays providing additional insights

10 Essential Opera Terms: Vocabulary words to facilitate discussion

Fun Facts: Entertaining tidbits about *Falstaff*

OPERA IN THE CLASSROOM

Active Exploration: Hands-on activities connecting the opera to topics in music, the humanities, STEM, and the arts

Critical Inquiries: Questions and thought experiments designed to foster careful thinking

Reproducibles: Classroom-ready worksheets that support the activities in this guide

You will also need the audio selections from *Falstaff*, available online at metopera.org/falstaffguide.

WHO'S WHO IN FALSTAFF

CHARACTER	PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Sir John Falstaff An aging knight down on his luck	FAHL-stahf	baritone	Sir John is a knightly aristocrat who has known better days. He is high-minded but with loose morals; greedy but surprisingly wise; vain and pompous but ultimately able to laugh at himself and at the situations in which he ends up.
Alice Ford A clever woman from Windsor	ah-LEE-chay	soprano	Alice is one of the “merry wives,” married to the upstanding townsman Ford. Although she may play the part of a docile housewife, in reality, Alice’s wit and determination are a match for any trickster in Windsor.
Meg Page Alice’s friend	as in English	mezzo-soprano	Meg is the “merry wife” of Page, another important townsman (but never seen in the opera). She and Alice are firm friends, along with Mistress Quickly. Meg happily plays along with the plan to take down Sir John.
Mistress Quickly A friend of Alice and Meg	as in English	mezzo-soprano	Another one of Alice’s friends, Quickly is an essential part of the trap laid for Sir John: She sets the ruse in motion by playing the part of the go-between and flirting outrageously with the knight.
Ford Alice’s jealous husband	as in English	baritone	Ford is a proud and respectable townsman. He is protective of his wife, Alice, and has strict expectations for his daughter Nannetta, yet his ego turns out to be his biggest flaw.
Nannetta The Fords’ teenage daughter	nahn-NET-tah	soprano	Nannetta is the innocent daughter of Alice and Ford. She has eyes for only one man, Fenton. Although her father is pressuring her to marry Dr. Caius, by participating in her mother’s plan, she is finally reunited with her true love.
Fenton Nannetta’s boyfriend	as in English	tenor	A young man in Windsor. Fenton lacks the social status or capital to be considered an appropriate match for Nannetta by her father, but his charm and his deep love for her eventually win over Ford.
Bardolfo and Pistola Falstaff’s associates	bar-DOLE-foh and pee-STOLE-lah	tenor and bass	The comic figures Pistola and Bardolfo are petty thieves who, in their quest for money, are dragged into Sir John’s messy adventures.
Dr. Caius Ford’s choice for Nannetta’s husband	KAH-YOOS	tenor	A respectable older man in Windsor who is smitten with Nannetta. He is an associate of Ford and is in cahoots with him to marry his daughter.

SYNOPSIS

ACT I: *The Garter Inn, Windsor, England.* As the curtain rises, the enraged Dr. Caius is accusing Bardolfo and Pistola, two associates of the venerable scoundrel Sir John Falstaff, of thievery. With trickster logic and wit verging on condescension, Falstaff shoos Caius away. Falstaff has money problems, and he chastises Bardolfo and Pistola for enjoying themselves at his expense. To remedy the situation, Falstaff lays out a scheme to wheedle cash out of two wealthy housewives, Alice Ford and Meg Page, by sending them both love letters. But Bardolfo and Pistola refuse to deliver them, claiming that the scheme offends their sense of honor. Infuriated, Falstaff rants that “honor is a meaningless concept,” and sends the thieves packing.

The garden of the Fords’ home. When Meg Page excitedly tells Alice Ford that she’s received a love note from the old knight Falstaff, she learns that Alice holds an identical letter. The wives decide to teach Falstaff a lesson. Alice will accept Falstaff’s advances and then expose him, with the help of Alice’s daughter, Nannetta, and their friend, Mistress Quickly. Meanwhile, Bardolfo and Pistola denounce Falstaff to Alice’s husband, Ford. Also present are Dr. Caius, whom Ford has chosen as Nannetta’s husband, and the young Fenton, whom Nannetta loves. The jealous Ford fears that his wife will give in to Falstaff’s wooing. Ford decides to trick his rival and to test his wife’s fidelity: He plans to visit Falstaff in disguise and ask him to seduce Alice. Three intrigues unfold at once: The women and men plan their schemes, while Fenton and Nannetta find a private moment to kiss.

ACT II: *The Garter Inn.* Falstaff holds court at the inn. First, Bardolfo and Pistola pretend to seek forgiveness and rejoin his service. Next, Mistress Quickly arrives with an invitation from Alice to visit her at home that afternoon. Falstaff is delighted. Bardolfo introduces a “Mister Fontana”—really Ford in disguise. “Fontana” offers Falstaff money to seduce a certain virtuous Alice Ford, in order to clear the path for Fontana to woo Alice himself. Falstaff reveals that he’s already set up a rendezvous with her. When Falstaff heads off to change his clothes, Ford erupts with jealousy.





The Fords' home. Mistress Quickly, Alice, and Meg are preparing for Falstaff's visit, although Nannetta is upset because her father insists that she marry Dr. Caius. Falstaff arrives and begins his seduction. Alice deters him, saying she knows he is also courting Meg. Suddenly Meg arrives, and (as they have planned) she warns Alice that Ford is approaching. At that moment, Quickly rushes in with news that Ford really is on his way. As Ford, Dr. Caius, Bardolfo, Pistola, and Fenton burst in, Falstaff desperately looks for a hiding place. The women stuff him into a huge laundry basket while the men go off to search the rest of the house. Nannetta and Fenton manage to steal another kiss, before they're discovered by an enraged Ford. Amid the confusion, Alice instructs her servants to empty the laundry basket out the window. To everyone's amusement, Falstaff is thrown into the Thames.

ACT III: *Outside the Garter Inn.* Falstaff, soggy and miserable after his unexpected swim, has decided that the world is a wicked place, but a glass of mulled wine soon cheers him up. Mistress Quickly appears, apologizing on Alice's behalf, and invites Falstaff to another rendezvous—that night in Windsor Great Park. Alice, Meg, Ford, Dr. Caius, and Nannetta look on unseen as Falstaff accepts the invitation. Alice lays out a plan to ridicule the knight: They will scare him by pretending to be a band of woodland fairies, long rumored to haunt the wood. Ford secretly agrees to let Caius sneak Nannetta out of the forest and marry her.

Windsor Great Park. Alice, who is aware of Ford's scheme, has arranged to disguise Bardolfo as Nannetta. Caius will then abduct the wrong person, and Nannetta can marry Fenton. Falstaff arrives at midnight to find Alice, as planned, but their meeting is interrupted by the arrival of the woodland fairies (really townspeople in disguise), who prod, pinch, and make fun of the terrified Falstaff. At last, recognizing Bardolfo, whose mask has fallen off, Falstaff realizes that he has been tricked—but he takes it all in good humor. Dr. Caius approaches with his "bride," as Alice escorts her daughter and Fenton—both disguised—to the gathering. Each couple's union is blessed by Ford, but when Dr. Caius lifts his bride's veil, he discovers "she" is Bardolfo. Ford finally accepts Fenton as his future son-in-law. Falstaff leads everybody in a final ensemble, declaring that everything in the world is a good joke.

THE PLAY *THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR* BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

By 1602, the year in which *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was first published, William Shakespeare was an established actor and playwright in England, churning out plays for London's Globe Theatre and the company of players known then as the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Protected by royal patronage, they staged private entertainment for the court of Queen Elizabeth I, the reigning monarch, as well as performing to theater audiences in London and on tour in the English provinces, and it was perhaps this royal connection that gave us *Merry Wives*.

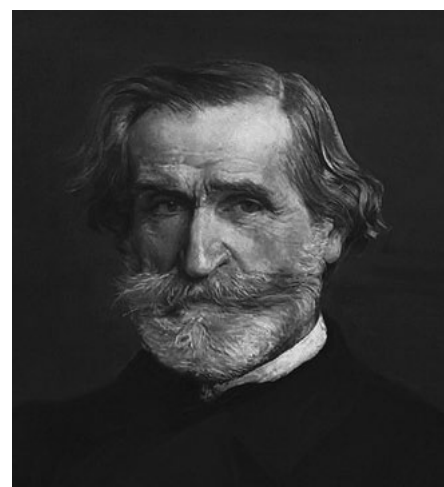
Legend has it that Queen Elizabeth I was so enraptured by the character of Sir John Falstaff, first seen in the historical plays *Henry IV, Part 1* and *Henry IV, Part 2* (written between 1596–99), that she inspired Shakespeare to dedicate a new story to the depiction of Falstaff in love. This became *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, most likely performed for the first time by Shakespeare's troupe in the late 1590s, and loosely based on a story in the collection "Il Pecorone" (written 1378–85) by the Italian Ser Giobanni Fiorentino. The play was a hit: Audiences in Elizabethan England lapped up Falstaff's antics, thanks in large part to actor Will Kemp's performances in the title role. Kemp, who specialized in comic roles such as Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, was the equivalent of a 16th-century stand-up comic. He was known for his physical comedy routines and spoken asides, features that are integral to the portrayal of the corpulent and vain Falstaff. Kemp's routines may also have played a part in Shakespeare's creative process in *Merry Wives* since, in the 1590s, the comedian was known for performing the ballad "Singing Simkin" (his own composition), which tells of a man hiding in a chest to escape his jealous spouse—an episode later written into Shakespeare's play.

The combination of Kemp's star power and the likeability of Falstaff's character aided *Merry Wives*' success in the 16th century, but some of the comedy may also have caused tensions with its royal patrons and censors. After all, the story presented a member of the nobility in a bad light, emphasizing Falstaff's avarice and loose morals. The play was also set in Windsor, an English town dominated by the royal castle that has been in use by the reigning British monarch since the 11th century. The play's takedown of the aristocracy clearly had the potential to hit a nerve with its royal patrons, yet the story's treatment of its female characters may have had a counterbalancing effect. Alice, Meg, Mistress Quickly, and Anne Page (the play's version of Nannetta) brought both cunning and determination to the stage at a time when the ultimate theatrical patron, Queen Elizabeth I, was herself known for strength and tenacity rivalling that of the other, supposedly stronger, sex. In a famous speech, for example, Elizabeth proudly stated that, though she had "the body of a woman," she carried "the heart and stomach of a king." In a play in which a band of steely women win out over Falstaff and their husbands, Queen Elizabeth I might well have enjoyed such a triumphant ending for the scheming, merry wives!



THE CREATION OF *FALSTAFF*

- 1564** William Shakespeare is born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England.
- 1590s** Shakespeare, now an acclaimed dramatist, writes three plays that feature the character of Falstaff: the histories *Henry IV, Part 1* and *Henry IV, Part 2*, and the comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. (The exact publication dates remain unclear.)
- 1813** Giuseppe Verdi is born on October 9 or 10 (the exact date is uncertain) in Le Roncole, a tiny Italian village near Parma. Verdi's parents are innkeepers with no musical training, yet they soon recognize their son's prodigious talents. He will receive his first music lessons at the age of three.
- 1822** Verdi, only nine years old, is hired to play organ at San Michele, a beautiful church across the street from his parents' inn. But Le Roncole's limited musical life falls far short of Verdi's needs, and he soon moves to the nearby town of Busseto to continue his musical studies alongside classes in Italian, Latin, the humanities, and rhetoric.
- 1832** The 18-year-old Verdi travels to Milan and applies to study at the conservatory. He is denied admission partly for bureaucratic reasons, partly because of his allegedly idiosyncratic piano playing. Unwilling to give up his music studies, Verdi takes private composition lessons with Vincenzo Lavigna, who worked as a keyboard player at La Scala.
- 1839** *Oberto*, the first of Verdi's 26 operas, premieres at La Scala, Milan's most famous opera house. The opera is successful enough that Bartolomeo Merelli, the impresario in charge of La Scala, signs Verdi to a contract for three more operas.
- 1840** In stark contrast to the successes of 1839, 1840 is one of the worst years of Verdi's life. His wife Margherita dies on June 18, and his second opera, the comedy *Un Giorno di Regno*, is a total flop. Stung by the rejection, Verdi will not write another comedy until *Falstaff*.





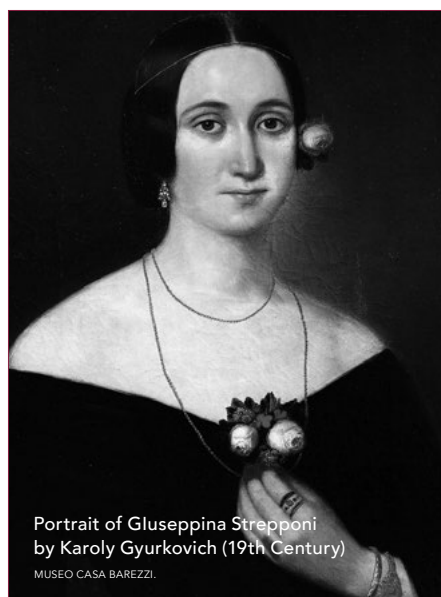
1842 Arrigo Boito is born in Padua, Italy, on February 24. On March 9, La Scala hosts the premiere of Verdi's third opera, *Nabucco*. It is an extraordinary hit. Singing the powerhouse role of the anti-hero Abigaille is Giuseppina Strepponi, a riveting young soprano who will become first his companion, later his second wife. *Nabucco*'s success launches a period of extraordinary productivity for Verdi: Between 1844 and 1849, he will compose no fewer than 11 operas, including *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, and *Il Trovatore*.

1848 Revolutions break out across Europe, sweeping through Germany, Denmark, Belgium, France, Ireland, and the sprawling Austro-Hungarian Empire, which at the time includes both Milan and Venice. In Milan, Verdi witnesses the "Five Days" of uprising that help launch the first Italian war of independence.



1853 Following the disastrous premiere of *La Traviata* (Verdi will revise the piece substantially the following year), Verdi's compositional output slows considerably. Over the next 18 years, he will compose only six new operas, many of which are written for opera houses outside of Italy. (*Aida*, for instance, is commissioned to celebrate the opening of the Khedival Opera House in Cairo.) Verdi is also involved in productions of his operas in Paris, Russia, London, and Madrid.

1859 Verdi marries his beloved companion, retired soprano Giuseppina Strepponi.



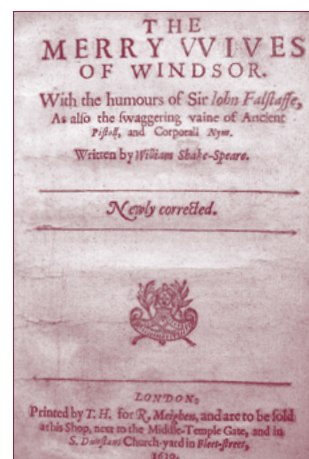
1861 For centuries, the region now known as Italy has been a political patchwork of tiny city states, principalities, and duchies. Yet citizens and political thinkers across the peninsula have begun to imagine a unified Italy free from foreign domination. Victor Emmanuel II, King of Sardinia, is tapped as a potential leader of the prospective country, and Verdi's name is employed as a handy acronym for the hopeful phrase "Vittorio Emanuele, Re d'Italia" (Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy). In 1861, the Kingdom of Italy is declared with Vittorio Emanuele II as its ruler. (Rome, however, remains under papal control.) From 1861–65, Verdi serves in the first Italian Parliament.

1871 After three wars and over 50 years of political turmoil, Rome is made the official capital of the Kingdom of Italy, and full unification is fully achieved.

1887 Almost a decade after his last operatic project, Verdi joins forces with librettist Arrigo Boito to create an opera based on Shakespeare's *Othello*. The resulting work demonstrates a clear shift in Verdi's compositional style: Instead of neat divisions between arias and recitatives, Verdi integrates long transitions that allow him to create a more seamless dramatic flow of action.

1889 Verdi begins work on a large-scale philanthropic project: the building of the Casa di Riposo per Musicisti, a home for elderly musicians. He later wrote that of all his works, the Casa di Riposo was the one that gave him the most pleasure.

In May, Verdi meets Arrigo Boito in Milan and mentions that he has long wanted to write another comic opera. Boito suggests as a source Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and immediately sketches an outline for the libretto.



1893 Verdi, now 80 years old, attends the premiere of *Falstaff* at La Scala. Among the audience members are Princess Letizia Bonaparte and Italian opera composers Pietro Mascagni and Giacomo Puccini.



1901 Verdi suffers a stroke on January 21 and dies on January 27. The funeral is small, in accordance with the composer's wishes, but a public memorial procession through the streets of Milan is attended by thousands. The procession is accompanied by a chorus from his opera *Nabucco*, "Va pensiero, sull'ali dorate" ("Go thought, on wings of gold"); the conductor is the young Arturo Toscanini.

CRITICAL INQUIRY

Can you think of a recent publicity campaign for a work of art? How was it advertised? Did this publicity inspire you to see/read/etc. the work? If you were to publicize a favorite work of art, how might you do it?



FUN FACT

In a letter to Boito from May 23, 1890, Verdi referred to John Falstaff as “Big Belly.”

THE DAZZLING SUCCESS OF FALSTAFF: REHEARSALS, PREMIERE, WORLDWIDE TOUR

This deep dive essay is an example of “reception history,” a research method that uses primary sources to decipher how people evaluated (or “received”) works of art when they were first created. By tracing the history of a work’s creation and reception, we can learn much about the priorities and aesthetic ideals of the time and place that produced the art we consume today.

Having composed *Otello* and *Macbeth*—based on two of Shakespeare’s most calamitous tragedies—Verdi’s turn to *Falstaff* marked a curious shift back to comic opera, for the first time since the disastrous premiere of *Un Giorno di Regno* in 1840. Since comedy was considered a low-brow, popular art by the audiences of the time, this artistic shift certainly bore a degree of risk. Yet Verdi’s intuition (and decades of experience as Italy’s most celebrated opera composer) did not fail him: As the Milanese newspaper *L’Italia del Popolo* reported on February 10, 1893, the premiere attracted a dazzling audience, filling the theater boxes with “colors, reflections, and splendors.”

Verdi’s opera was certainly a worthy object of acclaim, yet *Falstaff*’s early success was also due to a masterful publicity campaign. First and foremost, the opera owed its triumph to Giulio Ricordi, the editor of Casa Ricordi (the publishing house that printed Verdi’s later operas and a longtime champion of Verdi’s work). Having secured exclusive rights to *Falstaff*, Ricordi invested heavily in the opera’s production and, a stickler for detail, he spared no expenses to ensure that the staging of *Falstaff* was historically accurate. He paid Adolfo Hohenstein, the renowned set and costume designer, to take an expansive trip to London, Windsor, and Paris to collect drawings of 15th-century clothing, architecture, furniture, and kitchenware. Hohenstein’s oil and watercolor “bozzetti” (sketches) are preserved at the Casa Ricordi archives. Ricordi also pursued a clever marketing strategy and oversaw the extensive array of media publicity leading up to the premiere, as well as documenting its laudatory reception across the world.

The management of La Scala, the theater in which the opera was created, meanwhile, took the unusual step of increasing ticket prices for *Falstaff*’s premiere, rendering it an exclusive event not accessible to the ordinary folk, who usually made up an important portion of the operatic audience. Whereas a ticket in the main floor typically cost five lire, the price was now inflated to a staggering 150 lire. Nonetheless, Verdi’s fame ensured that the house sold out, and the audience began to line up for the premiere as early as 9:30AM. Among those present were aristocrats, officials, artists, and famed composers, among them Pietro Mascagni and Giacomo Puccini. Verdi himself appeared on the stage at the end of each act, cheered by the enthusiastic exclamations of “Viva! Viva Verdi!” As was customary at the time, encores of favored numbers were performed (the women’s quartet from Act I and Falstaff’s “Quand’ero paggio” from Act II). When Verdi returned to the Hotel Milan, nearly 4,000 admirers awaited him outside. The composer, alongside his librettist Arrigo Boito, appeared on the balcony to greet the exuberant crowd.

The success of the premiere continued into the latter half of the 1890s: After 22 performances at La Scala, *Falstaff* received accolades during worldwide performances in Genoa, Rome, Vienna, Berlin, London, Buenos Aires, Prague, St Petersburg, Paris, and, of course, at the Metropolitan Opera, where the opera was first performed on February 4, 1895.



Poster for the first French production of *Falstaff* by Adolfo Hohenstein (1894)

CRITICAL INQUIRY

Think about novels, plays, films, or operas that have been inspired by real people. What are some challenges you might confront when telling a true story in an artistic medium, and what kind of creative license should authors or composers take when depicting a real person?



A REAL SIR JOHN?

Today, William Shakespeare is arguably the most famous figure in world literature. But in his own day, he was one of many English playwrights doing their best to churn out hit plays in a competitive, highly political environment. In fact, were it not for political pressure in Elizabethan London, the Met might be presenting a Verdi opera called *Oldcastle*.

In early drafts of the first *Henry IV* plays, the character of the fat, cowardly mentor to young Prince Hal was called Sir John Oldcastle. But there really had been a Sir John Oldcastle at the time of Kings Henry IV and V, and his descendants still wielded considerable influence at the court of Queen Elizabeth I. When these descendants' displeasure with Shakespeare's depiction of their ancestor's namesake was made known, the playwright plucked the name of a different cowardly Sir John from an earlier play, *Henry IV, Part 1*. With a twist in spelling, the minor character Sir John Fastolfe (or Fastolf) became the timeless rogue Sir John Falstaff, and the *Merry Wives* went on. Shakespeare knew that the new play focusing on the character would be popular with his audiences and the queen, and he added an audience address in the epilogue of *Henry IV, Part 2*: An actor steps forth and promises a new play featuring Sir John in which, "for anything I know, Falstaff shall die of a sweat, unless he already be killed with your hard opinions." Then, as if to erase any doubts lingering after two plays featuring a Falstaff, the actor adds, "for Oldcastle died a martyr, and this is not the man."

THE LAST EPISODE

In Verdi, as in Shakespeare, Sir John's scheme to woo two merry wives of Windsor comically falls through, and the laughs continue with the wives' revenge. In the opera, the women first dunk Falstaff in the Thames, and then scare him silly in Windsor Forest in the middle of the night. Verdi and Boito seem to have thought this punishment enough for the knight, because they left out a third episode introduced by Shakespeare to humiliate Sir John.

In Act IV of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Alice Ford convinces Falstaff a third time that she is open to his solicitations. When, once again, Ford and the men of Windsor come hunting the errant knight, Alice and Meg Page dress him up to sneak out of the house disguised as "the fat woman of Brentford." What Alice neglects to mention is that her husband "cannot abide the old woman of Brentford; he swears she's a witch." So, as soon as Falstaff appears, Ford begins beating him, crying "Out of my door, you witch, you hag, you baggage, you polecat, you runyon!"

The removal of this final, humiliating incident from the *Falstaff* libretto indicates the care that Verdi and Boito took in constructing their opera. Although they used *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as their template, the composer and librettist understood that Shakespeare's play is a rambling burlesque, played for maximum laughter. *Falstaff*, on the other hand, is a more nuanced portrait of a multi-dimensional figure. After one comic dunking, Boito's libretto skips to an incident in which Falstaff's own weaknesses prompt his comeuppance, and Verdi and his librettist inserted a final fugue into the action in which all the characters reflect on their actions and their morals. The crowd-pleasing jokes that served Shakespeare's purposes so well in the play cede to a more complex and empathetic vision of Falstaff in the opera.

CRITICAL INQUIRY

Think of a story you know that has been adapted from one medium to another (for example, a book adapted into a film). How were the narrative and characters changed when it transferred from one expressive art form to another, and why?



CRITICAL INQUIRY

How might you, as a director, change an opera's setting to underline themes in the plot or to show the narrative in a new light? Within opera, how might you use developments in a character's costume to chart their changing emotions or character growth?

THE PRODUCTION

Italian comic opera thrives on contrasts and power dynamics: Clashes between nobles and servants, old and young, the cynical and the innocent generate much of the genre's comic tension, and also offer a clear pathway to an inevitably happy denouement. As such, operas from this theatrical tradition, including Verdi's *Falstaff* or Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* and *Don Pasquale*, are usually staged in period costumes, because historic settings, which typically depict societies with firm class structures and clear social expectations, accentuate these key themes. For example, Director Franco Zeffirelli's classic staging of *Falstaff*, created at the Met in 1964, lavishly portrayed 16th-century England. Yet Verdi's plots often subvert these themes, and in Robert Carsen's 2013 Met production, the comic clash of old nobility and "new money" is transferred to the more familiar terrain of suburban England in the years after World War II. As Carsen points out, updating *Falstaff* from the reign of Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603) to that of Elizabeth II (1952–present) allows the staging to pick up on modern allusions within the opera's social tension and situational comedy.



Carsen's *Falstaff* staging evokes Windsor society in the 1950s. The commercial boom of the age is recognizable in the prestige decors: the opulent restaurant (visible on **MOoD Track 7**), the exclusive gentlemen's reading room (**MOoD Track 14**), and Alice's picture-perfect kitchen straight out of a Betty Crocker advertisement (**MOoD Track 20**). The costumes, designed by Brigitte Reiffenstuel, capture the high-fashion styles of the time. The women wear Dior-inspired dresses, and the men are clad in tweeds and hunting "pinks," traditional British aristocratic dress. Even Falstaff, whose grubby house clothes reflect his fall from grace and his incipient penury, makes sure to dress in borrowed finery when out in public. Clearly, this is a society in which everyone is obsessed with keeping up appearances.

But in the post-war world, new ideas are brewing as long-held social certainties are actively undermined. While Nannetta's father, Ford, wants her to marry the respectable Dr. Caius, she is in love with Fenton, who, in this production, is a waiter. The gulf between the lovers' social classes is symbolized in the restaurant scene, when Fenton must serve the restaurant's guests—including Nannetta and her mother. Verdi increased the stage time for Shakespeare's Anne (Nannetta in the opera) and Fenton, including duets for the couple in Acts I and II, and Carsen's staging emphasizes how their love will eventually overcome class prejudices. As the director has explained in interviews, this setting underscores real post-war tensions in which the old ways of the titled aristocracy were gradually passing away in the new global commercial world, allowing self-made men and liberated women, like Fenton, Nannetta, Alice, Meg and Quickly, to assert their place in the world.



FINAL SCENE

Although Verdi was famously unimpressed by theoretical musical forms, he at times chose to employ them in his operas to produce particular dramatic effects. For the Act III finale of *Falstaff*, Verdi composed a musical ensemble in the form of a fugue, a contrapuntal musical form with historic roots going back to the 14th century. The art of fugal composition reached its pinnacle in the instrumental and sacred vocal works of Johann Sebastian Bach in the 18th century, but fugues can be found in the works of many later composers, both in orchestral music and in opera, including Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (Act II finale) and the prelude to Act I of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*.

The fugue is a complex musical concept. It can refer both to a compositional technique and a composition using polyphonic instrumental or vocal lines. The term derives from two Latin words meaning "to flee" and "to chase," reflecting the way that fugal "subjects" (musical ideas) figuratively chase one another. A fugue begins with a single voice introducing a main subject in the "tonic," or home, key. Once the subject has been played or sung in its entirety, a second voice enters, usually a fifth above in the "dominant" key, but sometimes with slight variations. This statement in the dominant is called an "answer." A third and often fourth voice then enter in sequence, each stating the subject or the answer. Once all voices have entered, the "exposition" section of the fugue is complete. Over the course of a fugue, the composer starts to "develop" the subjects, with voices entering in a range of keys and in variations, including inversion or retrograde motion in the melody, or rhythmic augmentation and diminution. After this development, a classic fugue will usually end with a final statement of the subject in the home key. Notably, fugues have long been associated with compositional virtuosity, and, as a form that is readily audible, they serve the purpose of drawing attention to specific musical moments (as well as the composer's talent).

Verdi drew upon the musical history of the fugue, using the form with a certain amount of irony in *Falstaff* and in his earlier opera *Macbeth*. According to the composer's letters, he viewed an operatic fugue as a musical joke for insiders when he employed the form in the battle scene in *Macbeth*: "You will laugh when you see that I have written a fugue for the battle!" he wrote to a friend. In *Falstaff*, though, Verdi delighted in the idea of using the form to revel in the story's own comedy. In an 1889 letter to his librettist, Arrigo Boito, Verdi stated that "I'm amusing myself by writing fugues. Yes sir, a fugue: and a comic fugue which would be suitable for *Falstaff*." In fact, Verdi did employ a fugue in *Falstaff*'s Act III finale, using this attention-grabbing technique to set the line "Tutto nel mondo è burla" ("Everything in the world is a joke"). In this fugue's exposition, Falstaff introduces the subject, and Fenton supplies the first answer. Quickly and Alice follow, entering with second statements of the subject and answer, before other members of the cast and orchestra join.



FUN FACT

Before choosing Shakespeare's plays as the source for his final opera, Verdi considered *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes (pictured above). The self-indulgent and remorseless character of Don Quixote, just as Sir John's, captivated the composer, perhaps due to its embrace of life's many contradictions.

Verdi may well have used the fugue to display his compositional vitality in a late 19th-century world where his own operatic aesthetics were markedly different from those represented by Wagner, whose operas were hailed as the exemplars of musical progress. Yet the *Falstaff* fugue is much more than a compositional exercise. The musical elements of the fugue also serve to underline the opera's meaning and add to its social comedy. For one, although the characters have been pulled apart by their various schemes throughout the opera, the intricate weaving together of musical voices that is integral to the fugue form suggests that they are ultimately reconciled and that peace is restored to Windsor society. The order of the musical voices in Verdi's fugue also illustrates the way in which Falstaff has been played during the opera: The title character sings the original opening subject, but this melody is gradually changed as Fenton, Mistress Quickly, Alice, and the other characters begin to sing, depicting the way in which Falstaff's initial plans to get rich are altered, and ultimately scuppered, by the women and the young lovers. The Act III fugue finale is also a meta-theatrical moment in which the characters break the fourth wall in order to comment on the situation in which they find themselves. This is a classic operatic technique, allowing characters to step outside of the action to impart the narrative's moral message to an audience—a technique that can also be heard in the final scenes of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, to name two well-known examples.

Allegro brioso $\text{♩} = 120$

answer

Fenton

subject

Tutto nel mondo è

Falstaff

Tutto nel mondo è burla. L'uom.....

è na-to burlo-ne, bur-lo-ne, bur - lone, tut - to è bur -

Orchestra

Fen.

burla. L'uom.....

è na-to burlo-ne, bur-lo-ne, bur - lo - ne, tut - to è bur -

Fal.

la, l'uom è nato bur-lo - ne, è na-to bur-lo-ne, bur-lo-ne, nur - lo - ne, tut - to bur

Orch.

Opening of the Act III fugue finale

FUN FACT

Shakespeare's plays included musical moments in which characters sang contemporary ballads known on the London streets.

THE COMICAL IN VERDI'S MUSIC

"Though I greatly admire Verdi," wrote Gioachino Rossini, "I believe him to be incapable of writing a comic opera." Coming from the most esteemed Italian opera composer, these words caused Verdi much distress. Furthermore, after the embarrassing flop of Verdi's first attempt at comic opera, 1840's *Un Giorno di Regno* (*King for a Day*), it took him more than 50 years to give comedy another chance. "After having relentlessly massacred so many heroes and heroines," he wryly observed, "I have at last the right to laugh a little." The result was an instant success. Verdi's score, full of wit and buoyancy, renders the already hilarious plot even more whimsical and conclusively proves Rossini wrong.

Not surprisingly, much of the comedic effect of the music revolves around the opera's chief mischief-maker. In Act II, Scene 2, Falstaff appears at Ford's house to declare his passion to Alice. The scene begins with the baritone Falstaff singing in the high register of an enamored lyrical tenor (**MOoD Track 21**). Verdi cleverly sets Falstaff's confession to Alice, "Alfin t'ho colto raggiante fior" ("At last I pick you, radiant flower"), to a guitar accompaniment. This instrumental setting tackles two goals at once: It alludes to serenading and recreates a historical Shakespearean soundscape by mimicking the timbre of a lute.

As Falstaff continues praising Alice, Verdi changes the tone of the music to convey the insincerity of the protagonist's intentions. The initial lyrical mood gives way to a more upbeat tone, with short, motivic, turning figures that resemble bursts of laughter. As if this were not funny enough, Verdi accompanies this excerpt with the mocking timbre of not one, but two bassoons. The scene culminates with Falstaff's

Falstaff attempts to seduce Alice in Ford's kitchen.

KEN HOWARD / MET OPERA



“Quand’ero paggio” (“When I was page”) (**MOoD Track 22**). Here, Falstaff tries to impress Alice by recalling his youthful days when he served as a page to the Duke of Norfolk (a passage taken from Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*). To highlight the comic and, most certainly, unrealistic nature of this story, Verdi borrows musical tools from the master of Italian opera buffa—Rossini himself. Sir John sings a lively, staccato line, marked *leggerissimo* (very light) and accompanied by a crude ‘oom-pah’ accompaniment with a brisk “allegro con brio” (fast with spirit) tempo marking. His voice now sounds nothing like a lyrical baritone. Instead, its overly articulated quick repeated notes create a true Rossinian comic bass effect (like the part of Dr. Bartolo from Rossini’s *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*). This amusing scene was so important to Verdi that within the predominantly uninterrupted musical drama he wrote “Quand’ero paggio” in a short ternary musical form (ABA’), giving the aria a self-contained structure that would allow performers to encore and excerpt it.

LO STESSO TEMPO ♩ = 88
sostenuto

Falstaff

T'im - ma - gi - no fre - gia ta del mio stem - ma,

Orchestra

p

Fal.

Mo - strar fra gem mae gem ma la pom - pa del tuo sen....

Orch.

Allegro con brio $\text{♩} = 112$
leggerissimo

Falstaff

Quand' e-ro pag - gio del Du-ca di Nor - folk e-ro sot - ti - le, sot-ti - le, sot -

Orchestra

ppp

Fal.

ti-le, E-ro un mi-raggio va - go, leg - gie-ro, gen-ti - le, gen - ti-le, gen - ti-le.

Orch.

Quand'ero paggio
 del Duca di Norfolk
 Ero sottile, sottile, sottile
 Ero un miraggio vago, leggiere,
 gentile, gentile, gentile.

When I was a page
 to the Duke of Norfolk
 I was skinny, skinny, skinny.
 I was a wandering mirage, slight of figure,
 and gentle, gentle, gentle.

PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS

Philosophical Chairs is an activity designed to foster critical thinking, active inquiry, and respectful dialogue among students. To play, participants agree or disagree with a series of statements, but the game doesn't end there. The most crucial element is what happens next: Participants discuss their points of view and can switch sides if their opinions change during the discussion.

Each topic statement is deliberately open-ended yet ties into a number of the themes present in *Falstaff*—including the consequences of lying and deceit, the complications that result from searching for easy solutions, and the importance of laughter. Set the stage for this conversation mindfully. Offer students a brief overview of the opera's plot, setting, and context, and remind them how to build a safe space for productive conversation. Some of the topics might be confusing or hard—that's okay! As you and your students explore and learn about *Falstaff*, you can return to these statements: What do they have to do with the opera's story? How might these questions help us explore the opera's story, history, and themes?

THE STATEMENTS

- People's perceptions of you don't matter.
- The older you get, the less you have to be on your best behavior.
- Quick fixes solve all problems.
- It is acceptable to tell white lies.
- Misleading others is not lying.
- Deception is immoral.
- Retribution is always justified.
- Games of the heart can have devastating consequences.
- Only arrogant people are proud.
- It is okay to laugh at someone else's expense.
- There's no better medicine than laughter.
- Life is too short to hold a grudge.
- Whoever laughs last laughs loudest.
- The world needs more Falstaffs.

A NOTE TO FACILITATORS: Between statements, provide some clarity as to why that particular statement was chosen. Explain to students where and how each particular theme shows up in the opera, or invite students to offer their own explanations.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Materials

Philosophical Chairs
Reproducible Sheet

COMMON CORE:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6–12.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7–12.1e

Seek to understand other perspectives and cultures and communicate effectively with audiences or individuals from varied backgrounds.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11–12.1d

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

STEP 1. INQUIRE

Invite students to read one of the statements—out loud as a class, to themselves, or in small groups. As they read, they should ask themselves:

- Do I understand the statement?
 - If not, what questions might clarify it for me?
- What immediately comes to mind when I read the statement?
 - What is my initial reaction: Do I agree or disagree?
- What led me to that decision?
 - What opinions do I hold with regards to this statement?
 - What life experiences may have led me to believe this way?

STEP 2. RESPOND

Ask students to commit to one side. They can agree or disagree, but there is no middle ground. (Many will not be completely comfortable committing to one side over the other—that's part of the game. It will help foster conversation and debate.)

STEP 3. DISCUSS

Share out! Use the following questions to guide discussion:

- Does anyone feel very strongly either way? Why or why not?
- Does anyone feel conflicted? Why or why not?
- Give voice to what you thought about in the first step:
 - What led me to make my decision?
 - What opinions do I hold with regards to this statement?
 - What life experience may have led me to believe this way?
- What might you have not considered that others are now bringing up in the discussion?
- Did any new questions arise during the discussion?

As the conversation continues, students are free to change their mind about whether or not they agree with the statement—or develop a more nuanced perspective.

Repeat steps 1 through 3 for each statement.

LAUGH TRACK

Verdi began composing *Falstaff* at the ripe old age of 80, unsure that he would live to complete it and struggling with intermittent bouts of depression. His determination to complete the work was surpassed only by his incredible skill in writing it. Jump into Verdi's final operative composition (a comedy!) then think quick (Mistress Quickly!) with a slapstick game of "PowerPoint Karaoke" inspired by the farcical shenanigans of the larger-than-life *Falstaff* characters.

STEP 1. WARM UP

We will begin with a fun and funny warm-up to get us on our feet and improving! Following the steps below to play a rousing game of "Terrible Presents." Work to stay engaged as a class and support others in the room by adhering to the "Rules of Classroom Theater" listed here. Read the rules as a class and add any other norms the group agrees are important.

Rules of Classroom Theater

1. Collaborate with your peers
2. Have a "yes, and" mentality
3. Respect school norms for language and content
4. Be creative! Think outside of the box.

Now that we have a corporate understanding of some of the basic components of successful improvisational theater in the classroom, it is time to get on our feet and hone our skills of persuasion.

"Terrible Presents"

To begin, the group must stand in a circle. Player #1 in the circle (whoever wants to go first) will mime handing the person next to them a "present." This person must open the present and tell the group what they have received. Whatever comes to mind is excellent—the stranger the better (e.g., "Oh great! Oh great! A moldy sandwich! Just what I wanted!"). Then they must mime repackaging the gift and hand it to the next person in the circle who will repeat the process with a different "present." Extra points for keeping a straight face!

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Drama, Choral Music,
Instrumental Music

Materials

- The reproducible handouts for this activity
- Technology for presenting a PowerPoint to the class
- Laptops and access to Google Slides, Canva, PowerPoint, or some other slide deck platform
- Any items from around the classroom that can make a noise (get creative!)



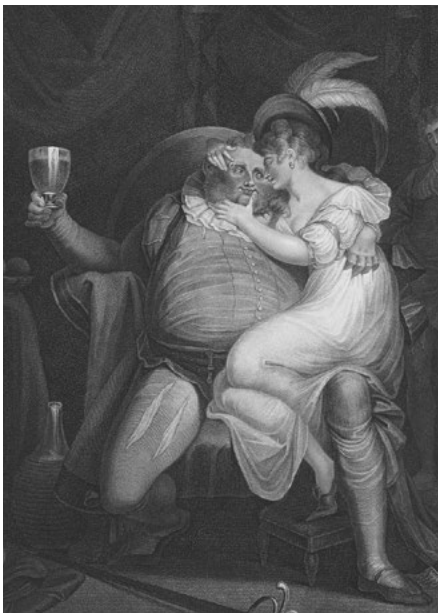
COMMON CORE:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.7

Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g. visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.9

Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.



STEP 3. POWERPOINT KARAOKE PLOT SYNOPSIS

Verdi's final opera is a huge departure from the 27 operas that preceded it. One of the elements that stands out is the physical comedy that is inherent in the telling of the storyline. Actors use physical comedy, exaggerated facial expressions, and stunts to drive home the punchlines of the plot. Instead of playing the long, singable melodies Verdi is most famous for in his other operas, the orchestra is active in the storytelling. More akin to a modern movie soundtrack than an 18th-century opera, Verdi's orchestration participates in the humor of the show with humorous swirling in the strings and chuckling in the brass, for example. Compared to Verdi's other operas, many of which have main characters dying, it is quite a departure. In 1887, Verdi is quoted as saying: "After having relentlessly massacred so many heroes and heroines I have at last the right to laugh a little." I think you will agree!

The storyline for *Falstaff* was created by combining elements of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV*. Verdi and his librettist Boito used the basic plot of *Merry Wives* as the main story for *Falstaff*, then augmented and fleshed out the characters with elements lifted from *Henry IV*. Combined, the two works tell the hilarious tale of John Falstaff, a man desperate to marry into wealth, and the scheming characters around him who plan to foil his plot.

Now, it's time to learn the basic storyline for the show. We will use an improv game of "PowerPoint Karaoke" to tell the plot. Read below for rules.

PowerPoint Karaoke

1. Divide the class into three groups, one for each act of the show.
2. Select two members of each team to present to the class. The other members of their team will serve as the sound effects crew.
3. Allow five minutes for the sound effects crew to gather materials that they might use to make sounds that support or augment the presentation. (Example: banging pencils on the table, squeaking a shoe on the floor, making kissing sounds, air horn effects from your cellphone, etc.) Make sure to practice creating each sound so that you know if it will happen readily when you need it.
4. The Act I group will go first. Have the two presenters step to the front of the class so that they can present. Use the Act I slides provided to tell the story of Act I of *Falstaff*. The presenters may not look at the slides in advance, instead they must improvise the plot based on what they see on each slide. Beware: some slides have only a few words or items on them!

1. As the presentation is occurring, members of the Act I sound effects crew will add sounds to the improvised storytelling when they feel so moved.
2. At the conclusion of the Act I presentation, the presenters will then read the actual synopsis for Act I. Students will discuss the differences between their improvised ideas and what the actual details of the plot are.

Repeat steps 4 through 6 until the entire plot has been presented.

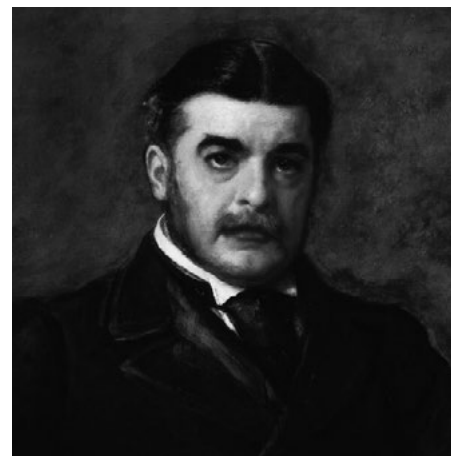
STEP 3. EXPAND

Discuss the following questions as a class:

1. What were the main elements of the plot that stayed the same for both the improvised and actual portrayals?
2. What parts of the actual storyline were left out of the PowerPoint version?
3. How did the sound effects improve the storytelling?
4. How did the effects take away from the storytelling?
5. Could any of the sound effects made in class by miscellaneous items be imitated by an orchestra? If so, how might orchestration reflect the original intent of the sound effect?
6. Now knowing the entire actual plot, how would you adjust the sound effects if at all.

DIVING DEEPER

Expand this activity by inviting students to listen to the short clip on the Met's YouTube channel (just search for "Falstaff, m'ha canzonata metropolitan opera"). Pay attention to the way the orchestra creates sound effects that support the humor of the text and stage action. Share your reflections with your group.



FUN FACT

Arthur Sullivan, the British composer known for his operettas produced in collaboration with dramatist William S. Gilbert, wrote incidental music for the play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* for an 1874 production in London.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Drama, Choral Music,
Instrumental Music

Materials

- The reproducible handouts for this activity
- Paper and pens for brainstorming
- A personal technological device for research

COMEDIC REWRITE

Verdi's *Falstaff* is full of hilarious moments buried amidst rousing and complicated ensembles. Filled to the brim with rapid-fire text, scenes in this production showcase the singing actors' ability to make the audience laugh. Learn about some different styles of comedic acting, then act out a scene from *Falstaff*.

STEP 1. KINGS OF COMEDY

Just like there are many ways to make people laugh, there are many different genres of comedy that actors can draw upon when designing a scene for their character. Some actors go so far as to specialize in one style of comedy, while others are masters at many ways to make people laugh. The exploratory process of learning a role helps actors find different ways of engaging the audience, and many will change things from performance to performance to keep things fresh!

Begin by brainstorming as a class: Who do you find funny? What kind of humor do you most enjoy? What kind of comedy do you *not* find funny? What kind of humor do you think will be in *Falstaff*?

Now, read about a few of the many, many different types of comedy. Discuss each as a class and brainstorm names of actors, singers, and comedians that fit each description.

1. **Slapstick:** Slapstick involves physical comedy, exaggerated facial expressions, and stunts. This style of humor can be cartoonish and raunchy, while keeping a light-hearted mood. Slapstick often features characters who injure themselves or others.
2. **Deadpan:** Also known as dry humor. This style of dry comedy evokes laughter through an intentional lack of emotion. Actors tell jokes without a change in facial expression or visible change of emotion.
3. **Parody:** Like satire, parody is a work that deliberately imitates another work for comic effect. Parodies can target celebrities, politicians, authors, composers, or any other interesting subject. Sometimes parodies deliver a message by commenting on a subject, trend, or style.
4. **Prop Comedy:** Actors use hilarious objects in normal ways or normal objects in hilarious ways. Relies on carefully selected props or even puppets. Prop comedy is an off shoot of physical comedy and ventriloquism.

STEP 2. QUICK RESEARCH

Let's learn about one another's favorite sources of laughter! You will have three to five minutes to use your personal technology to research your favorite comedians (actors, singers, dancers who make you laugh). Once you know who your favorite jokester is, choose a genre of comedy from the list of above that you think best suits their brand of humor (e.g., Jim Carey is a slapstick comedian). Share out with the class.

STEP 3. PLAYING THE SCENE

Now it's time to put our comedy skills to work with a little scene exploration. On the reproducible handout, you will find the translated dialogue for two scenes in *Falstaff* (MOoD Tracks 7 and 8; MOoD 14–15). Break into groups, select one scene, and cast it with members of your class. Make sure that every person in the class is in a scene. Each actor in the scene must select a style of comedy that will influence their characterization in the scene (e.g., Nannetta uses physical comedy and shows that by tripping on her way into the scene, etc.).

You will have 20 minutes to prepare your scene for performance. At the completion of your working time, you will perform your scene for the class who will then guess which style of comedy each actor chose to influence their interpretation of their character. Working with your scene partners, prepare the scene according to the specifications below.

1. Every actor must be engaged and focused for the entire scene and remain in character.
2. Each actor must select a style of comedy upon which to base their character (reflect on the different styles of comedy we studied above). Work to make over-the-top representations of whatever style of acting you choose so that your audience will be able to guess which style you chose.
3. Actors need not be the same gender as the character they are playing.
4. Actors receive extra credit if they perform in an English accent, since *Falstaff* is based on an original work by Shakespeare.

At the conclusion of each scene performance the class will discuss the questions below.

1. What style of comedy was each actor using? How did you know?
2. Does it work to have each actor focusing on a different style of comedy? Why or why not?
3. How would music have added or taken away from each of these scenes?



"Falstaff at Herne's Oak" (Shakespeare, *Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act 5, Scene 5), various artists, (1793)

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

STEP 4. WATCH HOW THE PROS DO IT

Now watch both scenes from a previous *Live in HD* performance (MOoD Tracks 7 and 8; MOoD 14–15). Pay attention to the different ways that the singing actors rely on comedic timing, physicalization, and facial expression to make the audience laugh.

DIVING DEEPER

Work as a class to create a playlist of your favorite comedic moments in opera, TV, movies, or stand up. Have each member of the class submit a short video clip (YouTube is fine!) of their favorite comedic moment from a show. Make sure to respect school norms for language and content with the clip you submit. Once everyone has submitted their favorite comedy moment, watch them all back-to-back as a comedy festival of sorts!

Verismo

A movement in Italian theater and opera in the late 19th century that embraced realism and explored areas of society previously ignored on the stage: The poor, the lower-class, the outcast, and the criminal. Characters in verismo operas are often driven to defy reason, morality, and occasionally the law. In order to reflect these emotional extremes, composers developed a musical style that communicates raw and unfiltered passions. Before its exploration on the operatic stage, the verismo aesthetic developed in the realm of literature.

Fugue

A type of polyphonic composition based on a brief theme, or “subject,” and its imitation throughout multiple voices of a composition. Fugues can be performed by singers, instruments, or a combination of the two. Choral fugues are often associated with religious music, especially the work of 17th- and 18th-century composers such as J.S. Bach. Considered one of the most complex forms of polyphonic writing, fugues have often been used by composers to show off their compositional skills.

Polyphony

A musical texture in which multiple instruments or voices play or sing different melodies at the same time. Most music for orchestra or chorus is polyphonic. Since polyphonic music was first discussed in a choral context, each individual line of music is referred to as a “voice,” even if it is played by an instrument. Anything with two or more contrasting voices is considered “polyphony”; three- to six-voice textures are most common in choral music. Sometimes, however, composers write for much larger choral groups: The 16th-century English composer Thomas Tallis once wrote a motet, “Spem in alium,” for 40 individual voices!

Tonic and dominant

In tonal music, different notes in each key have different “weight.” The fifth note of the scale, called the dominant, is the next in this hierarchy. In D minor, for example, D is the tonic, and A is the dominant. Note that “tonic” and “dominant” can also refer to the triads built on these notes.

Counterpoint

A historical term dating back to the 14th century, used to describe the musical techniques through which different musical voices are combined. In its simplest form, the term can be literally translated as the art of writing “points” (notes) against each other to create harmonic and melodic effects. Composers of the Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical eras were expected to follow a set of compositional rules to create “correct” counterpoint, guided by treatises providing examples and instruction, such as Johann Joseph Fux’s *Gradus Ad Parnassum* (1725).

Aria

A self-contained number for solo voice, typically with orchestral accompaniment. Arias form a major part of larger works, such as operas, oratorios, or cantatas.

Ensemble

In contrast to an aria, an ensemble is a musical number in which multiple characters sing at the same time. Ensembles are typically classified by how many characters they include: duets (two singers), trios (three singers), quartets (four singers), etc. Ensemble scenes are a special feature of comic opera, where they are often used to create humorous interactions between characters.

Staging

An umbrella term for everything that contributes to the visual aspect of an operatic performance, including stage sets, props, costumes, and, above all, the singers’ actions and movement across the stage. While the music of an opera mostly stays the same, the staging changes with each new director.

Libretto

The text of an opera or staged musical drama, comprising all spoken words and stage directions. Literally “little book” in Italian, the word refers to the centuries-old practice of printing a small book with the text to an opera, which was available for sale prior to a performance. A related word, “librettist,” refers to the artist who creates the words for the composer to set to music, either adapting them from an existing source, or writing original material. Often a librettist would have completed his work before the composer began to set it to music, but there were also many composers and librettists who worked very closely together.

Meta-Theatre

A theatrical technique that accentuates the artifice of theater, drawing attention to the performative nature of the stage rather than realism. A variety of techniques can be used to draw attention to the “un-reality” of a play or opera. These include: A play-within-a-play (as in Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* and Brett Dean’s recent operatic adaptation); depicting characters who are themselves performers (such as Tosca, Puccini’s titular opera singer); scenes featuring music that is heard or sung by the characters themselves as music (the music lesson scenes in Rossini’s *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and Donizetti’s *La Fille du Régiment*, or Cherubino’s “Voi che sapete” in Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*); or characters that “break the fourth wall” and speak directly to the audience.

PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS

Active listening, critical thinking, and respectful dialogue are learned skills: Everyone can acquire them, and no one can perfect them without practice. Philosophical Chairs is designed to help us develop these skills while also learning about opera.

You might find these statements challenging—and you might find it challenging to talk with someone whose views differ from your own. That’s the point! Take your time with each statement, embrace uncertainty, and know that changing your mind as you acquire new information is a sign of strength (not weakness). Before you begin your discussion, take some time to review the rules of engagement:

Be sure you understand the statement. If something is unclear, ask!

Face each other. Body language helps show that you’re listening.

Only one speaker at a time. Everyone will get their turn to speak.

Think before you speak. Be sure that what you’re going to say is what you really mean, and remember that we can disagree while still being kind.

Summarize the previous person’s comments before adding your own. This will show that you have heard their thoughts and are responding thoughtfully to what they said. It will also help avoid misunderstandings and faulty assumptions.

Address ideas, not the person. Challenging ideas or statements is great—but only if we respect the individuality and inherent value of the person who expressed them.

Three before me. After you’ve spoken, you may not make another comment until three others have shared their thoughts.

THE STATEMENTS

- People’s perceptions of you don’t matter.
- The older you get, the less you have to be on your best behavior.
- Quick fixes solve all problems.
- It is acceptable to tell white lies.
- Misleading others is not lying.
- Deception is immoral.
- Retribution is always justified.
- Games of the heart can have devastating consequences.
- Only arrogant people are proud.
- It is okay to laugh at someone else’s expense.
- There’s no better medicine than laughter.
- Life is too short to hold a grudge.
- Whoever laughs last laughs loudest.
- The world needs more Falstaffs.

COMEDIC RE-WRITE (SCENE TRANSLATIONS)

OPTION 1

ACT I, SCENE 2 (MEG, ALICE, QUICKLY, AND NANNETTA)

MEG

Greeting her friend
Alice.

ALICE

Also greeting
Meg.

MEG

Greeting again
Nannetta.

ALICE

To Meg
I must share something amusing with you.

To Mistress Quickly
Good morning, dear.

QUICKLY

May God bless you.

Caressing Nannetta's cheek
Pretty rosebud!

ALICE

Still to Meg
You've come at a good time.
Something incredible has happened to me.

MEG

And to me.

QUICKLY

Who was speaking with Nannetta,
now approaching with curiosity
What?

NANNETTA

Approaching
What?

ALICE

To Meg
You go first.

MEG

You go first.

ALICE

Promise that you won't tell anyone.

MEG

Do you think we would?!

QUICKLY

Dear lord! Of course we wouldn't.

ALICE

So: If I were to give in to the devil's temptation,
then I could be promoted to a gentleman's lady.

MEG

Me too.

ALICE

You're joking.

MEG

Taking a letter out of her pocket
Let's not waste time. I have a letter.

ALICE

Revealing a letter
So do I.

NANNETTA, QUICKLY

Oh!

ALICE

Giving the letter to Meg
Read it.

MEG

Exchanging the letters
Read it.

Reading Alice's letter

"Radiant Alice! I give you my love..."

I don't believe it. What does it say?
Apart from the name, the words are the same.

ALICE

Reading Meg's letter
"Radiant Meg! I give you my love..."

MEG

Continuing to read Alice's letter

"I long for love"

ALICE

Here "Meg," there "Alice."

MEG

They're the same.

Quoting again

"Do not ask why, but tell me ..."

ALICE

Quoting Meg's letter

"That you love me." I've never led him on.

MEG

It's all very strange.

All the women are in a group, comparing the letters and handing them around in curiosity.

QUICKLY

Let's look at them carefully.

MEG

The same verses.

ALICE

The same ink.

QUICKLY

The same handwriting.

ANNE

The same signature.

ALICE, MEG

Reading their own letters

"You are the joyous wife, I am the joyous husband, and together we make quite the couple."

ALICE

Indeed.

NANNETTA

Him, her, you...

QUICKLY

Three's a crowd!

ALICE

"Let's become one in the joyful pairing of a beautiful man and wife..."

ALL

How flashy.

ALICE

"And your face will shine on me like a star in the heavens."

ALL

Laughing

Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!

ALICE

Continuing

"Respond to your suitor, John Falstaff, Knight."

QUICKLY

Monster!

ALICE

We need to get back at him.

NANNETTA

And disgrace him.

ALICE

And make a fool of him.

NANNETTA

Oh! Oh! How funny!

QUICKLY

What fun!

MEG

What revenge!

OPTION 2

ACT II, SCENE 1 (FALSTAFF, BARDOLFO, PISTOLA, AND QUICKLY)

BARDOLFO, PISTOLA

Singing together and beating their chests in repentance
We are repentant and contrite.

FALSTAFF

Barely acknowledging them
Man returns to his evil ways like the cat returns to the cream.

BARDOLFO, PISTOLA

And we return to your service.

BARDOLFO

Master, there is a woman outside
who has asked to speak with you.

FALSTAFF

Send her in.

Bardolfo leaves from the left and returns with Mistress Quickly.

QUICKLY

Bowing deeply to Falstaff who is still seated
Your Honor.

FALSTAFF

Good morning, good woman.

QUICKLY

If your Grace accepts, I would like to have
a word with you in secret.

FALSTAFF

I'll grant you an audience.
*To Bardolfo and Pistola, who hover
in the background, spying*
Get out.

They leave, pulling faces at Falstaff

QUICKLY

Bowing again
Your Honor.

In a low voice

Mrs. Alice Ford...

FALSTAFF

Getting up and approaching Quickly thoughtfully
Yes?

QUICKLY

Alas! Poor woman! You are a great seducer!

FALSTAFF

Immediately
I know. Go on.

QUICKLY

Alice is in great distress due to her love for you. She thanks
you for your letter, and wants you to know that her husband
is always out between two and three...

FALSTAFF

Between two and three?

QUICKLY

Your Honor, at that time you will be able to freely enter her
house. The beautiful Alice! Poor woman! What cruel torment
she suffers! She has such a jealous husband!

FALSTAFF

Mulling over Quickly's words
From two to three. Tell her I await the hour impatiently.
I will not fail in my duty.

QUICKLY

Well said. But there is another message for your Honor.

FALSTAFF

Tell me.

QUICKLY

The beautiful Meg (an angel whom anyone would fall in love
with when they saw her) also greets you lovingly. But she says
that her husband is very rarely absent. Poor woman! A real
lily of purity and fidelity. You bewitch them all.

FALSTAFF

There's no witchcraft involved. It's the result of my own
personal charms. Tell me: do the two women know about
each other?

QUICKLY

Dear lord! Women are born cunning. But don't be afraid.

FALSTAFF

Looking in his bag

I will reward you...

QUICKLY

She who sows kindness reaps love.

FALSTAFF

Extracting a coin and handing it to Quickly

Take this, my Mercury woman.

Dismissing her with the gesture

Say hello to your ladies.

QUICKLY

Your Honor.

OPERA REVIEW *Falstaff*

Performance date:

Reviewed by:

Have you ever wanted to be a music and theater critic? Now's your chance!

As you watch *Falstaff*, use the space below to keep track of your thoughts and opinions. What did you like about the performance? What didn't you like? If you were in charge, what might you have done differently? Think carefully about the action, music, and stage design, and rate each of the star singers. Then, after the opera, share your opinions with your friends, classmates, and anyone else who wants to learn more about the opera and this performance at the Met!

THE PERFORMANCE, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Dr. Caius tries to get his money back. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Falstaff responds to Caius. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Falstaff accuses Bardolfo and Pistola of overspending. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Falstaff has a plan to raise money. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Bardolfo and Pistola respond. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Falstaff has opinions about honor. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Windsor's merry wives discuss Falstaff's letters. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

THE PERFORMANCE, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Bardolfo and Pistola report on Falstaff's plan. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
The wives and husbands scheme separately. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Nannetta and Fenton have a romantic moment. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Mistress Quickly visits Falstaff. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Falstaff meets "Mr. Brook." MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Ford has opinions about jealousy. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Falstaff arrives to meet Alice. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
The husbands storm in. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Falstaff "escapes." MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

THE PERFORMANCE, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Falstaff reflects on being dumped. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Falstaff receives a new invitation. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Alice has a new plan. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Everyone gathers in the forest. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Falstaff realizes the truth. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Two surprise weddings take place. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Everyone has a last laugh. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

Use this space to write a short review of the opera as a whole:

[illegible]