

2012 Suggestions for Teaching *The Very Merry Wives of Windsor, Iowa* by Alison Carey,
from the play by William Shakespeare

Before seeing/reading the play

1. *The Very Merry Wives of Windsor, Iowa* is an adaptation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* by William Shakespeare. Read Shakespeare's play or a synopsis. These and other websites provide information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Merry_Wives_of_Windsor

www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/merrywives

http://shakespeare.mit.edu/merry_wives/full.html

2. Research the character of Falstaff. What play was he originally created for? Look at the theories and anecdotal stories about how Falstaff might have wound up in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. These and other websites provide information:

www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/falstaff.html

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falstaff>

<http://dsc.dixie.edu/shakespeare/falstess.htm>

3. In Shakespeare's telling of the story, Falstaff's position in society comes from his being an English knight. Research knighthood in medieval and Elizabethan England. What qualities were knights expected to have? How were they expected to behave? These and other websites provide information:

www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-knights.htm

www.elizabethan.org/compendium/23.html

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knight>

4. What are the characteristics of a Shakespearean comedy? This and other websites provide information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakespearean_comedies

5. Look up Windsor, England in, both in Shakespeare's day and today. What is its proximity to London? How did and does its wealth and median income look compared to other small towns in England? What was and is its connection to the government? In what ways, despite its proximity to the city, is it a small town? This and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windsor,_Berkshire
www.localhistories.org/windsor.html
<http://www.actsmart.biz/news/the-10-richest-towns-in-the-uk-and-the-10-poorest.php>

6. Look up Iowa on a map. Research its geography, population, major industries, etc. Look for information on the debate over ethanol in this country and how it affects Iowa. References will be made in the play to Iowa's nickname, and its year of statehood, so watch for both of those in your research. These and other websites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iowa>
www.iowa.gov/Facts_About_Iowa
http://www.iowastatedaily.com/news/article_76dc4f66-7206-11e1-a02b-0019bb2963f4.html

7. Refer to your research on Windsor, England. There is no town of Windsor, Iowa, but there is a Windsor Heights. Look up Windsor Heights, Iowa and compare it to Windsor, England. How does its proximity to Iowa's capitol city of Des Moines match up with Windsor's proximity to London? How does its wealth and median income compare to other parts of Iowa? In what ways, despite its proximity to the city, is it still a small town? These and other websites provide information:
www.city-data.com/city/Windsor-Heights-Iowa.html
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windsor_Heights,_Iowa

8. What is an arranged marriage, particularly in Elizabethan England? What are the advantages of arranged marriages? The disadvantages? What would prompt parents to arrange a marriage for their child? What importance would social stratum hold when arranging a marriage? Money? Compatibility? Love? Under what situations today do we have anything like arranged marriages? These and other websites provide information:

www.william-shakespeare.info/elizabethan-wedding-customs.htm

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arranged_marriage

9. Alison Carey, the author of *The Very Merry Wives of Windsor, Iowa*, developed her style of adaptation during her tenure with the Cornerstone Theater Company. Research the history of the Cornerstone Theater and their adaptations of classic plays. These and other websites provide information:

www.cornerstone.pbworks.com/w/page/.../Cornerstone%20Timeline

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornerstone_Theater_Company

http://www.vathespian.org/pages/Allison_Carey_Bio.htm

10. Both Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Alison Carey's adaptation of it, explore attitudes towards and stereotypes of certain groups of people. Research stereotypes and commonly held ideas about Iowans. This and other websites provide information:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotype>

<http://iowacaucuses.drake.edu/node/9>

11. What are the Iowa Caucuses? What is their significance in American Presidential politics? This and other websites provide information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iowa_caucuses

12. In which states of the United States is same-sex marriage currently legal? Research the status of same-sex marriage in Iowa. What might be surprising about a state like Iowa legalizing same-sex marriage? These and other websites provide information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Same_sex_marriage_in_the_United_States

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Same_sex_marriage_in_Iowa

13. Research the Iowa State Fair. What are some of its major events and judged competitions? Pay special attention to the history of the Butter Cow. These and other websites provide information:

www.iowastatefair.org/about-us/history/

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iowa_State_Fair

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on Falstaff as a knight in Shakespeare's play. In what ways is the Falstaff of Alison Carey's adaptation a logical American modernization of a broke and disreputable English knight?
2. Describe the town of Windsor, Iowa as created by playwright Alison Carey, director Christopher Liam Moore and the design team for *The Very Merry Wives of Windsor, Iowa*. In what ways is the play's fictional Windsor, Iowa similar to Shakespeare's take on Windsor, England? In what ways is the fictional Windsor, Iowa similar to real small towns in Iowa? In what ways is it different?
3. Identify the comic predispositions of each of the characters in this play. What traits make each character comic? How is language used to comic effect in this play? Who uses language incorrectly? How is the misuse of language a source of humor? In what ways does the adaptation use Shakespeare's language to comic effect?
4. Consider the couples in the play. What characterizes each relationship? What do Francie Ford and George Page learn from their wives? What do Alice Ford and Margaret Page learn from their spouses? Contrast and compare the Fords and Pages with Anne Page and Fenton. How does Falstaff's pursuit of Margaret Page and Alice Ford compare with the various suitors pursuing Anne Page?
5. Refer to your research on arranged marriages. In what ways are the circumstances in *The Very Merry Wives of Windsor, Iowa* similar to those in Shakespeare's play? In what ways does Anne have more freedom now than in 1597? What weapons do the Pages have in 2012 America to try and dissuade Anne from marrying Fenton? What does Anne stand to lose if her parents strongly disapprove of her marital choice? What do the Page's learn from Anne? What, if anything, does Anne Page learn from her parents?
6. Refer to your research on the behavior expected of a knight in medieval and Elizabethan England. To what extent was a knight expected to be honest and honorable? Compare that to your expectations of modern politicians. To what extent

do you expect honesty or honor from politicians? To what extent do you expect or assume dishonesty and dishonor?

7. What does the political backdrop of the Iowa Caucuses election contribute to the story of the play? How does Falstaff's failed presidential bid compare to Falstaff's situation in Shakespeare's version of the story?
8. Look up all the definitions of honor in the dictionary. How many of them relate to the situations in the play? What does it mean to be an honorable spouse, parent, community member, politician, etc? Who in the play acts honorably? Who does not? Whose honor is in question? How is his or her honor defended?
9. What is the role of truth versus deception in the play? Who deceives whom and why? Who tells the truth and why? Who is fooled in the play? Who is made a fool? Who fools someone else? Chart the various schemes concocted by or participated in by each character. Which schemes are successful? Which are not?
10. Identify the disguises in the play. Who is disguised and for what purpose? Who is fooled by the disguises? Who is not? What do the disguises reveal about the characters who wear them?
11. Identify the instances of cross-dressing or gender confusion in Shakespeare's play. In what ways does Shakespeare use this device to comic effect? In what ways does Alison Carey's adaptation play with gender? In what ways do the changes in the gender of characters contribute to comic effect?
12. Refer to your research on same-sex marriage in Iowa and stereotypes. In what ways is the Iowan temperament portrayed on stage? Which characters typify the Iowan temperament? Which characters typify pro and con sentiments about same-sex marriage? How does the issue of same-sex marriage and stereotypes contribute to the comedy of the play?
13. Who are the outsiders in the play? How do the people of Windsor, Iowa treat the outsiders? In what ways are the outsiders rejected? In what ways are they accepted?

14. One of the themes Shakespeare addresses in the play is the nature of jealousy. How is jealousy addressed in *The Very Merry Wives of Windsor, Iowa*? What are the consequences of jealousy in the play for the people who are jealous? For the people they are jealous of?
15. Falstaff, Nym, Pistol, Mistress Quickly and Shallow are also transplanted to this play from *Henry IV, Part One and Two* and *Henry V*. If you have read or seen these other plays, compare and contrast the versions of the characters presented in the history plays to the versions presented by Shakespeare and Alison Carey in their stories of the *Merry Wives*. Which characters have basically the same functions and relationships to Falstaff that they have in *Henry V*? Which are completely different?
16. If you are also seeing *As You Like It* and/or *Romeo and Juliet*, compare daughters Rosalind, Celia and Juliet to Anne Page in *The Very Merry Wives of Windsor, Iowa*. How is each daughter valued and by whom? Which daughters find power by defying the societal expectations of their role as women? How much choice does each have about whom she will marry?
17. If you are also seeing *Romeo and Juliet* and/or *The Seagull*, compare the relationship of parents to their children in these plays to the relationship of the Pages have with their children in *The Very Merry Wives of Windsor, Iowa*. How close are the parents to their children? How much power do the parents seem to have?
18. If you are also seeing *Romeo and Juliet*, compare the relationship between love and marriage in it and in *The Very Merry Wives of Windsor, Iowa*. On what factors do the fathers decide who will marry their daughters? How much influence do the daughters' wishes have? What attributes other than love do the fathers value?

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