Female Characterization in Giuseppe Verdi’s Falstaff: Nannetta’s Transformation from Fairy Queen to Merry Wife

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ABSTRACT

Female Characterization in Giuseppe Verdi’s *Falstaff*: Nannetta’s Transformation from Fairy Queen to Merry Wife

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William Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* features bold, intelligent women who may appear to be social outliers in the context of rural sixteenth-century England. The wives hold power over Falstaff, their husbands, and the men in general. However, this female characterization is not merely a comedic caricature, but instead a theatrical adaptation of the stereotypical English housewife. This historical Elizabethan context profoundly affects female characterization as found in Giuseppe Verdi and Arrigo Boito’s final comedic opera, *Falstaff*. The prowess of Queen Elizabeth is evident in *The Merry Wives*; her influence profoundly
impacts the characterization of the women of Windsor. In Act I, Scene 2, the women receive identical love letters from Falstaff, resulting in the quartet, “Quell’otre! Quel tino!”, where the women plot to deceive the Old Knight. Shakespeare’s Elizabethan homage was upheld and embellished by Verdi and Boito in *Falstaff*. Queen Elizabeth is characterized by Boito’s Nannetta Page, an embodiment of purity and chastity, whose brief amorous exchanges with Fenton exemplify the young lovers’ innocence. Fenton and Nannetta sing the words of the great Italian poet Boccaccio during their exchanges, effectively bringing the dramatic action to a temporary halt while reaffirming the opera’s Italian roots. Nannetta is the thread connecting both the English and Italian national identities throughout the unfolding narrative of *Falstaff*. Not only does she sing the words of Boccaccio with Fenton, she also plays the part of *La Regina Delle Fate* during Falstaff’s final deception in Act III, Scene 2. Her depiction as the Fairy Queen is a direct link to Queen Elizabeth, a representation created by Shakespeare’s contemporary, Edmund Spenser in his epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*. I explore the intricacies of Nannetta’s characterization in relation to Queen Elizabeth through a historical, textual and musical analysis, culminating with a discussion of her Act III, Scene 2 aria, “Sul fil d’un soffio etesio”.
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The Merry Wives of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Falstaff* are clever, charming women who aren’t afraid to voice their opinions. Arrigo Boito’s adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* preserves the integrity of the comedy while spotlighting the young lovers, Nannetta and Fenton. Shakespeare’s comedy enjoyed great success in its time, perhaps due to its relevancy and immediacy to English middle-class life during the reign of Elizabeth I. Indeed, a common anecdote involving the creation of *The Merry Wives* is directly tied to Queen Elizabeth I. It is said that Elizabeth requested Shakespeare to create a play involving Sir John Falstaff from his play *Henry IV*, resulting in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

In this study I will examine the role of the women in Verdi’s *Falstaff* through a historical, cultural, poetic and musical analysis of specific pieces. For instance, When Alice and Meg receive identical love letters from Falstaff in Act I, Scene 2, the women decide to teach Old John a lesson, resulting in an unaccompanied women’s quartet, “*Quell’otre! Quel tino!*” In addition, I will consider the characterization of Nannetta, as well as her involvement in the plot to deceive Falstaff. I argue that the inclusion of Alice’s daughter, Nannetta in the plot to deceive Falstaff undermines the young girl’s innocent nature. The perceived innocence of Nannetta is constantly reinforced and denied throughout the opera, leading to her portrayal as the Queen of the Fairies in Act III. I will explore the specific instances which involve Nannetta in the deceptions of Sir John Falstaff, including a detailed analysis of her Act III, Scene 2 aria, “*Sul fil d’un soffio etesio*”. Alice’s choice to engage her daughter in the deception of Falstaff is the first step to her induction as a Merry Wife of Windsor, culminating in her marriage to Fenton.
The portrayal of Alice, Meg, Quickly and Nannetta in Verdi and Boito’s *Falstaff* as intelligent, opinionated women may seem overly progressive for a comedy rooted in Shakespearian times. Yet, the women are not the targets of caricature or mockery; this role is left for Sir John Falstaff. In an early 20th century essay praising *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Rosa Leo Grindon postulates the effect of Elizabeth’s involvement with the project; “When Shakepere [sic] was creating his great types of womanhood it is more than likely that the educated, the cultured mind, and the statesmanlike capacity of the great Queen would have its influence on his work. Appreciation and reverence for the capacity of woman runs through all his dramas as a silver thread upon which much of his best work depends.”¹ Although women were not regarded as equals to men in 16th century England, they were afforded several rights and opportunities to improve their social and intellectual standings. Queen Elizabeth I’s personal intellectual prowess and appetite for knowledge coupled with the Humanists concern for the ‘inferior’ sex led to the education of a variety of English women. According to Angela Pitt, the Humanists “idea was that since women are more frivolous and less stable than men, it is crucial that they be educated in order to fortify them sufficiently to cope with their inherent deficiencies.”² While the impetus behind this female education is blatantly sexist, the result is positive: an increase in women’s education.

Interestingly, the inequality of the sexes had little effect on the role of women in society. They played important roles as tradespeople, housewives, workers, property owners, executors of wills and patrons of the arts. Women were frequently involved in matters of property and estates. Phyllis Rackin shows that, “…most of the executors of wills in Shakespeare’s England

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were women rather than men---so much so that scribes sometimes mistakenly used the female form ‘executrix’ to refer to male executors of wills.”³ This fascinating piece of scribal misappropriation underscores the influence and importance of women in Shakespearian England.

Further contributing to the position of women in Elizabethan times is the absence of laws concerning unmarried women. The lack of restrictive laws resulted in the equal status of unmarried women and men, if only in the strictest legal sense. However, the everyday woman was not so fortunate as Queen Elizabeth when it came to choosing her marital status. Marriage was common, as a means to secure property, to raise one’s social status, to produce heirs, and so on. Arranged marriages were seen as the means to the aforementioned ends, not always as a result of love and passion. Following this model, Alice breaks convention by allowing her daughter to marry Fenton, instead of her husband’s choice, Dr. Caius. As such, Shakespeare and Boito underline the power of married women in this era, legal rights or not.

Unfortunately, the legal ramifications of marriage were substantial. Much as in the time of the Ancient Romans, a woman upon marrying her husband became his property and her legal rights, or lack thereof, were discontinued.⁴ The doctrine of coverture, one of many legal forces in Elizabethan England, revoked a married woman’s legal status as separate from her husband.⁵ In other words, the doctrine of coverture regarded femes covert, as legally inseparable from their husbands, requiring the husband’s consent for any sort of legal recourse. According to Tim Stretton, the doctrine of coverture severely limited the rights of women, in essence “…giving husbands power over the rights, property and bodies of their wives.”⁶ This grim reality

⁴ Pitt, Shakespeare’s Women, 14.
⁶ Ibid., 23.
substantiates the legal inequality of married women and men, perpetuating extreme gender bias.\textsuperscript{7} If it is indeed the case that Elizabethan wives had no rights, property or wealth, why then would Sir John Falstaff so ardently pursue two married women specifically for their wealth? The answer to this conundrum lends itself to the complex legal and social structures of England in Shakespeare’s time. Although wives were legally dependent upon their husbands, they were by no means trapped inside a gilded cage. This legal perspective, reliant upon the doctrine of coverture, is but a piece of the intricate social structure of 16\textsuperscript{th} century England.\textsuperscript{8}

The extremity of the doctrine of coverture was not lost upon the populace of Elizabethan England. Hence, through a number of legal procedures and loopholes, women often retained ownership of properties, and claimed inheritances of their husband’s estates upon his passing. In fact, local custom often outranked the limitations of the doctrine of coverture, granting more rights and freedoms to married women. As these local customs depended on established rules for specific locations, they varied greatly. The issue of inheritance is at the forefront of these customs, often concerning widow’s rights to her husband’s estate. This custom, “...allowed the widow of any copy holding tenant who died in possession of a copyhold estate to enter and enjoy that estate, or part of it, for her life (or as long as she remained chaste and unmarried) provided she paid the rents and performed the services due.”\textsuperscript{9} Again, this custom law empowers women as property owners while at the same time restricting their ability to acquire lovers and or remarry.

\textsuperscript{7} For more specific limitations placed upon married women under the doctrine of coverture, see Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England by Tim Stretton, 21-25 and When a Woman’s Marital Status Determined Her Legal Status: A Research Guide on the Common Law Doctrine of Coverture by Claudia Zaher.

\textsuperscript{8} For more information about social hierarchies and relationships in 16\textsuperscript{th} century England, see An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England by Susan Dwyer Amussen.

\textsuperscript{9} Stretton, Women Waging Law, 159.
Turning back to Falstaff and his plot to woo Alice and or Meg, yet another issue of grave importance is brought to the forefront: adultery. As we know, the legal rights of married women in the time of Queen Elizabeth were severely limited. Not only does this gendered bias apply to matters of property and wealth, but also to matters of intimacy and love. Serious consequences could result from accusations of adultery. As Stretton asserts, “The power of the accusation of female adultery was such that a single instance of alleged infidelity could provide grounds for separation and the denial of maintenance.”\textsuperscript{10} Such an outcome would be one of the numerous reasons for both Alice and Meg to refuse Falstaff’s amorous advances. Yet, they walk a fine line while pretending to fall for the Old Knight. This point is underlined especially during the basket scene in Act II, Scene 2, when Falstaff very narrowly escapes being caught by Alice’s husband, Ford. Ford is extremely suspicious of his wife, questioning her faithfulness. However, Alice is too clever to be caught by her distrustful husband. The wives’ scheme continues and Alice is safe from an accusation of adultery.

Shakespeare and Boito’s portrayal of the Merry Wives may not be so far from the reality of married life off-stage. I assert that the characterization of Alice, Meg, Quickly and Nannetta are representative of real women in Elizabethan times. Support in favor of this assertion is found in Shakespeare’s theater and his audience. Although the longstanding tradition of male-only players in Shakespearian drama was a well-established practice, it did not extend to the exclusion of women in the theater itself. This fact substantiates my claim for Shakespeare’s accurate representation of women in his \textit{Merry Wives of Windsor}. Women were a noteworthy part of the audience and Shakespeare was conscious of this fact. If the female members of the audience were unable to identify in some way with the female characters, \textit{The Merry Wives of Windsor}

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 196.
certainly would not have enjoyed so much success. The first published essay on Shakespeare was authored by Margaret Cavendish, an Englishwoman of the 17th century.\(^{11}\) Her account praised Shakespeare’s characterization of the Merry Wives, stating, “[O]ne would think, he had been Metamorphosed from a Man to a Woman, for who could Describe *Cleopatra* Better than he hath done, and many other Females of his own Creating, as *Nan Page, Mrs. Page, Mrs. Ford*, the Doctors Maid, *Beatrice, Mrs. Quickly, Doll Tearsheet*, and others, too many to Relate?”\(^{12}\) This first-hand account attests to Shakespeare’s keen ability to craft believable female characters with whom the audience could identify.

Indeed Shakespeare’s success was dependent on his female audience members. In the theater, the male and female audience were economic equals, or in other words, paying customers. He famously asks for his audience’s favor in the epilogue to *As You Like It*, another comedy dating from the turn of the century. Rosalind explains,

> “I am not furnished like a beggar, therefore to beg will not become me; my way is to conjure you, and I’ll begin with the women. I charge you, O women, for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you. -- And I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women—as I perceive by your simpering, none of you hates them—that between you and the women the play may please.”\(^{13}\)

This direct plea to the male and female audience asserts the importance of their combined presence; Shakespeare intended his plays to be accessible to men and women, so that one sex was not given hierarchical significance over the other. Thus, Shakespeare’s masterful portrayals of his characters, both men and women, are validated. He supplies both the women of his play

\(^{11}\) Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, 63.
\(^{12}\) Ibid.
and the women of his audience with the power to make *The Merry Wives of Windsor* a celebrated success.

Arrigo Boito continued Shakespeare’s attitude towards the women of *Falstaff*, and his operatic adaptation certainly highlights Alice, Meg, Quickly and Nannetta’s intellect and resourcefulness. In this way, the women are elevated to a higher intellectual plane than the men, namely Ford, Falstaff, Dr. Caius and Fenton. Boito’s conception of *Falstaff* draws from multiple sources, including *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Henry IV* and *Decameron*. He condenses the number of characters and streamlines the plot as to best suit the operatic stage.\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, this was not to the detriment of Shakespeare’s play, but to the credit of Boito’s creative talents. According to Roy E. Aycock, “It is no literary heresy to assert that the Boito-Verdi *Falstaff* is superior to its source.”\textsuperscript{15} While this bold statement cannot be shared by all scholars, it does attest to the quality of Boito’s libretto.

Perhaps one of the most significant textual alterations for the purposes of this study is Boito’s choice of Nannetta as the Fairy Queen instead of Mistress Quickly, Shakespeare’s original Fairy Queen. Boito’s alteration has profound implications for Nannetta’s characterization, which will be addressed through a thorough analysis of her Act III, Scene 2 aria, “*Sul fil d’un soffio etesio*”. Another liberty taken by Boito is the complete exclusion of Falstaff’s second humiliation, where he cross-dresses, thereby being mistaken for ‘the woman of Brainford’. More intriguing than these omissions or changes in plot are the inclusion of lines from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. These inclusions have two very important ramifications. First, the inclusion of a revered Italian poetic master solidifies nationalistic ties to Italy, thereby setting

\textsuperscript{14} For more specific omissions and alterations, see *Giuseppe Verdi: Falstaff* by James Hepokoski, 24-26.
this opera distinctly apart from the trend of Wagnerian influence. And secondly, the Boccaccian
couplets are sung only by Fenton and Nannetta, hence creating a ‘lovers’ sphere’ specific only to
themselves, a prominent subplot to the opera itself.

Verdi’s role as a nationalistic symbol was by no means new during the composition of
Falstaff. Indeed, it was thrust upon his music and himself some thirty years earlier, during the
Risorgimento. His very name became a politically charged acronym, “Viva Verdi”, while the
Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves from Nabucco became associated with Italian nationalism, an
association which remains intact in contemporary times. Philip Gossett points to Verdi’s support
of the 1848 Revolutions, quoting a militaristic letter from Verdi to librettist Francesco Maria
Piave, dated 21 April 1848:

Just imagine that I wanted to remain in Paris when I heard of the revolution in Milan. I
left as soon as I received word, but all I could see was the splendid barricades. Honor to
the heroes! Honor to all of Italy, which in this moment is truly great.

The hour has sounded, be convinced, of its liberations. The people want it and
when the people want something there is no absolute power they can resist. They can try,
they can do what they will, even using force, but they will not succeed in defrauding the
rights of the people. Yes, yes, in a few years or even a few months, Italy will be free, one,
republican. What else could it be?

You speak to me of music? What has gotten into you? …You can’t think that now
I want to occupy myself with notes, with sounds? …There can be only one music grateful
to the ears of Italians in 1848: the music of the cannon! …I would not write a note for all
the gold in the world: I would feel remorse at using music paper, which is so good for
making bullets.16

Verdi’s zeal for Italian nationalism is evident, even in pre-unification Italy. This letter
demonstrates his passion for the cause, yet firmly divorces it from his music. Interestingly, Verdi
did not maintain this point of view, as he and his music became representations of Italian
nationalism itself.

16 Philip Gossett, “Giuseppe Verdi and the Italian Risorgimento,” Studia Musicologica Vol. 52,
The libretto of Verdi and Boito’s *Falstaff* is invariably connected to Italian nationalism. While the source for the story is Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, it appears that neither Verdi nor Boito consulted English sources of the play. Verdi famously did not read English, relying instead on Italian translations by Carlo Rusconi and Giulio Carcano. The distance between the original English play and the Italian translations is great, in both terms of language and literary style. In an attempt to create an accurate translation, Rusconi abandoned Shakespeare’s poetic schema entirely, favoring prose over the restrictions associated with poetic form. Although much of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is written in prose, it is not a characteristic of the entire play. In other words, while Rusconi’s elimination of Shakespearian poetic form may have aided the fluidity of his translation, it is not reflective of the poetic context of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The newly formed prose character of these translations certainly must have had an influence on the conception of the libretto. As Verdi and Boito, Rusconi wanted to create an ‘Italian’ version of Shakespeare. Denise Gallo explains, “Rusconi’s stated mission, then, was to render as completely as possible the author’s meaning while ‘Italianizing’ each word, or as he wrote, ‘italianizzarlo’.” Removed from the original context of Shakespeare’s comedy, the prose of Rusconi and Carcano alters the character and style of Shakespeare’s words, while creating a distinctly Italian version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

An interesting point of contention, perpetuated by both Verdi and Boito states that the real source for Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was Giovanni Fiorentino’s *Il Pecorone*, a 14th century collection of stories, written in the same style as Boccaccio’s *Decamerone*. John W. Klein goes so far as to say that Verdi and Boito used *Il Pecorone* just as

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18 Ibid., 11.
much as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* during the opera’s conception. Verdi goes one step further, emphasizing the importance of *Il Pecorone* during a discussion with the writer Jules Huret:

“Do you know what *Falstaff* is?” [Verdi] said. ‘It is nothing other than an ancient Italian comedy, written in a very ancient language long before Shakespeare! Shakespeare took the material and added the character of Falstaff, who in the original comedy was a mere village braggart… . Boito wanted to return to the original source, and translated directly from the ancient Italian language, which was far from easy.”

This statement raises an interesting dilemma: If Verdi’s assertions of an Italian source for *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are true, then why use Shakespeare at all? Verdi’s love and respect for the English master is well-established, yet he attempts to minimalize Shakespeare’s involvement in the creation of *Falstaff*.

While Verdi’s statement regarding the creation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* may have some merit, it cannot be denied that Shakespeare, not Giovanni Fiorentino provides the source for *Falstaff*. However, only to debate the accuracy of Verdi’s statements would miss the entire point of this quotation. Clearly, Verdi attempted to legitimize his and Boito’s creation by giving it an Italian source in lieu of an English source, as a means of nationalistic pride. As Denise Gallo explains, “Boito also had sufficient motive for emphasizing the native origin of his libretto since, in addition to compositional activities that involved him in the musical state and its politics, his literary career placed him in the midst of the post-Unification campaign to develop a shared national culture, part of which depended on the glorification of an ‘Italian’ language.”

Following the *Risorgimento*, a scattered Italian populous needed the connecting thread of

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21 Ibid., 15.
language, art, music and culture to reaffirm their identity as a united Italian nation--An identity which both Verdi and Boito attempted to construct through *Falstaff*.

The first appearance of Boccaccian text occurs during an exchange between Fenton and Nannetta in Act I, Scene 2. Nearly every time the lovers meet, they do so in secret, hiding their affections from Nannetta’s disapproving father, Ford. The secretive nature of Fenton and Nannetta’s love demands an intimate, personal realm: the ‘lovers’ sphere’. The lovers’ sphere of Fenton and Nannetta is textually reinforced by the Boccaccian phrase, “*Bocca baciata non perde ventura, anzi rinnova come fa la luna*.”

James Hepokoski points out the prominence of *quinari*, or five-syllable lines during the young lovers’ exchanges. Boito’s use of poetic structures such as the *quinari* are but one of the many devices which isolate Fenton and Nannetta within their own plane of experience. Throughout the opera, time seems to stop when Nannetta and Fenton sing to each other, exchanging amorous feelings and stealing quick kisses. For example, in Act I, Scene 2, Fenton and Nannetta have their first exchange by themselves, exchanging kisses and establishing their separate story line.

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22 “A kissed mouth does not lose its fortune, rather it renews itself like the moon.” This phrase comes from the final line of the seventh novella of the second day of Boccaccio’s *Decamerone*. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

What first appears to be ordinary, teenage love quickly transforms into the *quinari*, harkening to the Boccaccio’s medieval literary tradition.

Fenton and Nannetta are truly enamored with each other, further contributing to their separate ‘lovers’ sphere.’ Despite their adoration, the separateness of their sphere cannot be maintained; Alice, Meg, and Quickly disturb Fenton and Nannetta’s realm, bringing the lovers back to reality.

In a letter from Boito to Verdi dated July 7, 1889, the librettist emphasizes the continuity of Fenton and Nannetta’s love:

This amorous play between Nannetta and Fenton must appear in very frequent spurts; in all the scenes where they are present they will steal kisses hidden in corners, slyly, boldly, without letting themselves be discovered, with fresh little phrases and short little dialogues, very rapid and cunning from the beginning to the end of the comedy. It will be a most cheerful love, always disturbed and interrupted, and always ready to begin again.25

This characterization of Fenton and Nannetta is apt: it is present, but very secretive. Although Fenton and Nannetta’s lovers’ sphere is purely metaphorical, it harkens to the Minnegrotte in Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde, where Isolde and Tristan could escape from the outside world.26 Thomas Bauman examines Nannetta and Fenton’s characterization, recognizing their purity, innocence and chastity, while dramatically linking their habitual hiding to other characters who also hide in the opera, namely the wives and Falstaff.27 While Nannetta and Fenton hide to escape to their lovers’ sphere, Falstaff hides in a basket of laundry in order to escape the wrath of a jealous husband during Act II, Scene 2.

The portrayal of Nannetta as pure, innocent and chaste is a deliberate choice by Boito that minimalizes her true capacity for trickery, manipulation and desire. Nannetta is ever present with

the wives, contributing to their schemes. Her character is introduced with Alice, Meg and Quickly during Act I, Scene 2 when they read the two identical letters from Falstaff. Although Nannetta does not initiate the plan to trick Falstaff, her participation in the scheme supports her mother and the other wives. The women’s quartet that follows the reading of the letters is a pivotal point in the dramatic narrative and also in the development of Nannetta’s character. The text of the quartet begins on page 67, when Alice says, “Qull’otre! Quel tino?” The women talk to each other, describing their plans to humiliate Falstaff. Each woman has her own specific text, no two are the same. Not surprisingly, four different texts being sung at the same time are impossible to differentiate, resulting in a wall of sound rather than the manipulative desires of the four women.

In addition to the different texts, the formal structures of Alice, Meg, Quickly and Nannetta’s texts are not exactly the same. The four women each have sixteen lines of text, broken into four groupings of four lines each.

Example 3. Poetic Form in the Act I, Scene 2 Women’s Quartet

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ABBA</th>
<th>CDCD</th>
<th>EFFE</th>
<th>GHGH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nannetta</td>
<td>ABAB</td>
<td>CDCD</td>
<td>EFFE</td>
<td>GHGH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg</td>
<td>ABBA</td>
<td>CDCD</td>
<td>EFFE</td>
<td>GHGH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quickly</td>
<td>ABAB</td>
<td>CDCD</td>
<td>EFFE</td>
<td>GHGH</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As evidenced by this table, the women share different poetic rhyme schemes in addition to their separate texts. The difference in poetic structure further contributes to the obfuscation of the text during the women’s quartet. These factors, coupled with a fast tempo allow the audience to miss a very important contribution to the formation of Nannetta’s character. She repeats her first two lines three times in full, saying, “Se ordisci una burla, Vo’ anch’io la mia parte.” 28 These words,

28 “If you plot a prank, I’ll also do my part.”
buried underneath the text of three other women provide insight into Nannetta’s mind. She wants to play a part in the prank, she says so herself!

When the women evolve into four part homophony on page 67, the tempo is marked *più moderato*, dotted quarter = 88. The singers are given the stylistic marking, *sottovoce*, which adds a layer of mysteriousness to the exact nature of their scheme against Sir John Falstaff. While the key signature of four sharps indicates E major, the quartet is ever-moving, demanding finesse from the singers as it moves chromatically through secondary chords, driving to the final E major cadence on page 71. The first cadential pause occurs in the fifth measure of the quartet, after the first strophe. Although the rhythmic motion does not stop, the harmonic motion pauses on the dominant of E. The second strophe begins to progress away from the E major tonal center. In the seventh measure of the quartet, Nannetta sings the third of the e minor chord, flatting the G# to G natural. This sets up the brief transition to G major as the strophe ends with cadential motion from V65/G to G. However, this is not a real modulation, G major is quickly reverted in measure nine, as the third strophe begins. The third strophe begins on the dominant of E major and moves towards c# minor and then to B major. C# minor is suggested in measure eleven when Quickly sings B#. A brief V64 to i cadence occurs in measure twelve after the editor’s breath mark. Yet, the move to c# minor is subverted immediately after this cadence when three secondary dominants suggest B major or V/E major. The fourth and final strophe begins in measure twelve after a sixteenth rest. E major is briefly restored for two full measures before being disrupted in favor of elements which could suggest C or G major. This shift coincides with the entrance of Ford, Dr. Caius, Bardolph, Pistol, and Fenton, who will sing their own ensemble after the women’s quartet concludes. While secondary chords in measures thirteen through fourteen suggest C or G major, measure fifteen favors G major with the inclusion of e minor, or vi/G.
However, before any significant cadence, Verdi quickly progresses back to E major to finish the quartet in measure seventeen, ending the ensemble with an authentic cadence.

The original conception of this quartet included no accompanimental support for the singers, effectively setting this ensemble apart from the other characters, specifically the men. The option for sparse accompanimental support was added after the premiere, primarily for the singers, not the audience. Julian Budden remarks, “Despite the supportive oboes and clarinets (a mere safety device like the old fisarmonica) the effect is of an a cappella ensemble such as might be performed by that ideal vocal quartet which in Verdi’s view the Milan Società del Quartetto ought to have instituted, to sing music by Palestrina and his contemporaries.”

The effect of this a cappella ensemble was so great that it was one of two pieces encored during the premiere of Falstaff. While this quartet is interesting, as James Hepokoski illuminates, it is puzzling how it came to be one of the two encores of the premiere. Hepokoski hypothesizes that Verdi set up the possibility of an encore for the women’s quartet in order to underline its dramatic significance. Correspondence from Verdi to Ricordi from March 17, 1894 supports Hepokoski’s theory: “that quartet must have its effect, not so much for the music as for the stage action, because it immediately reveals the character of the wives, who are ultimately the ones who accomplish the comedy”. This correspondence is particularly interesting because Verdi does not differentiate Nannetta from the other women, instead referring to the quartet as “the wives”. This point ultimately foreshadows Nannetta’s marriage,

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31 Ibid.
32 Hepokoski, Giuseppe Verdi: Falstaff, 127.
33 Ibid.
completing her transformation from a girl who plots alongside the other women into a married woman.

Immediately following the women’s quartet, “Quell’otre quel tino!” the men enter, talking amongst themselves. The ensuing men’s quintet is quite different than the women’s quartet. Each man has his individual vocal line and words, but their entrances are staggered. First, Dr. Caius sings, then Bardolfo, then Fenton, Pistola and finally Ford. According to Julian Budden, the staggered entrances paired with individual variations suggests the effect of, “…a chaotic cannon…” Not a cannon in the strict sense of the term, but instead a cacophony of sound and unintelligible words. Although the women have finished their quartet, they remind us of their presence only four measures after Dr. Caius begins the men’s quintet. Alice, Nannetta, Meg and Quickly chant, “Quell’otre! Quel tino!” three times before finally exiting the stage. All the while, the men are singing their bombastic quintet below the women. The women’s interjections provide a reminiscence of their plans, reminding us of their intentions to deceive Falstaff. When they sing over the men, they sing in unison on B or in octaves on F#. The effect of this large ensemble is similar to being hit by a great wall of sound, so quickly that it almost can be missed. Although the men are speaking to Ford, he cannot differentiate the four separate messages because all four men are speaking at the same time. He says as much, “Se parlaste uno alla volta, forse allor v’intenderò.” This comedic outburst by Ford reinforces the bombastic character of the men’s quintet, as even he is unable to tell what exactly is happening. This is the intersection of the women’s plans as well as Ford’s plot to undermine Falstaff and his wife.

Verdi’s acknowledgement of the wives as the true comedic protagonists is an important distinguishing feature of Falstaff. Without the wives, there would be no Falstaff and without

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34 Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 462.
35 “If you talked one at a time, perhaps then I would understand you.”
Falstaff there would be no *Merry Wives*. Semantics aside, Verdi masterfully crafts two transformations during the opera, as Falstaff realizes his behavior was inappropriate he becomes a more humble man and when Nannetta marries Fenton, she becomes a Merry Wife. It is evident that Nannetta possesses the same wit, intellect and cunning as Alice, Meg and Quickly when she schemes with the wives to deceive Falstaff. Her transformation begins to take place in the ‘lovers’ sphere’ where she and Fenton are able to realize their feelings and steal kisses, despite Ford’s fatherly disapproval. After the women plot their scheme in the Act I, Scene 2 quartet, Quickly delivers a message to Falstaff, prompting him to meet with Alice while her husband is away.

In Act II, Scene 2, the women are preparing for the first of two deceptions. Meg and Alice wait for the news from Quickly regarding Falstaff. She informs the wives that Falstaff intends to visit Alice that very day, very soon, “*dalle due alle tre*”. Nannetta is distraught by the thought of her proposed marriage to Dr. Caius, orchestrated by Ford, not Alice. Yet, the women take control of the situation once more; Alice assures her daughter that she will not have to marry the lecherous Dr. Caius. With her mother’s reassurance, Nannetta’s disposition greatly improves and she resumes her part in the mischief. The women’s plan is to lure Falstaff inside, then scare him into hiding with the dirty laundry, eventually tossing him into the river.

Unbeknownst to the women, Ford has caught wind of their plan, and threatens to ruin everything. A sense of heightened drama is added to the scene when the jealous husband begins to search for Alice’s presumed lover. However, the women demonstrate their adaptability and resourcefulness, waiting for the opportune moment to hide Falstaff in the basket of dirty clothes. This scene is riddled with confusion and chaos as the men search every corner of the house for evidence of Alice’s unfaithfulness. Nannetta and Fenton seize the opportunity to hide from the
mob, once again returning to the confines of their ‘lovers’ sphere.’ Although Fenton and Nannetta’s sphere plays a key role in the dramatic narrative at this specific juncture, their Boccaccian couplet, “*Bocca bacciata non perde ventura, anzi rinnova come fa la luna*” is conspicuously absent from the dialogue. However, the lovers still speak in *quinari*, solidifying their place in their sphere, separate from the dramatic chaos which surrounds them.

Moving forward to the final deception of Falstaff in Act III, Scene 2, the women once again conspire against the old Knight. This time the entire community is involved in the scheme, including the men. The women hope to frighten Falstaff to the point where he will realize the error of his ways and repent for his misdeeds. In order to create an appropriate atmosphere, the women assign roles for everyone to play. Nannetta will be the Queen on the Fairies, Meg, a wood nymph and Quickly a sorceress.  

36 Spirits, witches, fairies and other mythical beings have a long-standing tradition in the folklore of 17th century England. According to a mid-19th century article from *The Knickerbocker*, “Long after the fairies of romance had disappeared, save from the poet’s page, the less noble elves and fairies retained their dominion over the fears and affections of the peasantry.”  

37 Tales of mythical creatures perpetuated by oral and written transmission were very much alive in the time of Shakespeare.  

38 The inherent mysticism associated with mythical creatures is key to understanding their significance. Act III, Scene 2 takes place at night, in the park: a natural setting. This open-air setting gives us our first clue in fairy classification: there are two main categories of fairy creatures, those that reside in the house, and those who reside outdoors. Some fairies have Kings and Queens, like Oberon and Titania in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the

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38 However, the origins and categorization of these creatures deserves further discussion.
charlatan Fairy Queen played by Nannetta in *Falstaff*. One notable feature of the fairies found in *Falstaff* is their dancing. Nannetta instructs her fairy cohort to dance, a commonplace activity for fairies of all sorts. Katherine Briggs’s *A Dictionary of Fairies: Hobgoblins, Brownies, Bogies and Other Supernatural Creatures* defines dancing as, “The festive exercise most widely attributed to the fairies, large or small. Beautiful or hideous fairies are alike adept in it.” While dancing may not appear to be a menacing activity, even something as innocent as a dance can adopt powerful ritualistic connotations in the case of the supernatural.

Elements of a ritualistic scene are certainly present during the Act III, Scene 2 humiliation. The charlatan fairies dance their dance and the other various supernatural creatures converge on Falstaff, dressed as a supernatural character himself, Herne the Hunter. In an article discussing Verdian ritual scenes, Frits Noske questions the integrity of the scene as a true ritual, pointing to the *prestissimo* tempo and the large ensemble. However, the aspect of ritual cannot be discounted on these premises alone. The action of this opera in general moves at a very quick pace and as such, tempi are affected. The fast tempo of the Act I, Scene 2 women’s quartet, “*Quell’otre quel tino*”, does not undermine the dramatic significance of the ensemble. Instead, it adds a layer of substance to the women’s characterization, demonstrating their passion and desire to teach Falstaff a lesson. It cannot be denied that the fast tempi reflect the accelerated dramatic narrative, resulting in a chaotic atmosphere.

Amid the ritualistic chaos, Falstaff is threatened by the fairies, although not directly. A common English folktale contributes to the old Knight’s terror, a belief that Shakespearian audiences were well aware of. According to Katherine Briggs, Falstaff “…at once believes in

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the fairies and believes them to be formidable, so that it is death to watch them, a belief still existing on the Welsh borders in the nineteenth century.”41 The fairies are essential to the successful completion of the women’s plot to deceive Falstaff. As demonstrated by Falstaff, the widespread belief in these and other supernatural creatures provides the means to execute the plot. Yet, tricks of this ‘supernatural’ nature are not uncommon to Shakespeare’s time. As Regina Buccola says, “Fairy lore offered early modern women supernatural alibis for everything from extended absences from home and husband (i.e., tales of fairy abduction of people believed to be dead until their abrupt, unexpected return) to mistreatment of children…”42 Hence, the women of Windsor are able to exploit the situation by dressing up as fairies, scaring Falstaff and achieving their ultimate goal to humiliate the lecherous old Knight.

The significance of fairy folklore encapsulated within Act III, Scene 2 of Falstaff is not limited only to the supernatural creatures. Indeed, the fairies, specifically the Queen of the Fairies are a representation of the socio-political climate of Queen Elizabeth’s reign. The Merry Wives of Windsor is not the first play to glorify Queen Elizabeth by means of character representation. In other words, Shakespeare was paying homage to his patroness by including an all-powerful Fairy Queen as part of his play. Edmund Spenser immortalized Elizabeth’s visage in his epic poem, The Faerie Queene, the first half published in 1590, twelve years before The Merry Wives of Windsor. It is well known that Spenser characterized Queen Elizabeth as his own Faerie Queene, Gloriana. Although Shakespeare does not make the connection between his Fairy Queen and Queen Elizabeth explicit, the association is evident. The Fairy Queen of Falstaff is a representation of Queen Elizabeth, harkening to the Faerie Queene of Edmund Spenser. A

plethora of Elizabethan allusions are found specifically while examining the character of Nannetta, Boito’s own Fairy Queen.

In the first published edition of Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the 1602 Quarto, Anne Page is not the Fairy Queen, but instead it is Mistress Quickly who assumes the regal role. However, in the 1623 folio edition of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the roles are noticeably different: Quickly is no longer the Queen of the Fairies, instead it is Anne Page. While the authenticity of certain Quarto editions is highly contested within Shakespearian scholarship, (*The Merry Wives of Windsor* included), Shakespeare’s original conception of the Fairy Queen is not the core issue at hand. What is important is that the textual change from Quickly to Anne as the Fairy Queen was made in 1623, when the folio edition was published. So, while Boito’s conception of Nannetta as the Queen of the Fairies does differ from the original Quarto, this change in characterization certainly cannot be attributed to the librettist’s creative design. Further evidence for Boito’s preservation of this change can be found in the various translations he consulted while writing the *Falstaff* libretto.

Denise Gallo credits Boito with the change saying, “He also has been praised for remedying Shakespeare by removing the unsuitable Quickly from the role of Queen of the Fairies and bestowing it more appropriately on Nannetta, Anne Page’s operatic counterpart.” This misattribution is one that has been perpetuated throughout musicological scholarship, one that I hope to correct through an examination of three translations which Boito and Verdi were known to have consulted throughout the creation of *Falstaff*. Namely, I refer to the 1864 translation by François-Victor Hugo, the 1881 translation by Giulio Carcano, and the 1859 translation by François-Victor Hugo, the 1881 translation by Giulio Carcano, and the 1859 translation by François-Victor Hugo, the 1881 translation by Giulio Carcano, and the 1859

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translation by Carlo Rusconi. It would appear that all three translations share a common source: the 1623 folio edition of *The Merry Wives of Windsor.*

Stage directions in the respective translations indicate that Anne Page, Boito’s Nannetta is dressed as the Fairy Queen. In Scene XIX of Hugo’s translation, we see the following stage directions: “Entrent SIR HUGH EVANS, déguisé en satyre; PISTOLET, représentant Hobgoblin; ANNE PAGE, vêtue comme la reine de Fées, accompagnée de son frère et d’autres, déguisé en fées, et portant sur la tête des flambeaux de cire allumés.” Similarly, Carcano’s stage directions for Act V, Scene 5 read: “Entrano SIR UGO EVANS, travestito da Satiro; la COMARE QUICKLY e PISTOL; ANNA PAGE, travestita da Regina delle Fate, accompagnata da suo Fratello e da Altri, in abito di folletti, con fiammelle accese sulla testa.”

Finally, Rusconi’s directions for Act V, Scene 5 indicate: “(entra sir UGO EVANS vestito da satiro: mistress QUICKLY e PISTOL; ANNA PAGE in abito da regina delle fate, seguita da suo fratello, e da altri trasfigurati tutti come silfi con torcie, ecc.).” While each of the three translations varies slightly from one another, all agree that Anne Page is dressed as the Queen of the Fairies. Hence, Boito was merely preserving the characterization of Anne Page as manifest through Nannetta; Mistress Quickly was not a candidate for the position of Queen.

More relevant than Nannetta’s portrayal as the Queen of the Fairies is the implicit connection between her portrayal and Queen Elizabeth. Nannetta is the embodiment of purity, chastity and virginity, three characteristics commonly associated with Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen. Nannetta is still unmarried when she acts as the Fairy Queen in Act III, Scene 2,

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further strengthening the ties to Elizabeth. The association of Fairy Queens to Queen Elizabeth is made clear when Edmund Spenser introduces Gloriana, in his epic Poem, *The Faerie Queene*. Gloriana is an illustration of “the most excellent and glorious person of our soueraine the Queene.” As the Queen of the Fairies, Nannetta presides over all the other fairies, instructing them to dance and sing, while taking part in the final humiliation of Falstaff.

According to Shakespearian scholar Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich, “Although the *Merry Wives* fairies speak of Falstaff’s lust rather than Elizabeth’s chastity, they still insist on sexual virtue, and the play’s Fairy Queen alludes to the actual reigning monarch when she presides over a provincial show, keeps order, and enforces chastity.” We know that Nannetta is chaste because we have seen her interactions with Fenton in their ‘lovers’ sphere’. The innocent young lovers explore their affections, stealing kisses, but nothing more. Adding to this innocence is the conception of the Fairy Queen’s costume. While Nannetta’s exact costume is subject to interpretation, her Fairy Queen costume must lend itself to her transformation into a bride, as she is to be married at the conclusion of the opera. Hence, in some productions, Nannetta wears a white dress when she presides as Queen of the Fairies. In fact, Alice describes Nannetta’s outfit as white, when she tells her daughter, “*Sarai la Fata Regina delle Fate, in bianca vesta*…”

The color white is another symbol of her purity and chastity as an unmarried woman.

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48 Ibid., 337.
49 In the 1956 video production of Falstaff, conducted by Tullio Serafin, Anna Moffo’s Nannetta wears a white dress while portraying the Queen of the Fairies. Additionally, in the 2013 Metropolitan Opera production of Falstaff, directed by Robert Carsen, Lisette Oropesa’s Nannetta also wears a white dress.
Interestingly, only when Nannetta is playing the part of the Fairy Queen does her innocence and cunning combine to illuminate her true character.

The powerful, chaste Fairy Queen commands attention from her fairy consort, while the very thought of her frightens Falstaff. Musically, Nannetta’s Act III, Scene 2 aria, “Sul fil d’un soffio etesio” is one of the two real arias from the entire opera that can reasonably be performed outside of its context.\textsuperscript{51} The implications of this fact alone act much like the small exchanges between Fenton and Nannetta, offering a moment of pause during the fast-paced dramatic narrative. The text for Nannetta’s aria is evocative of several recurring fairy themes: natural imagery, flowers, the moon, dancing and magic. Boito creates his own fairy song, revising the text of Hugo, Carcano and Rusconi’s translations. The text is divided into seven strophes, traded between the Fairy Queen and the fairies. Nannetta sings the first two strophes, the fairies respond with the third, Nannetta sings the next three strophes, and then the fairies respond with the final strophe.

Example 4. Poetic Structure in \textit{Sul fil d’un soffio etesio}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Queen of the Fairies</th>
<th>ABAB</th>
<th>CDCD</th>
<th>GHHG</th>
<th>IJJI</th>
<th>KLKL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fairies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Fairy Queen thus interacts with her fairy consort, trading verses while maintaining her hierarchical importance. The fairy chorus is subservient to their Queen, never reaching a dynamic level louder than \textit{piano}. The fairies’ subdued dynamics portray their delicacy and add to their mysterious nature.

Although Boito revised the Fairy Queen’s text, he did maintain specific bits of material as found in Carcano’s translation. Carcano’s Fairy Queen has a considerably longer

\textsuperscript{51} The other aria is sung by Fenton at the beginning of Act III, Scene 2, “Dal labbro il canto estasiato vola”.

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speech than Boito’s, evoking similar natural and magical images associated with the fairies. One line of text from Carcano’s translation is almost perfectly maintained by Boito in his Fairy Queen text: “Delle Fate i fior son cifre.” This line is strikingly similar to Nannetta’s final line, “Le Fate hanno per cifre i fior.” Extra emphasis is placed upon this particular line of text, not only because it is the Fairy Queen’s ultimate line, but also because it is the only line in the entire aria that is repeated. The music and poetry reach a climax as the Fairy Queen sings the final iteration of her last line, “Le Fate hanno per cifre i fior.”

Boito’s refinement of earlier translations, such as Carcano’s is self-evident. Carcano’s translation seems unpolished when compared to Boito’s text. Many similar magical fairy elements are present, but the flow and meter of the words are lacking. Carcano makes almost no attempt to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boito’s Fairy Queen Text, Act III, Scene 2</th>
<th>Carcano’s Fairy Queen Text, Act V, Scene 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sul fil d’un soffio etesio</td>
<td>Su, sul di Windsor le turrite mura,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scorrete agili larve</td>
<td>O farfrelli miei, cercate intorno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fra i rami un baglio cesio</td>
<td>In ogni canto, e quell’antica sede</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D’alba lunare apparve.</td>
<td>Fino all’estremo di s’innalzi altera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danzate! E il passo blando</td>
<td>Nella sua maesia, degio soggiorno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misuri un blando suon.</td>
<td>Del su Sir, degno anch’esso di sua sede!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le magiche accoppiando</td>
<td>Del Consiglio ogni stallo sia per voi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carole alla canzon.</td>
<td>Con balsami rimondo, e col profumo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La selva dorme e sperde</td>
<td>Di fiori eletti; ogni seggio, ogni scudo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incenso ed ombra; e par</td>
<td>D’un leale blason s’adorni e splenda!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nell’aer denso un verde</td>
<td>Scioglente il canto, voi de’ prati erbosi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asilo in fondo al mar.</td>
<td>Fate notturne, e la magica ridda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erriam sotto la luna</td>
<td>Menando intorno, che somigli al nodo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scegliendo fior da fiore</td>
<td>Di giarrettiera, sotto ai pié vi spunti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogni corolla in core</td>
<td>L’erba novella più soave e fresca,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porta la sua fortuna.</td>
<td>Che nell’altra champagne: e sullo smalto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coi gigli e le viole</td>
<td>Di vermigli, di azzurri e bianchi fiori</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scriviam de nomi arcani,</td>
<td>Tal scrivete: Honey soit qui mai y pense:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalle fatate mani</td>
<td>Di zaffri leggenda preziosi,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germoglini parole,</td>
<td>Che di perle contesta e ricche trine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parole alluminate</td>
<td>Del cavalier che s’inchina al ginocchio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di puro argento e d’or,</td>
<td>S’annoda! Delle Fate i fior son cifre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmi e malle. Le Fate</td>
<td>Via, sparite! Ma i vostri usati balli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanno per cifre i fior.</td>
<td>Tessete tondo, d’Erno alla queria antica</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

rhyme any of his lines, and when he does it seems as though it was unintentional. Although Boito’s poetry is more elegant than Carcano’s, Carcano did not intend for his words to be set to Verdi’s music!

Nannetta’s Act III, Scene 2 aria, “Sul fil d’un soffio etesio” is a delicately stylized canzona which demonstrates the beauty and fluidity of the Fairy Queen and her consort. The formal design of the aria is modified strophic: Nannetta returns with the music of the opening in measure twenty-four, designating the aria’s major division. The aria begins piano pianissimo, leggerissimo e staccato. The meter is 3/4, with staccato sextuplets. Nannetta makes her vocal entrance in measure two, at the end of the first beat. While the accompaniment articulates the staccato sextuplets, Nannetta sings long legato lines, creating a polarity between the accompaniment and the vocal line. Furthermore, the rhythmic displacement of Nannetta’s vocal entrance creates a rhythmic disparity between the voice and accompaniment, producing the effect of a quasi-hemiola. In the opening two lines of the aria, Verdi includes a very difficult stylistic indication to the singer, namely notes marked staccato underneath a slur indicating a legato line.


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53 See Appendix for Nannetta’s Act III, Scene 2 aria “Sul fil d’un soffio etesio” as found in the International Music Company’s piano reduction of Falstaff, measure numbers are my own.
These seemingly opposite stylistic indications specify the importance of individual notes within a continuous legato line. Without the staccato indications, it is easy to blend one note into the next, a texture which will be reserved for other phrases within the aria. Another indication calls for the singer to sing *dolcissimo*, first appearing in measure three, a musical sign indicative of Nannetta’s characterization.

Nannetta’s aria is rooted in the key of A major, colored by small departures to E major. The accompanimental sextuplets of the first five measures are comprised of dyads moving in parallel octaves, never sounding all members of a chord at the same time. The vocal line dismisses any doubt about the key of A major, as Nannetta sings the fifth scale degree, E, before leaping down a perfect fifth to A, jumping back up to E in measure three. The motion from E to A is repeated in measure five, with a reversal of direction. The fifth scale degree leaps up a perfect fourth to A before returning down to E. The completion of the A to E motion in measure five leads to a change in accompanimental texture in measure six and an increased vocal range. The accompanimental sextuplets ease into legato triplet figures while the E from Nannetta’s line in the previous measures is transferred to the right hand of the piano, emphasized with a trill for four beats. Nannetta continues her long legato lines without staccato indications, resting on an F in measure seven before completing the first stanza of the song and the first strong ii-V7-I cadence, in measures eight and nine.

Suggestions of E major are introduced as Nannetta sings her second stanza, beginning in measure ten. The Fairy Queen commands her consort to dance and the right hand of the accompaniment complies, answering with a 32nd note figure, evocative of the spritely movement of tiny fairies dancing around their Queen. The D# first found in the 32nd note accompanimental motive is repeated in the vocal line, driving the upward scale to its goal, E.
Nannetta sings in triplets up the scale, moving through E to its upper neighbor, F# before leaping down a perfect fifth to B and back up a perfect fourth to E. Measures ten through twelve tonicize E major, but this is not a true modulation. After the cadence to E in measures eleven and twelve, the vocal line decrescendos and the key of A major is restored. The same accompanimental device is employed in measure thirteen as in measure six, as the E from Nannetta’s line is transferred to the right hand of the accompaniment and trilled for three beats while the left hand arpeggiates triplets. Nannetta continues to sing triplet figures, embellishing the third scale degree, C in measure fifteen on the word “alla” with a grace note appoggiatura before cadencing to A in measure sixteen. This cadence signals the end of the Fairy Queen’s first section. The accompanimental texture shifts and the fairy chorus enters with the third strophe of the song, linking the two main sections together.

The fairy chorus sings piano pianissimo, entering on a unison E, which is maintained for a full three measures before breaking into a two part texture in measure twenty. Throughout the eight measure section the dynamic level gradually crescendos to piano, maintaining the fairies’ mysterious delicacy set forth by Nannetta’s soft dynamics. The meter of this choral interlude changes from 3/4 to 4/4, while remaining in A major. The accompaniment abandons the legato triplets in favor of staccato motion, switching between duple and triple rhythmic emphasis. Grace note appoggiaturas, much like Nannetta sang in measure fifteen, embellish the staccato accompaniment while depicting a slow fairy dance.54 A low A pedal is sounded on the first beat of measures sixteen through twenty, reaffirming the key of A major.

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54 The fairy chorus often dances around their Queen in staged performances of this aria. In the International Music Company’s piano reduction of Falstaff, an editorial indication suggests a “Slow dance by the little fairies” starting in measure sixteen, when the fairy chorus sings their first interlude.
major is further reinforced by the descending A major scale found in the right hand of the accompaniment on the second beat of measure sixteen.


This descending A major scale completes an octave descent before it is repeated in a newly embellished form, at measure eighteen. Slow harmonic rhythm is maintained for four measures, sixteen through twenty, changing only once per measure until the vocal divide in measure twenty. When the vocal split is reached, the harmonic rhythm increases, changing three times in measure twenty-one, then once per beat in measures twenty-one through twenty-three. After the second iteration of the descending A major scale, measures eighteen through twenty, the descending pattern continues in measure twenty, beginning the scale on F# instead of A. The fairy chorus begins a brief transition away from A major with the inclusion of E# in measure twenty-one, a secondary dominant of F#. The real area of temporary tonicization begins in measure twenty-two; the fourth beat of the measure is a secondary dominant of C major which
moves to a C major chord in the subsequent measure. This localized tonicization is maintained for four beats before returning to V\(^7\)/A on the fourth beat of measure twenty-three, in preparation for the return of the Fairy Queen’s music in measure twenty-four. The fairy chorus’ return to A major corresponds with a return to unison singing, cadencing on the same E which began the interlude.

In measure twenty-four, the music which began the aria returns, and Nannetta sings the fourth verse. The stylistic indication “come prima” indicates that this passage is a return to the music of the first verse. Indeed, the music remains exactly the same as the first section until measure thirty-three, when the vocal line changes on the words, “e le viöle”. The vocal line in measure thirty-three begins on A, moving down by step to E, before changing direction and ascending to G# in measure thirty-five. This ascent to G# expands the upper range of the vocal line, as compared to the corresponding passage in measure eleven, where the voice only reaches F#. Additionally, the fifth scale degree, E, is withheld in the vocal line until the third beat of measure thirty-five, whereas in measure twelve, E was sung on the first beat, held for a full measure. Again, hints of E major are found in measures thirty-three through thirty-five with the introduction of D#. However, the cadence in measure thirty-five signals the return to A major, disrupting the temporary tonicization of E major. Following the precedent initiated in measure five, the E from the vocal line in measure thirty-five is transferred to the right hand of the accompaniment in the subsequent measure, where it is trilled for three beats. Nannetta sings the final line of the fifth strophe, “Dalle fatate mani germoglino parole” and a new accompanimental texture is introduced in measure thirty-nine.

The section that begins in measure thirty-nine is colored by several secondary dominants and secondary leading tone chords. The new accompanimental texture is comprised of
a rocking sextuplet figure in the right hand paired with one note in the left hand, each figure sounding once per beat, three times a measure. The harmonic departure introduced in measure thirty-nine is initiated by a third inversion dominant seventh of F#, or V43/vi in the key of A major. G# is sounded in the left hand. The G# is preserved in the next measure while the harmony above changes to V65 in the key of A major. Nannetta continues to sing her long, legato lines, driving to the vocal climax in measure forty-four, where she sustains a high A for four beats before leaping down a major seventh to B in measure forty-five. The descending bass line moves through whole steps and half steps from G# to B. The second scale degree, B in the left hand of measure forty-four anticipates the second scale degree that Nannetta leaps to in measure forty-five, in preparation for the final line of the aria. The changing harmonic motion paired with the whole step and half step bass descent creates an air of mystery, as the Fairy Queen sings of magic words, songs and spells. The ambiguousness of the active harmonic area is reflective of Nannetta’s words, supporting her magical powers while adding to Falstaff’s terror. The key of A major is restored in measure forty-six, as Nannetta sings the final line of the aria for the first time. The harmonic motion pauses on a V7 chord in measure forty-seven, allowing the Fairy Queen to cadence on the fifth scale degree, E in measure forty-eight.

The E sung by Nannetta in measure forty-eight is transferred to the fairy chorus on the anacrusis to the next measure. The fairy chorus music from their first appearance in measures sixteen through nineteen returns in measures forty-eight through fifty-one. This includes the descending A major scale found in the right hand of the accompaniment. The A major scale repeats itself in the same register two times in measures forty-eight through fifty-two. However, this time the fairies remain in unison for a total of six measures instead of splitting into two parts after three measures of unison singing during their first interlude, in
measure twenty. In measure fifty-two, the harmonies from the first fairy chorus interlude are not preserved. Instead, new harmonies including secondary dominants and secondary leading tone chords create a rising bass line. The ascending bass line moves by whole step, half step and major third, starting on F# in measure fifty-two and rising to D in measure fifty-three. The descending A major scale returns for a third iteration in a new, higher register as the right hand of the accompaniment leaps up two octaves in measure fifty-two. The combination of both the descending A major scale and the ascending bass line prompts Nannetta’s entrance on E on the anacrusis to measure fifty-four. To complete the pattern set forth by the descending A major scale, Nannetta must sing an E before leaping up to A.

![Example 8. Giuseppe Verdi, Falstaff, Act III, Scene 2, pg. 364, mm. 53-54.](image)

Now, Nannetta reverses the direction of the A major scale, beginning her vocal ascent in measure fifty-four.

The Fairy Queen repeats her final line of text, reaffirming her magical message and expanding the vocal range of the line, moving past the E and cadencing on a high A. Nannetta’s final line of the aria is marked dolcissimo, while the accompaniment below is marked
pianissimo. The Fairy Queen preserves her delicate elegance, maintaining a sweet, soft dynamic while singing a slow legato ascent to the climax in measure fifty-six. This ascent begins on E, leaping up a perfect fourth to A, then a major third to C# before beginning the mostly chromatic ascent to the high A. The Fairy Queen’s ascent is harmonically supported first with two tonic chords in measure fifty-four. The harmonic rhythm is dictated by the vocal ascent, moving once per beat while supporting the ascending line. After the vocal line climaxes, the high A is maintained for nine beats, slowing dying out as the fairy chorus sings underneath their Queen. The accompaniment cadences on a tonic in measure fifty-eight, as Nannetta and the fairy chorus sing their final note of the aria. The piano continues with a postlude, the staccato eighth notes die out as they jump back and forth from A to E, eventually regaining their vigor in measure sixty, pushing the tempo while driving the dramatic narrative.

Nannetta’s amorous sub-plot does not conclude with her Fairy Queen aria. After tormenting Falstaff a bit longer, the deception and trickery is revealed when Bardolfo’s disguise falls off his face, revealing the former servant to his master. After this revelation, Falstaff’s relief gives way to repentance; he recognizes the error of his ways, proclaiming, “Incomincio ad accorgermi d’esser stato un somaro.” Following Falstaff’s repentance, Ford seizes the opportunity to hold a wedding for his daughter. Unbeknownst to him, one final, decisive deception is to occur. A double wedding takes place, involving Dr. Caius, Bardolfo, Nannetta and Fenton. In the wives’ final deception, Dr. Caius, Nannetta’s intended husband mistakenly marries a veiled Bardolfo, allowing Nannetta to marry Fenton, the man of her choosing.

Nannetta’s characterization and personal growth throughout the opera is largely based upon her role as a woman in the community, a role that in Shakespearian times was influenced by the

55 “I begin to realize I was an ass.”
ruling monarch, Queen Elizabeth. Yet, Nannetta’s clear homage to Elizabeth, her role as the Fairy Queen, is but one part of Nannetta’s story. While “Sul fil d’un soffio etesio” is the clear Elizabethan climax of the narrative, Nannetta’s personal dramatic climax occurs after her portrayal of the Fairy Queen, when she marries Fenton. Thus, two noteworthy transformations are attained in the final scene of the opera. The wives succeed in their deception and Falstaff recognizes the error of his ways, admitting his folly. Meanwhile, Nannetta and Fenton succeed in their own deception, culminating in Nannetta’s transformation from a woman to a full-fledged Merry Wife of Windsor.
NANNETTA

LO STESSO MOVIMENTO \( \text{d}=63. \)

Sul fil di un soffio e
From secret caves and

PPP leggerriss. e stacc.
corda sola
dolciss.

Scorrete a gigli
Emerge, your locks en-

portando la voce

Fra i rami un baglior
With fronds of fern and

D'alba luna reap
While yet the moon is
Danza! e il passo binding.

Then dance, lightly and

blando. Mi su. riun bando suon,

feast. While singing your elfi sh rhymes.

Le magiche ac cop pian do. Caro le al la can.

Words that are wed ded sweetly. To tunes of ol den
CHORUS OF FAIRIES

(Slow dance by the little fairies)

La sel•-va•dor•
The for•est slum

(36) pp
levare corda sola

me•
be•rys

e sper•de incen• its leaf•y boughs•

so ed om•bra;
their shad•ous spread,
Dark green be•neath the
Porta la sua fortuna.
Col gigli e le vitici.

Sempre dolce

Dai le fatte mani.

Germogliano parole.

Francesco O...
Fa·ro·le al·lu·mi·na·te

Di·pu·ro argen·to e d'or,

Car·mi e ma· li·e. Le

Fa·te hanno per ci·fre

Such as the rose·buds tell,

Serve us for

furnish us man·a·tions
POCO PIÙ ANIMATO.
morendo

CHORUS OF FAIRIES. (The little fairies pluck flowers).

Sotto il luna re al bor, Verso la quercia
Let us at once repair, To the gigantic

(all the fairies, and their Queens, slowly approach Herne's Oak, singing)

Le Fate han no per bru na Del ne ro Cac ia tor.
The flowers have taught us full the oak tree The sab le hun ter's lair.
(Enter all the characters, disguised, and twenty-four fairies, who surround Anne. The men are grouped R., the women L. Mrs. Page as a green nymph masked — Dame Quickly as a witch masked — Mrs. Ford masked — Bardolph in a scarlet dominò, hood thrown back, unmasked — Fenton, black dominò, masked — Ford undisguised and unmasked)

BARDOLFO

PRESTISSIMO $d=112$ (stumbling against Falstaff and signalling the fairies to halt)

PISTOLA

accel: PRESTISSIMO $d=112$

Chi va là!

Who goes there!
Bibliography


