Check for updates

Renaissance Studies Vol. 0 No. 0 DOI: 10.1111/rest.12838

Falstaff on Tour: County, Town and Country in the Late Elizabethan Theatre

NEIL RHODES

'Where's England?', Donald Trump is reported to have asked at the 2019 G7 summit, 'they don't use it too much any more'.[1] Trump's musings certainly revealed a rather hazy sense of the political geography of the United Kingdom, but they also contained an essential truth. Since the use of 'England' as a generic term for Britain or the UK fell into abeyance, the idea of England as a country with its own identity has largely been confined to right-wing ideology and sentiment. Within academic commentary the subject tends to be avoided, and while there has been a great deal of discussion over the last thirty years or so, in the borderlands of literature and history, on nationhood and national identity, this has tended to focus on those nations other than England that occupy the group of islands that lie off the north-west coast of Europe.[2] The purpose of this article, then, is to address the elephant in the room, and to do so via Falstaff, arguably the most popular of all Shakespeare's creations, who is himself, if not elephantine, then certainly a beached 'whale', as Mistress Ford calls him in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (II.i.57).[3]

There is a consensus among historians that England constructed an idea of itself as a nation quite early on, and certainly by the time that Falstaff appeared in the late Elizabethan theatre.[4] That view has been challenged by Krishan Kumar, who associates nationhood with the much later emergence of a democratic polity, but I do not propose to open up that debate here.[5] Instead, I

[1] *The Sun*, 27 August 2019.

[2] The most distinguished exception is Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); with regard to Shakespeare see *This England, That Shakespeare: New Angles on Englishness and the Bard*, ed. Willy Maley and Margaret Tudeau-Clayton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

[3] References to Shakespeare are to editions in the Arden 3 series.

[4] See for example John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 352–78; Antony D. Smith, '"Set in the Silver Sea": English National Identity and European Integration', *Nations and Nationalism* 12.3 (2006), 433–52; Patrick Collinson, *This England: Essays on the English Nation and Nationalism in the Sixteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011) and especially Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 27–87.

[5] Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Since it is relevant to the latter part of this article, it is worth noting that in dismissing the role of Bible translation in the construction of a sense of nationhood, Kumar ignores the point that, unlike other European vernaculars, the late arrival of the English Bible meant that it coincided with and effectively defined the Reformation there, thus cementing the link between Protestantism and national identity; see Kumar, 103–4.

© 2022 The Author. Renaissance Studies published by Society for Renaissance Studies and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

shall avoid the terms 'nation' and 'nationhood' altogether and come at the subject of England through the local identities of county and town. I shall also largely avoid the two plays that tend to dominate literary discussions of nationhood – *1 Henry IV* and *Henry V* – and focus instead on the rather different idea of England that emerges from *2 Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives*.[6] So rather than 'nation' I have opted for the more fluid and ambiguous term 'country'. The word 'nation' is glossed as 'country' in John Rider's dictionary of 1589, *Bibliotheca Scholastica*, and Shakespeare certainly uses 'country' in that way; but the term was also used for 'county'.[7] Slender says of Shallow in *The Merry Wives*, 'he's a Justice of Peace in his country' (I.i.202), which the Arden 3 editor thinks may be a misreading of 'county'; but an emendation is unnecessary because the two words were interchangeable: Shakespeare's future collaborator, George Wilkins, has a character in *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* (1607) say 'You have bin welcome in your Country Yorkshire', and when King James arrived in London in 1603 an observer wrote that 'it was wonderfull to see the infinit number of horsemen and footemen … from the counties of Kent, Surrey, Essex, & Middlesex, besides many other countries'.[8] This seems entirely apt, because an idea of the *patria* would have been founded on and channeled through a sense of local identity, in which the county was the defining unit. We might bear in mind here Patrick Collinson's comment on 'the dual status of England as a nation and as a federation of counties'.[9]

The other reason why I have opted for 'country' is that it points to the intersection of history and geography. The chronicles of England published by Hall and Holinshed, which provide impetus for Shakespeare's English histories, coincided with the mapping of the land: 1577 was the year in which the first volume of Holinshed appeared, and it was also the year that Elizabeth granted Christopher Saxton exclusive rights to the publication of his maps of the English and Welsh counties for ten years.[10] These rather grand productions were followed in the 1590s by the more democratic pocket maps of William Bowes, and then by John Norden, who only covered a few counties in the south east but who also added roads.[11] History and geography – or chronicle and map-making – are fused in the notion of

[6] Neither of these plays is discussed in *This England, That Shakespeare*, despite the latter being the only play of Shakespeare's other than the Histories to be unambiguously set in England.

[7] Greenfeld, *Nationalism*, 32.

[8] *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, ed. Giorgio Melchiori (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 138; George Wilkins, *The Miseries of Inforst Mariage* (London, 1607), B3r; John Savile, *King James his Entertainment at Theobalds* (London, 1603), A4v.

[9] Collinson, *This England*, 27; see also, more generally, John M. Adrian, *Local Negotiations of English Nationhood, 1570–1680* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[10] *Christopher Saxton's 16th Century Maps: The Counties of England and Wales*, introd. William Ravenhill (Shrewsbury: Chatsworth Library, 1992), 13–14; on Saxton's contribution to a sense of English national identity see the classic account in Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, 107–47.

[11] Katarzyna Lecky, *Pocket Maps and Public Poetry in the English Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 38–50. (Norden surveyed five counties, but only Middlesex and Hertfordshire were printed.)

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

chorography, a term coined by William Cunningham in 1559 to refer to 'the partes of th' earth, diuided in themselues', with the description of 'portes, Rivers, Hauens, Fluddes, Hilles, Mountaynes, Cities, Villages'.[12] The earliest instance of English chorography, though it does not use the term, is probably Leland's *Itinerary*, written in the late 1530 s/early 1540 s in response to the dissolution of the monasteries, and the most spectacular example the chorography of Great Yarmouth in Nashe's *Lenten Stuffe* of 1599. Shakespeare's English histories are chorographical in their blend of history and geography (consider the map that the rebels pore over in *1 Henry IV*) and the two plays I want to focus on draw upon this form in particularly striking ways, using local identities to show us a country. It is this combination of history and geography that might give us a more precise meaning to the expression 'deep England'.

I also want to explore two questions in relation to these plays, which will act as ways into the local identities of county and town. The first is: why does Falstaff take a detour via Gloucestershire when heading for York in *2 Henry IV*? And the second question addresses the point that will already be apparent, which is that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is not a history play: why, then, does Shakespeare take Falstaff on a detour via this, his only English comedy, in the second tetralogy of English histories? Both these questions could be addressed in a technical way with regard to textual status and dates of composition. As far as the first is concerned, in *2 Henry IV* 2.1 the Lord Chief Justice instructs Falstaff to enlist forces on behalf of the king with the order to 'take up soldiers in counties as you go' (2.1.185) on his way to join Prince John at York. But when we first see him outside London, in 3.2, he is at his old friend Justice Shallow's farm, listening to him reminisce about their wild youth. The county is not specified at this point, but when Falstaff does get to York in 4.1, he asks Prince John, 'I beseech you give me leave to go through Gloucestershire' (4.2.79–80), and he does indeed return there, again to Shallow's farm, for the memorable scenes in Act 5. Editors of *2 Henry IV* argue that the recruiting scene at 3.2 was written for an earlier draft of the play in which Falstaff was travelling to Shrewsbury, which is certainly plausible, but I shall simply address the text that we have, where Gloucestershire is a real, peopled place, with a central part in the play, providing us with some of the most famous scenes in Shakespeare.[13]

So why is Gloucestershire significant? Shallow's farm may be a quiet, rural retreat, but the county is the source of upheaval in the second tetralogy: the port of Bristol in the south west provides an entry point into the heart of England, and Bolingbroke's first rallying point in *Richard II* is Berkeley Castle, overlooking the Severn estuary; travelling there, Northumberland

[12] William Cuningham, *The Cosmographical Glass* (London, 1559), B4r.

[13] *King Henry IV Part 2*, ed. James C. Bulman (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 228; for a more sceptical view see *Henry IV, Part 2*, ed. René Weis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 12.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Fig. 1 Christopher Saxton's map of Gloucestershire (1579). Courtesy of University of Glasgow Archives and Special Collections, Hunterian Di.1.12

says that he's 'a stranger here in Gloucestershire' and complains about the 'weary way/From Ravenspurgh to Cotshall [Cotswold]' (2.3.8–9). Later in the play, after Richard's murder, we hear that forces rising against the new king 'have consumed with fire/Our town of Ci'cester in Gloucestershire' (5.6.3–4). And Gloucestershire's pivotal status can be seen from the maps of the period. Falstaff is supposed to be travelling north, but instead he heads west, and the county itself is positioned both on a north/south and an east/west axis.[14] This is clearly illustrated by Saxton's map, which shows the county divided into three strips running north/south; the Forest of Dean in the west, then the Severn valley, and then the Cotswolds (Fig. 1). Saxton does not show roads, but one of the best recorded medieval roads ran north from Bristol to Shrewsbury, and Hal would have travelled this route on his 'march through Gloucestershire' to Bridgnorth in *1 Henry IV* (3.2.175–6). At the same time Gloucestershire is also the source of the Thames, running from west to east and connecting the county to London; Leland gives the source as Trewsbury Mead, though others claim Severn

[14] John Kerrigan, '*Henry IV* and the Death of Old Double', *Essays in Criticism* 40.1 (1990), 27; David Rollison, *The Local Origins of Modern Society: Gloucestershire 1500–1800* (London: Routledge, 1992), 48.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Springs, and Holinshed guides us down the Thames from 'the playnes of Cotteswolde' to the capital '[f]inallye going from thence unto the sea' in chapter 9 of the *Chronicles*.[15] Gloucestershire is obviously not *en route* to York, but the fact that Falstaff travels in two directions in the play has a significance of its own, situating the county as a crossroads of the country.

The most important survey of the country in the period, in both historical and geographical terms, is Camden's *Britannia*, first published in Latin in 1586 (using the term 'chorographica' in the title), with maps added in 1607, and translated into English by Philemon Holland in 1610. For Camden Gloucestershire is a spent Eden. He quotes William of Malmesbury's description of the county as a fruitful paradise where 'the high ways and common lanes [are] clad with apple trees and pear trees, not set nor grafted by the industry of man's hand, but growing naturally of their own accord', only to say that this is no longer true, because 'the soil is now wearied and become barren with too much fruitfulness'.[16] We might almost hear an echo of this when Falstaff reappears at Shallow's farm in *2 Henry IV* 5.3: "Fore God, you have here goodly dwelling, and rich', he exclaims; to which Shallow replies, 'Barren, barren, barren; beggars all, beggars all, Sir John' (5.3.5–8). Shallow's response is a modest demur, but it is illustrated in modern screen interpretations of the play, such as the BBC *Hollow Crown*, where colour is drained from the landscape in a frozen monochrome in this scene. The Gloucestershire scenes are threaded with intimations of mortality, of course, because they show us old men at the far edge of their lives; but we should also bear in mind that when the play was first performed the country had suffered several failed harvests. Falstaff is a product of what is sometimes referred to as the Black 90s and Shakespeare's most famous embodiment of conspicuous consumption emerged in the shadow of starvation.[17]

It is true that this is not much in evidence on Shallow's farm, despite his modest disclaimer, but there are other reasons why Gloucestershire is not the 'other Eden, demi-paradise' of Gaunt's imagination in *Richard II*. Unlike that play, *2 Henry IV* is written extensively in prose and it gives us real people in a real place. Here are some of them: Master Dommelton, Master Tisick, Master Dumbe, John Doyt, George Barnes, Francis Pickbone, Will Squele, Jane Nightwork, William Visor, Clement Perks. None of these is a character, but their names populate the play with the common people of England.[18] They are very different from the titled nobility that we normally

[15] Raphael Holinshed, *The First Volume of the Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (London, 1577), C3r-v.

[16] William Camden, *Britain, or a Chorographicall description of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1610), 357.

[17] On the 'Black Nineties' see Chris Fitter, *Radical Shakespeare: Politics and Stagecraft in the Early Career* (London: Routledge, 2012), 5–9, 29–30, 44–5; for data on harvests see W. G. Hoskins, 'Harvest Fluctuations in English Economic History, 1480–1619', *Agricultural History Review* 12 (1964), 28–46.

[18] On the play as a history of commoners see Alison Thorne, 'There is a history in all men's lives: reinventing history in *2 Henry IV*' in *Shakespeare's Histories and Counter-Histories*, ed. Dermot Cavanagh, Stuart Hampton Reeves and Stephen Longstaffe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 49–66.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

associate with the history plays. Some are clearly fictitious and satirical, while others sound like real men and women, and in the case of the muster scene, where the common people *are* characters, apparently satirical names turn out to be quite possibly real. For we do in fact have a record of the 'names and surnames of all the able and sufficient men in body fit for his Ma'ties service in the wars within the City of Gloucester and the Inshire of the same' for this period. This was compiled by John Smyth of Nibley, who was appointed steward to the Berkeley family in 1596 and steward to the hundred and liberty of Berkeley the following year, just as Shakespeare was writing the two parts of *Henry IV*. On his list is one Thomas Warter, a carpenter from Chipping Camden, who is identified as 'fitt to serve with a Calyver', and among Falstaff's recruits is a Thomas Wart: 'Put me a caliver into Wart's hand, Bardolph', Falstaff exclaims (3.2.271).[19] This is quite possibly just a coincidence, but the detail brings us startlingly close to real lives in the 1590 s, as do the tables of occupations that may be drawn from the muster list. That list is part of a longer record book of local husbandry and economic history kept by Smith, who writes that 'out of our forefathers' fields we reape the best frutes of our modern understanding'.[20] When Shallow and his servant, Davy, discuss sowing the hade field with red wheat in 5.1 they might have come straight from the pages of Smith's manuscript.

Whatever Shakespeare's initial design for *2 Henry IV* may have been, there is no doubt that this is a play with a strong sense of place. This is most vividly realised in Shallow's farm, but the London scenes, as well as Shallow's reminiscences of Clement's Inn and Mile End are also topographically precise; there are references to country fairs; and some of the characters who do not actually appear are given local identities, such as 'John Doyt of Staffordshire' or 'Will Squele, a Cotsole [Cotswold] man', while others are associated more precisely with a particular neighbourhood. At the beginning of 5.1 Davy refers to two local litigants and urges Shallow to take sides: 'I beseech you, sir, to countenance William Visor of Woncote against Clement Perks a'th' hill' (5.1.36–7). These two men were located by the early nineteenth-century scholar Richard Webster Huntley, author of a book about Cotswold dialect, who identifies Woncote as Woodmancot in the parish of Dursley, and writes:

> In Shakespeare's time a family named Visor, the ancestors of the present family of Vizard, of Dursley, resided and held property in Woodmancot.

[19] John Smyth, *Men & Armour for Gloucestershire in 1608* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1980), 92. The Smyth record was first cited in *The Second Part of King Henry IV*, ed. A. R. Humphreys (London: Methuen, 1966), 103 (Arden 2). Poins may also be a Gloucestershire name; see John Smyth, *The Berkeley Manuscripts*, ed. Sir John Maclean (Gloucester, 1883), I, 48; II, 20–21.

[20] Smyth MSS., Gloucester City Library 16,524, I, 72; cited from H. P. R. Finberg, 'The Historians of Gloucestershire' in *Gloucestershire Studies*, ed. Finberg (Leicester: The University Press, 1957), 270. On Smyth and the economic and social history of Gloucestershire see Rollison, *Local Origins*, 139–41, 249–51, 258–64.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

> This township lies at the foot of Stinchcombe Hill, still emphatically called "The Hill" in that neighbourhood on account of the magnificent view which it commands. On this hill is the site of a house wherein a family named "Purchase", or "Perkis", once lived, which seems to be identical with "Clement Perkes of the Hill".

Huntley also points out that Hotspur's reference to Berkeley Castle standing 'by yon tuft of trees' in *Richard II* (2.3.53) is 'the exact picture of the castle as seen from "the Hill"', being 'shut in on one side, as viewed therefrom, by an ancient cluster of thick lofty trees'.[21] That glimpse of a real place in the lyrical landscape of the earlier play points us towards the more localised environment of *Henry IV*, and the Gloucestershire scenes of part two in particular, prompting one editor of the play (René Weis) to suggest that 'Shakespeare was familiar with this particular area' (Fig. 2).[22]

The association of people and place in *2 Henry IV* is part of a wider texture of social memory which presents history as oral tradition. Oral tradition has strong ties to a sense of community and local identity, so it blends with the chorographical character of the play which gives us history from the ground up, but it also encompasses the 'common voice', represented here by Rumour, and it blurs distinctions between fact and fiction.[23] The sub-plot of *2 Henry IV* – more an undercurrent of the ordinary life of the community than a 'plot' – amounts to a dramatization of the social memory of England, combining the collective memory of shared cultural experience with individual reminiscence. In what is surely the most extraordinary demonstration of bricolage in Shakespeare, personal memories are interwoven with scraps of popular literature, from the old songs which evoke a mythologised England of Robin Hood and King Arthur to the modern mythology of the theatre, delivered in snatches in the high, astounding style of Pistol. All this is punctuated by drunken exclamations and the reiteration of the term 'merry', which appears 21 times in the play.

But there is another kind of remembering at work that looks forwards rather than backwards and which takes the form of the *memento mori*. We might see night-time in Shallow's orchard as Gaunt's 'other Eden', but it is a merry England of convivial hospitality at its last gasp. The 'last year's pippin' that Shallow offers to Falstaff at the beginning of 5.3 is not fresh fruit but akin to one of those 'old, withered apple-johns', which Hal has earlier likened to Falstaff himself and which he cannot abide. In *1 Henry IV* he had claimed that Bardolph's red face acted as a *memento mori*, since it reminded him of hell-fire

[21] Richard Webster Huntley, *A Glossary of the Cotswold (Gloucestershire) Dialect, Illustrated by Examples from Ancient Authors* (London: John Russell Smith, 1868), 22–3.

[22] *Henry IV, Part 2*, ed. Weis, 250.

[23] On social and collective memory and the common voice see Daniel Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture 1500–1730* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 271–4 and 356–62; I have adapted these terms to the specifically literary context here. See also, more generally, Jonathan Baldo, *Memory in Shakespeare's Histories: Stages of Forgetting in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 73–101; Thorne, 'There is a history'.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Fig. 2 Detail from Saxton's map of Gloucestershire

(3.3.25–43), but as William Engel has pointed out, in this play it is Falstaff who acts as a constant *memento mori* for Hal, reminding him of his own end and future purpose.[24] Hal's reformation and Falstaff's death are interdependent. The promise of plenty in Shallow's last words before the knocking at the door brings news of the king's passing and the new reign – 'Lack nothing; be merry!' (5.3.69–70) – turns out to be illusory. The *memento mori* that hovers over Falstaff throughout the play and which is echoed in Shallow's 'Barren, barren, barren' is brought into sharp focus in the next scene where we see Doll Tearsheet and the Hostess arrested in Eastcheap: 'Goodman death! Goodman bones!', Doll shouts at the beadle (5.4.27). The lovingly crafted nostalgia of the Gloucestershire scenes in which old men reach back into the past is suddenly terminated by the changed and punishing circumstances of the present.

[24] William Engel, 'Handling Memory in the Henriad: Forgetting Falstaff' in *The Routledge Handbook of Shakespeare and Memory*, ed. Andrew Hiscock and Lina Perkins Wilder (London: Routledge, 2018), 165–79 (172).

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

But while Gloucestershire may seem to represent the old world in *2 Henry IV*, the county was also the seedbed of the new. In the period just before the fictional events of the play, the Berkeley family employed John of Trevisa to translate scholarly Latin texts into English. These included the *Polychronicon*, a universal history which in Trevisa's translation also references the towns and villages near Berkeley and which became the first historical work to be printed in English.[25] In that publication Caxton claims that Trevisa translated the Bible into English, and it is also possible that he wrote one of the manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*, so the area was fertile ground for proto-Protestantism.[26] The most striking illustration of this is that William Tyndale was probably born at Melksham Court near Stinchcombe and baptized at North Nibley: the Tyndale family were from the same neighbourhood as Shakespeare's Visor and Perks, as well as the much grander Berkeley family and their steward John Smith. If the local identities inscribed in *2 Henry IV* help to reorientate the history play towards middle England, it was 'the language spoken in the Vale of Berkeley … middle England in the largest possible sense', as Tyndale's biographer David Daniell puts it, that provided the vernacular foundations for the his English Bible.[27] Camden refers to language as the 'surest proof of peoples originall' and just as Gloucestershire (to quote Camden again) is the 'source or first head' of the country's principal river, so it is the source of the principal linguistic marker of English national identity.[28] In a parallel process of reorientation, Gloucestershire's pivot from a North/South to an East/West axis is also a pivot from the old to the new.

This is the direction that Shakespeare takes Falstaff in *The Merry Wives*, down the Thames to Windsor. The Arden 3 editor Giorgio Melchiori dates this play to 1600, after *Henry V*, but there is no consensus about this, and in their magisterial catalogue of early modern British drama Wiggins and Richardson place it in 1597.[29] I shall be literal-minded about it and argue that after the announcement of Falstaff's death in *Henry V* (1599) it would be strange for him to reappear on stage a year later. Besides, there is a narrative connection with *2 Henry IV* in that the 'competence of life' which Hal promises him at the end of that play is evident in Falstaff's new status as one of the poor knights of Windsor, alluded to in Mistress Quickly's quip about 'pensioners' (2.2.73); and with *Henry V* in that shortly after her 'pensioners' remark

[25] Emily Steiner, 'Berkeley Castle' in *Europe: A Literary History, 1348–1418*, ed. David Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), I, 227–39; Woolf, *Social Circulation*, 268.

[26] David C. Fowler, *The Life and Times of John Trevisa, Medieval Scholar* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 3–5, 241–7. I am grateful to Ian Johnson for the reference, though he adds that this view has not found much support. For the more general point see Rollison, *Local Origins*, 84–96.

[27] David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1994), 18.

[28] Camden, *Britain*, 367.

[29] *The Merry Wives*, ed. Melchiori, pp. 18–21; *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue, Volume III: 1590–1597*, ed. Martin Wiggins with Catherine Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 396.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Pistol eyes her up as a marriage prospect, which is duly realised in that play. So I think it makes more sense to see *The Merry Wives* as following on immediately from *2 Henry IV*. Like that play, it is written extensively in prose and it does, in fact, advertise its Gloucestershire connections.[30] As we saw at the start, Shallow is described as a Justice of the Peace of that county; his nephew Slender says he's heard that Page's greyhound has been 'outrun on Cotsall [Cotswold]' (1.1.83); he tells Anne Page that he loves her 'as well as I love any woman in Gloucestershire' (3.4.44), and he claims acquaintance with 'the best in Gloucestershire' in the final act (5.5.177–8).

But Windsor is not Gloucestershire, and it is a town not a county, so what is Falstaff doing here and can we 'read' Windsor in the same way that we can read the county? The town and its environs are certainly pictured for us with every bit as much topographical specificity as the county: the Host tells Page and Slender 'go you through the town to Frogmore' while 'I will bring the Doctor about by the fields' (2.3. 67–8, 71) in order to meet up with Ann Page who has gone to a farmhouse in Frogmore for a meal with friends; Simple goes looking for Doctor Caius through 'the Petty-ward, the Park-ward, every way: Old Windsor way, and every way but the town way' (3.1.5–7); laundry is taken down to Datchet Mead by the Thames, which is how Falstaff ends up in the river; and at the climax of the play all the company are gathered in Windsor little park, around Herne's oak, to give Falstaff his come-uppance. Then there are the buildings: notably the Garter Inn, where the Gloucestershire visitors, including Falstaff, are staying, and the households of the Windsor residents, the Pages and the Fords. At the heart of the play is the domestic space, presided over by Mrs Alice Ford, into which Falstaff forces his great bulk.

This is Middle England, the bourgeois (or perhaps more properly, 'burgess') environment of a prosperous Tudor town.[31] It brings to mind other Berkshire towns further up-river, such as Reading and Newbury, memorialised by Thomas Deloney at exactly the same time; yet the comparison is not exact, for while Deloney celebrates the work ethic as a way to get wealth, in *The Merry Wives* we see Page and Ford at leisure, planning to go hawking and arranging breakfasts. The only business matter that we hear of is Page's plan to marry off his daughter. And anyway, this is not a predominantly male world: unlike Shallow's Gloucestershire, which seems to be completely devoid of women, even among the servants, and unlike Deloney's eponymous *Jack of Newbury* and *Thomas of Reading*, it is the wives who give this play its title and who are in charge here, along with Meg Page's resourceful daughter.[32] Nowhere in

[30] *The Merry Wives* has the largest proportion of prose of any of Shakespeare's plays (90%).

[31] See George K. Hunter, 'Bourgeois Comedy: Shakespeare and Dekker' in *Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 1–15.

[32] Anne Barton notes the absence of women in Gloucestershire in 'Falstaff and the Comic Community' in *Essays, mainly Shakespearean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 81.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Shakespeare do we get a more vivid sense of a domestic environment. Mistress Quickly, who is a much more proper character here than the urban quean of *Henry IV*, rehearses her daily tasks as Doctor Caius's housekeeper: 'I wash, wring, brew, bake, scour, dress meat and drink, make the beds and do all myself' (1.4.90–1); the play is littered with reference to foodstuffs; and we are shown the interior of a middle-class Elizabethan dwelling. The main plot-line is of course Falstaff's attempt to seduce both Mrs Ford and Mrs Page, and that project requires him not only to penetrate their domestic space, but also to conceal himself within it to escape detection by Alice Ford's jealous husband. The merry wives have the measure of both men. 'He cannot creep into a half-penny purse, nor into a pepperbox', Ford declares; Mrs Page suggests that he 'Creep into the kiln-hole' (4.2.54), while Mrs Ford warns that her husband has an exact recall of 'every 'press, coffer, chest, trunk, well, vault' (4.2.57). The dominant theme of the main plot-line is of a very large man being squashed into very small spaces; but there is in fact nowhere that the fat knight can hide.

And this is really the point. The domestic space that the play so carefully depicts, along with the town of Windsor itself, will not accommodate Falstaff. The word itself - 'accommodate' - is in fact bandied about in *2 Henry IV*: 'a soldier is better accommodated than with a wife', Bardolph pronounces, and then, not very helpfully, '"Accommodated": that is, when a man is, as they say, accommodated, or when a man is being whereby 'a may be thought to be accommodated, which is an excellent thing' (3.2.77–80). In *The Merry Wives* Falstaff is accommodated, as ever, in a pub, but this play also goes to some lengths to show that he is not welcome in the home. One of its most memorable images is of Falstaff ejected from the Ford household in a buck-basket, submerged under a pile of dirty washing, and deposited in the river. In his own painful recollection he is.

> compassed like a good bilbo in the circumference of a peck, hilt to point, heel to head; and then, to be stopped in like a strong distillation with stinking clothes that fretted in their own grease … And in the height of this bath – when I was more than half stewed in grease, like a Dutch dish – to be thrown into the Thames and cooled, glowing hot, in that surge. (3.5.102–11)

Falstaff is cooked and laundered. This is women's work. It represents the triumph of the domestic at the same time as it expels this gross intruder upon it. Falstaff is the alien body both in the Ford household and in Windsor itself. One detail about his early life that emerges from Shallow's reminiscences in *2 Henry IV* is that he was once page to Thomas, Duke of Mowbray. Jonathan Bate has suggested that this identifies Falstaff with the old religion, which is quite plausible, and it would certainly put further distance between him and

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

his earlier incarnation as Oldcastle, given the Protestant associations of that name.[33] But it also underlines something else: being sent to live in someone else's house as a page emphasises Falstaff's homelessness, right from the start.

So Windsor is everything that Falstaff is not - a rooted, prosperous community of the middling sort, focussed on marriage and the home, where the women are very much in charge. But there is another aspect to the town, which makes it distinctive within Middle England, and this is the fact that it is also a royal seat. Mistress Quickly refers to the time 'when the court lay at Windsor' (2.2.59–60), but there are also signs that the court *is* in fact at Windsor during the action of the play; certainly, there are explicit references to the Garter Ceremony at Windsor castle in the last act when Mistress Quickly, dressed as the Queen of Fairies, urges her troop of elves to search the castle (5.5.56f.).[34] This is not to endorse the old theory that the play itself was written for the Garter Ceremony of 23 April 1597. *The Merry Wives* is clearly not an aristocratic entertainment. But the vestigial royal presence is undoubtedly part of its detailed social make-up. Hal, does not, of course, appear in Windsor, or in Gloucestershire for that matter, but his influence lingers in the person of Fenton, Anne Page's preferred suitor, whom her father dislikes because 'he kept company with the wild Prince and Poins' and is 'of too high a region' for her (3.2.65–6). The other royal presence is not the historical but the contemporary monarch, Queen Elizabeth, whom Pistol invokes in 5.5 when he instructs the fairy troop to go about its household tasks:

> Cricket, to Windsor chimneys shalt thou leap:
> Where fires thou find'st unraked and hearths unswept,
> There pinch the maids as blue as bilberry -.
> Our radiant queen hates sluts and sluttery. (5.5.43–6)

Pistol refers to the Queen of Fairies, but implicitly, too, to Gloriana herself, recast as a severe, household matron; and though it may seem difficult to reconcile the iconic majesty of the elderly Elizabeth with this domestic role, it would fit this intensely middle-class play, which reinvents royalty in its own image.

Windsor's confident middle-classness gives it the capacity to absorb almost anything that is not quite of its kind, whether this is royalty, the Welsh parson, the French doctor, or the upper-class rake, Fenton. It is, rather strangely, both a model of diversity and also socially and topographically homogeneous.[35] The exception to this, the alien body that it will not accommodate, is Falstaff. But what happens to Falstaff is rather different

[33] Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997), 205–7.

[34] Doctor Caius refers to the court's presence at Windsor at 2.4.46–7, 54–5, 114.

[35] On varieties of English in the play and Shakespeare's rejection of an exclusionary model of 'the King's English' see Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, *Shakespeare's Englishes: Against Englishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 5–6, 46–80.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

from what happens to Malvolio or Shylock, other outsider figures who are expelled at the end of Shakespearean comedies, and this is because Windsor also has the capacity to domesticate what threatens it. In this play the forest, with all its dangers, is only a park, and it is here that Falstaff's sexual shaming takes place. Tricked into dressing up as a stag and going to Herne's oak in Windsor little park for his supposed assignation, Falstaff is tormented by a troop of local children masquerading as fairies. Eventually he pulls off the buck's head he's wearing and is confronted by his intended paramour, Mistress Meg Page:

> Now, good Sir John, how like you Windsor wives?
> See you these, husband? [*Points to the horns.*]
> Do not these fair yokes
> Become the forest better than the town? (5.5.106–8)

The stag's horns may well be more fitting to the forest than the town, but this is merely a park, and Mistress Page has already domesticated the horns to yokes, the emblem of the steady marriage and the antithesis of both the horny stag and the cuckolded husband.[36] In the end, with all sexual threats removed and the stability of the middle-class marriage in place, even Falstaff is invited to 'laugh this sport o'er by a country fire' (5.5.236).

So we might see *The Merry Wives* as a reformation comedy, reinforcing stable sexual values and the centrality of the home. In the main plot, the marriage bond survives the assault of the decayed, wandering, upper-class old profligate, and in the sub-plot it is a measure of Fenton's reformation that he is happy to settle down with a daughter of the middle classes, albeit one with plenty of money. At the same time, that union is a measure of the upward social mobility of the new Tudor middle class. These outcomes rest upon what the Gloucestershire visitor, Slender, refers to as 'honest, civil, godly company' (1.1.168), reformation values which are the antithesis of everything that Falstaff represents.[37] It's noteworthy that women are not allowed upstairs at the Garter Inn, Windsor, which is a nicety you cannot imagine being observed at the Boar's Head, Eastcheap. *2 Henry IV* may also be seen as a drama of reformation, though in a rather different way, as the prodigal son frees himself from the old Vice; but because the rejection of Falstaff in that play curtails a long saga of merriment, audiences have often felt that the ending has a sour, kill-joy aspect to it. If the Gloucestershire scenes in that play are suffused with nostalgia, rehearsing the death of the merry world, *The Merry Wives* offers a rejoinder: virtue and festivity are not

[36] On the yoke as a Protestant symbol of marriage see Heinrich Bullinger, *The Golden Boke of Christen Matrimonye*, trans. Thomas Becon (London, 1543), C7r; cf. also the conclusion to the third book of *The Faerie Queene* (III.12.47).

[37] R. S. White, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 5.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

inimical to each other, and reformation comedy *is* possible; as Meg Page reminds her friend Alice Ford, 'Wives may be merry and yet honest too' (4.2.100).[38]

Falstaff does not expire in Windsor, but in London, back at his old haunt at the Boar's Head tavern. He never reappears in person, and we hear of his death in *Henry V* from the former Mistress Quickly, now married to Pistol and renamed as the 'Hostess'. The scene is sandwiched between King Henry's exposure of the three traitors and the delivery of his ultimatum to France. In response to Bardolph's wish that he were with the departed Falstaff, 'wheresome'er he is, either in heaven or in hell', she declares, 'Nay, sure, he's not in hell; he's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom' and then tells of his crying out '"God, God, God!" three or four times', adding 'Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet' (*Henry V* 2.3.7–10, 18–21). This hilarious piece of bathos deliberately sabotages the ostentatious piety of the play's main plot, and of the previous scene in particular, with its repeated invocations of 'God' as the three traitors are exposed and condemned. Her identification of Falstaff with Arthur is an inspired malapropism for 'Abraham's bosom', which was a kind of waiting room for the afterlife. Reworking the Old Testament reference, she imagines a neutral place of repose, beyond moral judgement, in which 'Arthur' is shorn of the Christian role assigned to him in later literature. If *2 Henry IV* is a drama of reformation, and *The Merry Wives* a reformation comedy, *Henry V* shows us the reformed king in action, with Falstaff consigned to another world.

The Hostess's memorialisation of Falstaff in death returns us momentarily to the social world of *2 Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives*, with its tableau of reminiscence acting as a counterpart to her earlier account of the marriage proposal in the 'Dolphin chamber' of the Boar's Head (*2 Henry IV* 2.1.84–102).[39] Falstaff's tour of England in these two plays invites us to see the country from the perspective of two local communities, mapped out in conspicuous detail and peopled by commoners. This is not a mythical England or an England of dynastic struggle, but an England rooted in place and focussed on the lives of the lower and middling sort. This survives in the Bates and Williams scenes of *Henry V*, where the common soldiers are represented as articulate citizens, giving voice, as it were, to the wretched individuals pressed into military service by Falstaff in the earlier play. And while Falstaff's tour of the country is nominally set in the early fifteenth century, it also shows us what happens to

[38] On the play's relationship to 'Merry England' see Harriet Philips, *Nostalgia in Print and Performance, 1510–1613* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 179–205.

[39] On the Hostess's speech as a form of blazon see Joseph M. Ortiz, 'By the Book: Blazoning the Subject in Shakespeare's History Plays' in *Staging the Blazon in Early Modern English Theater*, eds. Deborah Uman and Sara Morrison (London: Routledge, 2013), 125–36 at 132–33.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

England in the sixteenth century. The local communities of Gloucestershire and Windsor, county and town, encapsulate the old world and the new, with the former's other role as the seedbed of the Reformation acting as a bridge between the two. The social mobility of the second half of the sixteenth century alongside the Protestantization of the country, is captured in 'civil', 'honest', middle-class Windsor, in which Falstaff is so obviously out of place.[40] In the end, we should probably not follow Bardolph and the Hostess in sentimentalizing Falstaff. To draw a parallel with the nineteenth century, we might instead see him more in terms of the 'old corruption' that the Whigs hoped the Great Reform Act of 1832 would sweep away. And as for Elizabethan audiences, much as they loved Falstaff, he also represented what they had left behind.

University of St Andrews

[40] I have discussed the impact of social mobility on Tudor literature in Neil Rhodes, *Common: The Development of Literary Culture in Sixteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 20–5.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Abstract
Why does Falstaff travel to York via Gloucestershire in Henry the Fourth, part two? And why does Shakespeare interrupt his second tetralogy of history plays to take his most famous comic character to Windsor in the Merry Wives? This article uses Falstaff's tour of England in these two plays to explore an idea of the country founded upon local identities rather than on the overarching appeal of nationhood. Drawing upon chorography and social history, it focusses on the association of people and place and offers a view of England from the ground up rather than through the more imposing structures of political narrative and symbolic form.

14774658, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rest.12838 by NHS Education for Scotland NES, Edinburgh Central Office, Wiley Online Library on [07/11/2022]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License