

Falstaff: opera in three acts by Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901). The libretto was adapted by Arrigo Boito from Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and scenes from *Henry IV*, parts 1 and 2. Premiered in February 1893 at La Scala, Milan.

Verdi wrote *Falstaff* -- the last of his 28 operas – when he was near 80 years old. It was only his second comedy, and the third work based on a Shakespeare play, after *Macbeth* and *Otello*. The plot revolves around the thwarted, sometimes farcical, efforts of the fat knight, Sir John Falstaff, to seduce two married women to gain access to their husbands' wealth.

Falstaff did not prove as popular as Verdi's earlier works, and languished until conductor Arturo Toscanini insisted on its revival at La Scala (1898) and the Metropolitan Opera in New York (1908).

Verdi had to trim Shakespeare's plot to make it an acceptable length for opera. To do justice to Shakespeare he had: "To sketch the characters in a few strokes, to weave the plot, to extract all the juice from that enormous Shakespearian orange." At the premiere, a critic remarked:

The leading note of [Falstaff]'s character is sublime self-conceit. If his belief in himself were shattered, he would be merely a vulgar sensualist and debauchee. As it is, he is a hero. For one terrible moment in the last act his self-satisfaction wavers. He looks round and sees every one laughing at him. Can it be that he has been made a fool of? But no, he puts the horrible suggestion from him, and in a flash is himself again. "Son io," he exclaims with a triumphant inspiration, "che vi fa scaltri. L'arguzia mia crea l'arguzia degli altri." ["I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men", a line from *Henry IV* part 2.] Verdi has caught this touch and indeed a hundred others throughout the opera with astonishing truth and delicacy.

Although *Falstaff* has become a regular repertoire work, there nonetheless remains the view of John von Rhein in 1985: "*Falstaff* probably always will fall into the category of 'connoisseur's opera' rather than taking its place as a popular favorite on the order of *La Traviata* or *Aida*."

The opera was described by its creators as a *commedia lirica*. Russ McDonald commented in 2009 that *Falstaff* is very different – a stylistic departure – from Verdi's earlier work; most of the musical expression is in the dialogue, and there is only one traditional aria. The result is that "such stylistic economy – more sophisticated, more challenging than he had employed before – is the keynote of the work." McDonald argues that consciously or unconsciously, Verdi was developing the idiom that would come to dominate the music of the 20th century: "the lyricism is abbreviated, glanced at rather than indulged. Melodies bloom suddenly and then vanish, replaced by contrasting tempo or an unexpected phrase that introduces another character or idea." The orchestral writing acts as a sophisticated commentator on the action.

A recurrent question is how much, if at all, Verdi was influenced by Wagner's comic opera *Die Meistersinger*. This was a sensitive subject; many Italians were suspicious of or hostile to Wagner's music, and were protective of Verdi in a nationalistic way. Nevertheless, *Falstaff*'s style was markedly different from that of his popular works of the 1850s and 1860s, and it seemed to some to have Wagnerian echoes. In 1999 the critic Andrew Porter wrote, "That *Falstaff* was Verdi's and Boito's answer to Wagner's *Meistersinger* seems evident now. But the Italian *Falstaff* moves more quickly." Toscanini points to: "the difference between *Falstaff*, which is the absolute masterpiece, and *Die Meistersinger*, which is an outstanding Wagnerian opera. Just think for a moment how many musical means – beautiful ones, certainly – Wagner must make use of to describe the Nuremberg night. And look how Verdi gets a similarly startling effect at a similar moment *with three notes*."

<i>Falstaff Roles</i>	Voice	Opera des Nations, Geneva June 2016
Sir John Falstaff, <i>a fat knight</i>	baritone	Franco Vassallo (b. 1969, Milano) Paolo Gavanelli (Italian, lives in St Gallen)
Ford, <i>a wealthy man</i>	baritone	Konstantin Shushakov (Russian)
Alice Ford, <i>his wife</i>	soprano	Maija Kovalevska (b. 1979, Riga, Latvia)
Nannetta, <i>their daughter, in love with Fenton</i>	soprano	Amelia Scicolone Mary Feminear (b. Auburn, Alabama)
Meg Page	mezzo-soprano	Ahlina Mhamdi (Brest, France)
Mistress Quickly	contralto	Marie-Ange Todorovitch (b. Montpellier, FR)
Fenton, <i>in love with Nannetta</i>	tenor	Medet Chotabaev
Dr Caius, <i>friend of Ford</i>	tenor	Raul Giménez (b. 1950, Argentina)
Bardolfo, <i>a servant of Falstaff</i>	tenor	Erlend Tvinnereim (b. Bergen, Norway)john
Pistola, <i>a servant of Falstaff</i>	bass	Alexander Milev
Mine, <i>host of the Garter Inn</i>	Silent	
Robin, <i>Falstaff's page</i>	Silent	
Chorus of townspeople, Ford's servants, and masqueraders dressed as fairies etc.		
Conductor: John Fiore (b. Brooklyn, New York. Lives in Geneva)		
Production: Lukas Hemleb		

Falstaff Synopsis

Time: The reign of Henry IV(1399 to 1413) Place: Windsor, England

Act 1

A room at the Garter Inn

Falstaff and his servants, Bardolfo and Pistola, are drinking at the inn. Dr Caius bursts in and accuses Falstaff of beating his servants and Bardolfo of picking his pocket. He is calmed. As Falstaff leaves, he notes his worsening financial condition. Falstaff hands a letter to each of his servants for delivery to Alice Ford and Meg Page, two wealthy married women. In these two identical letters, Falstaff professes his love for each of the women, although it is access to their husbands' money that he chiefly covets. Bardolfo and Pistola refuse, claiming that honour prevents them from obeying him. Falstaff dispatches his page, Robin, to deliver the letters. Falstaff delivers a tirade at his rebellious followers (*L'onore! Ladri...! / "Honour! You rogues...!"*) telling them that honour is a mere word and is of no practical value. He chases them out.

Ford's garden

Alice and Meg have received Falstaff's letters. They compare them, see that they are identical and, together with Mistress Quickly and Nannetta Ford, resolve to punish Falstaff. Meanwhile, Ford has been warned of the letters by Bardolfo and Pistola, and they are joined by Dr Caius and Fenton, a young gentleman. (Ford disapproves of Fenton interest in Nannetta.) Both groups sing of their thirst for revenge either separately or together, while the young lovers exchange courting banter. The multiple vocal lines and meter here makes this ensemble rather difficult to perform well.

Act 2

A room at the Garter Inn

Falstaff is alone at the inn. Bardolfo and Pistola, now in the pay of Ford, enter and pretend to beg for forgiveness for past transgressions. They announce to their master the arrival of Mistress Quickly, who delivers an invitation to go to Alice's house that afternoon between the hours of two and three. She also delivers an answer from Meg Page and assures Falstaff that neither is aware of the other's letter. Falstaff celebrates his potential success ("*Alice è mia*/Alice is mine." "*Va vecchio John*" / "Go, old Jack, go your own way").

Ford arrives, masquerading as "Signor Fontana (Master Brook)", supposedly an admirer of Alice; he offers money to the fat knight to seduce her. "Fontana" explains that if Alice succumbs to Falstaff, it will then be easier for Fontana to overcome her virtuous scruples. Falstaff agrees with pleasure and reveals that he already has a rendezvous arranged with Alice for two o'clock – the hour when Ford is always absent from home. Falstaff goes off to change into his best clothes; Ford is consumed with jealousy (*È sogno o realtà?* / "Is it a dream or reality?") in the best Elizabethan theatrical tradition of the enraged cuckold. When Falstaff returns in his finery, they leave together with elaborate displays of mutual courtesy.

A room in Ford's house

The three women plot their strategy ("*Gaie Comari di Windsor*" / "Merry wives of Windsor, the time has come!"). They are in high spirits, but Alice notices that Nannetta is not. This is because Ford plans to marry her to Dr Caius, a man old enough to be her grandfather; the women reassure her that they will prevent it. Mistress Quickly announces Falstaff's arrival, and Mistress Ford has a large laundry basket and a screen placed in readiness.

Falstaff's attempts to seduce Alice with tales of his past glory ("*Quand'ero paggio del Duca di Norfolk*" / "When I was page to the Duke of Norfolk I was slender") are cut short, as Mistress Quickly reports the impending arrival of Ford with a retinue of henchmen to catch his wife's lover. Falstaff hides first behind the screen, and then the women hide him in the laundry basket. In the meantime Fenton and Nannetta hide behind the screen. The men hear the sound of a kiss behind it. They assume it is Falstaff with Alice, but instead they find the young lovers. Ford orders Fenton to leave. Inside the hamper Falstaff is almost suffocating. While the men resume the search of the house, Alice orders her servants to throw the laundry basket out the window (defenestration) into River Thames. Falstaff endures the jeers of the crowd.

Act 3

Before the inn

Falstaff glumly curses the sorry state of the world. Some mulled wine soon improves his mood. Mistress Quickly arrives and delivers another invitation to meet Alice. Falstaff wants nothing to do with it, but she persuades him. He is to meet Alice at midnight at Herne's Oak in Windsor Great Park dressed up as Herne the Hunter. He and Mistress Quickly go inside the inn.

Ford has realised his error in suspecting his wife, and they and their allies have been watching secretly. They now concoct a plan for Falstaff's punishment: dressed as supernatural creatures, they will ambush and torment him at midnight. Ford privately proposes a separate plot to Caius: Nannetta will be disguised as Queen of the Fairies, Caius will wear a monk's costume, and Ford will join the two of them with a nuptial blessing. Mistress Quickly overhears and quietly vows to thwart Ford's scheme.

Herne's Oak in Windsor Park on a moonlit midnight

Fenton arrives at the oak tree and sings of his happiness ("Dal labbro il canto estasiato vola" / "From my lips, a song of ecstasy flies") ending with "Lips that are kissed lose none of their allure." Nannetta enters to finish the line with "Indeed, they renew it, like the moon." The women arrive and disguise Fenton as a monk, telling him that they have arranged to spoil Ford's and Caius's plans. Nannetta, as the Fairy Queen, instructs her helpers ("Sul fil d'un soffio etesio" / "On the breath of a fragrant breeze, fly, nimble spirits") before all the characters arrive on the scene.

Falstaff attempts a love scene with Alice, but is interrupted by the announcement that witches are approaching. The men, disguised as elves and fairies, soundly thrash Falstaff. At length he recognises Bardolfo in disguise. The joke is over, and Falstaff acknowledges that he has received his due.

Ford announces that a wedding shall ensue. Caius and the Queen of the Fairies enter. A second couple, also in masquerade, ask Ford to deliver the same blessing for them as well. Ford conducts the double ceremony. Caius finds that instead of Nannetta, his bride is the disguised Bardolfo, and Ford has unwittingly blessed the marriage of Fenton and Nannetta. Ford accepts the *fait accompli* with good grace. Falstaff, pleased to find himself not the only dupe, proclaims in a fugue, which the entire company sings, that all the world is folly, and all are figures of fun (*Tutto nel mondo è burla... Tutti gabbati!* / "Everything in the world is a jest...").

-wikipedia, edited