

Synopsis

Act I

In and around Royal Windsor, England. Dr. Caius bursts into Sir John Falstaff's room in the Garter Inn, accusing him of unseemly behavior the previous night. He further accuses Falstaff's two henchmen, Bardolfo and Pistola, of having robbed him while he was drunk. Falstaff contemplates the large bill that he has run up. He informs Bardolfo and Pistola that, in order to repair his finances, he plans to seduce Alice Ford and Meg Page, both wives of prosperous Windsor citizens. When the men refuse to deliver the letters that Falstaff has written to the two ladies, he ridicules their newly discovered sense of honor, before throwing them both out.

Alice and Meg laugh over the identical love letters that they have received from Falstaff. They share their amusement with Alice's daughter Nannetta and their friend Mistress Quickly. Ford arrives, followed by four men all proffering advice: Dr. Caius, whom Ford favors as Nannetta's future husband; Bardolfo and Pistola, who are now seeking advantageous employment from Ford; and Fenton, who is in love with Nannetta. When Ford learns of Falstaff's plan to seduce his wife, he immediately becomes jealous. While Alice and Meg plan how to take revenge on their importunate suitor, Ford decides to disguise himself in order to pay a visit to Falstaff. Unnoticed in the midst of all the commotion, Nannetta and Fenton manage to steal a few precious moments together.

Act II

Feigning penitence, Bardolfo and Pistola rejoin Falstaff's service. They show in Quickly, who informs Falstaff that both Alice and Meg are madly in love with him. She explains that it will be easier to seduce Alice, since her husband is out of the house every afternoon between two and three. Falstaff joyously anticipates his seduction of Alice. A "Mr. Fontana" (Ford in disguise) arrives, and to Falstaff's surprise, he offers him wine and money if he will seduce Alice Ford, explaining that he has long been in love with the lady but to no avail. If she were to be seduced by the more experienced Falstaff, she might then be more likely to fall a second time and accept Fontana. Falstaff informs his new friend that he already has a rendezvous with Alice that very afternoon. As Falstaff leaves to prepare himself, Ford gives way to jealous rage. When Falstaff returns, the two men exchange compliments before leaving together.

Quickly, Alice, and Meg are preparing for Falstaff's visit. Nannetta tearfully tells her mother that her father insists on her marrying Dr. Caius, but Alice tells her daughter not to worry. Falstaff arrives and begins his seduction. As Falstaff becomes more amorous, Meg Page interrupts the tête-à-tête, as planned, to announce (in jest) that Ford is approaching. But just at that point, Quickly

suddenly returns in a panic to inform Alice that Ford really is on his way. As Ford rushes in with a group of townsfolk, the terrified Falstaff hides in a large laundry basket. Fenton and Nannetta also hide. Ford and the other men ransack the house. Hearing the sound of kissing, Ford is convinced that he has found his wife and her lover together but is furious to discover Nannetta and Fenton instead. While Ford argues with Fenton, Alice instructs her servants to empty the laundry basket out of the window. To general hilarity, Falstaff lands in the River Thames.

Act III

A wet and bruised Falstaff laments the wickedness of the world but soon cheers up with a glass of mulled wine. Quickly persuades him that Alice was innocent of the unfortunate incident at Ford's house. To prove that Alice still loves him, she proposes a new rendezvous that night in Windsor Great Park. In a letter that Quickly gives to Falstaff, Alice asks the knight to appear at midnight, disguised as the Black Huntsman. Ford, Nannetta, Meg, and Alice prepare the second part of their plot: Nannetta will be Queen of the Fairies and the others, also in disguise, will help to continue Falstaff's punishment. Ford secretly promises Caius that he will marry Nannetta that evening. Quickly overhears them.

As Fenton and Nannetta are reunited in the park, Alice explains her plan to trick Ford into marrying them. They all hide as Falstaff approaches. On the stroke of midnight, Alice appears. She declares her love but suddenly runs away, saying that she hears spirits approaching. Nannetta, disguised as the Queen of the Fairies, summons her followers, who attack the frightened Falstaff, pinching and poking him until he promises to give up his dissolute ways. In the midst of the assault, Falstaff suddenly recognizes Bardolfo and realizes that he has been tricked. While Ford explains that he was Fontana, Quickly scolds Falstaff for his attempts at seducing two virtuous women. Falstaff accepts that he has been made a figure of fun but points out that he remains the true source of wit in others. Dr. Caius now comes forward with a figure in white. Ford is to marry the pair. Alice brings forward another couple, who also receive Ford's blessing. When the brides remove their veils, it is revealed that Ford has just married Dr. Caius to Bardolfo—and more importantly, Fenton to Nannetta. With everyone now laughing at his expense, Ford has no choice but to forgive the lovers and bless their marriage. The entire company agrees that the whole world may be nothing but a jest filled with jesters, but he who laughs last, laughs best.

—Robert Carsen

Reprinted courtesy of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

Giuseppe Verdi

Falstaff

Premiere: Teatro alla Scala, Milan, 1893

A deeply human comedy full of humor and genuine emotion, Verdi's last opera is a splendid finale to an unparalleled career in the theater. The story is an amalgamation of scenes from Shakespeare, primarily drawn from the comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. It centers on the remarkable personality of Sir John Falstaff, one of literature's most compelling characters: aging, vain, dishonest, a bit crass, prodigiously self-indulgent—but also curiously philosophical. The subject choice of a comedy based on Shakespeare was surprising for Verdi: while there are comic moments in several of his great tragedies, his only real comic opera had been *Un Giorno di Regno*, his second work for the stage and an utter failure more than 50 years earlier. *Falstaff's* supremely well-crafted score, shows that the composer was continuing to grow as an artist even as he entered the ninth decade of his life. It is an astounding work and among the greatest operatic comedies of all time.

The Creators

In a remarkable career spanning six decades, Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) composed 28 operas, at least half of which are at the core of today's repertoire. Verdi's role in Italy's cultural and political development has made him an icon in his native country. The remarkable Arrigo Boito (1842–1918) was also a composer (his opera *Mefistofele*, based on Goethe's *Faust*, premiered in 1868), as well as a journalist and critic. The plays of William Shakespeare (1564–1616) have inspired a huge number of operatic interpretations. Before *Falstaff*, Verdi had already adapted *Macbeth* (1847, revised 1865) and *Otello* (1887, also with Boito as librettist).

The Setting

The opera is set in and around the town of Windsor, west of London. The historical references in Shakespeare's plays place the character of Sir John Falstaff in the first decades of the 15th century, although traditionally the opera has often been set in Shakespeare's time, two centuries later. The current Met production places the action in mid-20th century England, after the Second World War—an era when long-established social norms were rapidly changing and the aristocracy lost much of their wealth and influence.

The Music

Falstaff marks a stylistic departure for Verdi and occupies a category of its own, without parallels in the history of the genre. The musical ideas come fast and abundantly, moving from one to the next organically and without discernible breaks. The text is of primary importance, and while this could also be said for other operas, what makes *Falstaff* unique is the abundance of lyricism within a structure that almost completely avoids traditional arias. The orchestra carries the story and occasionally makes colorful comments on the action, while at other times, it represents the overall spirit of the proceedings, such as in the remarkable prelude to Act III, which contains all the sweeping crescendo of a Rossini overture in less than a minute. Several brief but notable vocal solos stand out, among them the title character's playfully comic recollection of his youth in Act II and his melancholy soliloquy on aging in Act III, as well as the young Fenton's serenade in the last scene. But the bulk of the singing happens in ensembles that, despite their highly sophisticated musical structure, seem as natural as speech and adhere perfectly to the lines of the text. The complex counter-rhythms of the ensemble that ends Act I are both funny and the perfect depiction of people at cross-purposes. The opera's celebrated finale is a fugue in which all the characters take part, each one both a perpetrator, and the butt, of the "great joke of life" Falstaff evokes in his final words.

Met History

Falstaff came to the Met two years after its world premiere, with Victor Maurel reprising his performance of the title role and Emma Eames as Alice. It was repeated the following year and then retired until Arturo Toscanini conducted a new production in 1909 that starred Antonio Scotti and Emmy Destinn. Tullio Serafin conducted the premiere of a new production by Joseph Urban in 1925. This performance starred Scotti, opposite Lucrezia Bori as Alice and Beniamino Gigli as Fenton. The breakout performance of the night, however, was American baritone Lawrence Tibbett's Ford. The opera returned to the repertoire in 1964 in a production directed and designed by Franco Zeffirelli and conducted by Leonard Bernstein, both in their Met debuts. The cast included Anselmo Colzani in the title role, opposite Gabriella Tucci, Judith Raskin, Regina Resnik, Rosalind Elias, Luigi Alva, and Mario Sereni. This staging remained in the Met repertory until 2005, with such illustrious artists as Renata Tebaldi, Mirella Freni, Pilar Lorengar, Patricia Racette, Marilyn Horne, Stephanie Blythe, Susan Graham, Matthew Polenzani, Tito Gobbi, Cornell MacNeil, Giuseppe Taddei, Paul Plishka, and Sir Bryn Terfel, all making appearances. In 2013, Ambrogio Maestri took on the title role in the premiere of Robert Carsen's production, which also featured Angela Meade, Lisette Oropesa, Jennifer Johnson Cano, Blythe, Paolo Fanale, and Franco Vassallo.

Program Note

“The great dream has come true,” wrote Arrigo Boito, the librettist of Verdi’s *Otello* and *Falstaff*, shortly before the former opera was unveiled in 1887. *Otello*’s premiere was an internationally celebrated success, bringing to fruition a proposal that had started eight years earlier when it was tentatively broached over the course of a dinner conversation. Boito refers to Verdi’s dream of creating a new opera based on his beloved Shakespeare, but he might just as well have marveled at the feat of luring the aging composer out of his self-proclaimed retirement from the opera stage.

Verdi had become so identified with the tragic genre that *Otello* must have seemed the perfect culmination of his life’s work. Yet Boito was determined, as he put it in a letter to a friend, “to make that bronze colossus resound one more time.” Verdi, for his part, had long harbored a desire to prove that the scope of his art extended beyond the dramas of gloomy passion with which he had built his reputation.

As early as 1847, Rossini made a pronouncement that still caused Verdi to bristle decades later: “He will never write a semi-serious opera ... much less a comic opera like *L’Elisir d’Amore*.” Undoubtedly, this reminded Verdi of the humiliating fiasco of his only previous attempt at comedy—*Un Giorno di Regno*, his second opera—but he must have also been spurred by an itch to compete with his illustrious predecessor, whose *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* Verdi deemed “the best comic opera ever written,” a work filled with a “wealth of real musical ideas, comic verve, and truth of declamation.”

Shakespeare himself, Verdi’s abiding idol, commanded admiration for the all-encompassing spectrum of a body of work that not only probes the deepest tragedy but also teems with comic vitality. Pioneering Romantics like Victor Hugo—another major influence on Verdi—even reappraised the Bard as one of their own on the grounds of his virtuosity at juggling the sublime and the grotesque within the same play. Verdi had already ventured into similar territory with the decadent festivities surrounding the grim plots of *Rigoletto* and *Un Ballo in Maschera*, for example, or in his almost Dickensian characterization of Fra Melitone in *La Forza del Destino*. Immediately prior to settling down to work on *Otello*, the composer defensively announced to his publisher Giulio Ricordi that he had been on the lookout for a comic opera libretto “for 20 years.” There’s even evidence that just before *Aida*, he briefly considered a libretto titled *Tartufo*—drawn from Molière’s satire of religious hypocrisy.

In other words, Verdi was more or less primed to “resound” once again when, in the summer of 1889, with *Otello* a triumphant fait accompli, Boito won him over with the tempting new prospect of a libretto adapted primarily from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The composer responded with a rush of enthusiasm: “We’ll write this *Falstaff* then! We won’t think for the moment of obstacles, of age, of illness!” As it happened, the creation of his final opera was

interrupted by those very hindrances over the next several years, but it finally premiered in Milan in 1893.

Given the composer's status, *Falstaff* was essentially guaranteed to be received with reverence. Still, the fact that a comic opera could contain so much that was challenging for both its performers and its audiences must have come as a surprise. Not only is the score remarkably mercurial, but the pace of the opera itself remains unrelentingly rapid, a study in coiled energy. What in earlier works might have taken an entire scene to express here incandesces within a compressed time frame, only to jostle against a fresh onrush of musical images.

Verdi, who approached 80 by the time he completed the score, took enormous pleasure in the countless discussions in which Boito engaged him as they hammered out the libretto's details. As a counterpart to his unbridled excitement about the project that he nicknamed "Big Belly," the composer fell prey to fits of melancholy and fretted that he would not live to complete the score.

These polar aspects—the adventure of experimenting, wedded to a wistful sense of a vanishing tradition—can be discerned within the sound world Verdi constructed for *Falstaff*. No other opera by this composer tumbles into action with more headlong momentum—not even *Otello*, whose storm claps raise the curtain with a sudden shock but are accompanied by the vestigial convention of an opening chorus. *Falstaff* dispenses entirely with any hint of a prelude or choral scene-setting. Instead, he launches the opera in a metrically tripping scherzo mode that almost immediately gives voice to the rapid patter of dialogue—a strategy from which Puccini, for one, would learn much.

At the same time, *Falstaff* parades a host of fleeting backward glances over the traditional tropes of Italian opera—structures and idioms Verdi had inherited and developed across his entire oeuvre. Instead of being unfolded at leisure, these dart unpredictably in and out of the hyperactive, continually metamorphosing soundscape that Verdi composed for the array of six scenes economically laid out by Boito's scheme. Think of the brief pockets of lyricism introduced by the young pair of lovers, Nannetta and Fenton, which Boito suggested would be more effective when "sprinkled" throughout the opera, "like powdered sugar on a cake," in contrast to a standard drawn-out duet. Or take the rhetoric of the revenge aria in which Ford momentarily channels a hint of the jealous Moor. The climactic comic frenzy of the second act's finale resembles a mash-up of the most dazzling moment of Rossinian "organized chaos" with a sturdily constructed Mozartean ensemble.

For their source material, Verdi and Boito turned to what is among the thinnest, most lightweight of Shakespeare's comedies. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Sir John—much as he fears giving up "my kingdom" (his ample girth) in the opera's opening scene—is but a shadow of the imposing life force who emerges in the *Henry* chronicle plays. The Falstaff of *Merry Wives* is reduced to

the butt of situation-comedy plotting by the denizens of what the critic Graham Bradshaw describes as “the respectably prosaic world of middle-class Windsor.”

Yet, this uncharacteristically slim, straightforward comedy—according to apocryphal legend, hastily put together to satisfy Queen Elizabeth’s request to see a play showing “Sir John in love”—provided the practical framework needed to bring the most complex and richly layered of Shakespeare’s comic characters to life on the lyric stage. The genius of what Boito and Verdi achieved together was to forge an opera that is, as Bradshaw puts it, “paradoxically more truly Shakespearean than its Shakespearean source.”

This extends beyond Boito’s clever interpolation of material from the *Henry* plays into Sir John’s monologues. As a “translation” of Shakespeare to the dimensions of the operatic medium, *Falstaff* brims over in text and music alike with the equivalent of Shakespearean abundance. Verdi and his librettist had enormous fun trading wordplay back and forth as they parsed the subtleties of Boito’s libretto—an exuberant concoction of puns, varied metrical verse forms, interrelated images, and archaic vocabulary alluding to Italy’s literary heritage (including such writers as Boccaccio).

Verdi’s music meanwhile distills and juxtaposes the divergent perspectives that comprise the opera: the idealistic young lovers, the farcical plot set in motion by Alice (Verdi describes her role as “stirring the porridge”), the dramatic conflict introduced by her husband, Ford, who conspires with Dr. Caius, and the self-serving natural force embodied by Falstaff himself, omnipresent throughout the opera—even when Sir John is offstage.

In the third act, in which the comic momentum of the first two yields to a more ritualistic atmosphere for the final scene, Verdi counters the graphic “realism” of his prismatic orchestration with something new: a miraculous evocation of the numinous world that surrounds that society and Falstaff alike. His music for the fearful specters that are summoned to Herne’s Oak and then comically revealed pays tribute to the sources of early Romanticism and its penchant for midsummer magic. But as in the finale of Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*, the long night’s comedy of errors serves as the prelude to a reconciliation: The fat knight’s “lesson” prepares the way for the young generation to be recognized and securely united in love. Verdi then gathers all the riotous energy of what has preceded and reconfigures it as a fugue, that emblem of strictly organized discipline—his greatest joke of all.

—Thomas May

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