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**THE TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSION OF  
SHAKESPEARE'S THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR AS  
ADAPTED INTO OPERA BY RITTER AND  
DITTERSDORF**

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at the changes that occur in the adaptation of Shakespeare's play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* into opera as it travels transnationally from England to Germany and temporally from the Elizabethan Age to the end of the eighteenth century. The change of mentalities is obvious, as greater momentum is granted to bourgeois interests, such as trade and money issues. The process of translation is also vital in the forging of the libretto. Therefore, the names of the characters are modified to reflect the local colour of German society, as well as to subliminally impress a description of those respective characters upon the audience. Thus, for instance, the name *Ruthal* suggests a nature that is forever calm when confronted with the unexpected crises of life. Even if in the original play the women are cast in unusually important positions for that age and for Shakespeare's wont, functioning as clever stage directors of the farce and astutely duping the men, in Ritter's and Dittersdorf's Singspiels they practically reach a form of feminism *avant la lettre*. The male characters also differ from their theatrical models in that *Falstaff* and *Ford* (re-baptised *Wallauf*) are much more vindictive and less benign. The rigours of the operatic tradition impose various transformations from spoken to sung language, entailing a dramatic metamorphosis which results in the alteration or downright rewriting of the plot, as well as the reduction of the number of acts and characters. Finally, the conclusion of this study maps the whole transnational journey of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in its musical adaptations, which has brought utmost global fame to a play that has never been greatly favoured by the theatre.

Long after *Falstaff* was already a dearly beloved theatre character, the world of the musical stage also adopted him, and from then on he could no longer be supplanted. A surprising number of French, German, Austrian, Italian, English, Irish, Romanian and other nationalities of composers tackled topics revolving around his character in opera and musical theatre, thus conferring upon Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* a transnational dimension rarely paralleled in music.

The first opera ever reported to have adapted Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* for the lyrical stage was Papavoine's *Le Vieux coquet* ou *Les*

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*Deux amies (The Old Gallant or The Two Lady-Friends)*, which premiered at the Comédie-Italienne in Paris in 1761.

The second opera based on *The Merry Wives* was interestingly also a French one: *Herne le Chasseur* (1773) by François-André Danican Philidor (1726-1795), who came from a numerous family of well-known musicians and was deemed by the Grande Encyclopédie “the only one who deserves to be ranked as first class composer” in the whole family, being “one of the best French artists of the eighteenth century” (648, my translation).

The following adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives* saw the light of day in Germany: Peter Ritter’s *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor*, a Singspiel in three acts which premiered at the National Theatre in Mannheim in 1794. Ritter<sup>1</sup> (1763-1846) also came from a family that was almost exclusively made of musicians, became a good violinist and cellist early in his childhood and started touring with his family at twelve. He also took up composition at a very young age.

His *Die lustigen Weiber* (1794) disappeared from the repertoire immediately. Pichler’s review of the premiere throws light on the probable reasons why it was so soon forgotten:

Ritter’s opera *Die lustigen Weiber*, on a text after Shakespeare, modernised by Römer and shifted on German soil, generated unanimous discontent. A message on the poster announced that, at the composer’s wish, the present Singspiel was adapted so that Falstaff should only appear in a few scenes among those in which he appeared in Shakespeare’s play, as music limits the poet more than theatre. (qtd. in Kruse, vol. 20, 68, my translation)

The libretto was written by Georg Christian Römer, who is significant in the history of comic opera chiefly because he wrote the play *Der Bürgermeister von Saardam, oder Die zwei Peter*, itself based on the French play *Le Bourgeois-mestre de Sardam, ou Les deux Pierres* by Anne-Honoré-Joseph Duveyrier de Mélesville, Jean Toussaint Merle and Eugène Centiran de Boirie<sup>2</sup>. In 1837, Albert Lortzing based the libretto to his famous comic opera in three acts *Zar und Zimmermann (Tsar and Carpenter)* on Römer’s play. The latter also adapted Johann August Apel’s short story *Die Jägerbraut (The Hunter’s Bride)* for his friend Ritter, but the draft was discarded when the composer found out that Weber was using the same material for his *Der Freischütz* (adapted by librettist Johann Friedrich Kind).

In Ritter’s opera, the characters undergo various changes. Sir John is called Ritter Hans<sup>3</sup> Falstaff. But Mr. Ford becomes Herr Wallauf, as “auf dem Wall”

<sup>1</sup> For the details on Ritter’s life and work I am indebted to Kruse, vol. 20, pp. 69-70.

<sup>2</sup> In 1827, Domenico Gilardoni based his libretto to Donizetti’s melodramma giocoso *Il borgomastro di Saardam (The Mayor of Saardam)* on the French play.

<sup>3</sup> Ritter means knight in German – an accidental coincidence with the composer’s name.

Just as Jack comes from John in English, Hans comes from Johannes – John – in German. Brooding over the significance of the name, and inclining to believe there *is* something in a name, Peter Marginter launches a rhetorical question: “Don Juan, Don Giovanni, Sir John –: Sie haben es mit den Weibern: Warum so viele Hänse? Führt eine Spur zu Salome?”/“Don Juan, Don Giovanni, Sir John –: there is something with you and women: Why so many Jacks? Does a trail lead to Salome?” (3). Of course, Don Juan and Don Giovanni are one, so

means “on the rampart” and depicts him as a man forever braced for battle. Mr. Page becomes Herr Ruthal – he who is forever calm about everything that might befall him. Strangely, the two names are also appropriate for the two wives who wear them. Falstaff calls Madam Wallauf Hannchen, a diminutive for Johanna, this being an astute, but hardly justified transformation of Miss Page’s name in the play – Ann, endearingly called Nan. In turn, the latter – Anne Page – becomes Luise in the opera, which is an utterly unaccountable change. She is Wallauf’s daughter instead of Ruthal’s, and in this, Römer’s libretto anticipates Boito’s<sup>4</sup>, finding ways to make it relevant that the young girl should be the daughter of the jealous and controlling man instead of the imperturbable one’s. Fenton turns into Warneck, probably for no other reason than to sound more German. However, Mrs. Quickly, a hostess here, is given a significant name – Frau Klapper, which means both rattle (a noisy instrument) and claptrap (pretentious, insincere or empty language), notions that designate her as a gossip. It is very probable that the choice of this name should have been influenced by that of Mother Prat(t) given to Falstaff when disguised as the fat woman of Brainford in *The Merry Wives* (IV.2.167), which Salomon Hermann von Mosenthal will translate as Mutter Klatsch (Mother Scandal) in Otto Nicolai’s opera<sup>5</sup> in 1849.

The list of dramatis personae in Ritter’s opera is completed by creditors, servants, etc. No source can be found on Ritter’s *Lustigen Weiber*. According to Kruse (70), even Schulze, Ritter’s biographer, who said he had bought the composer’s entire musical bequest in 1886, limits his comments to Pichler’s above mentioned note. Neither the book, nor the score can be found – although the 1796 Mannheim season calendar mentions it was published for the 1795 Easter Mass. It is therefore a fluke that the Mannheim Library preserved at least Falstaff’s vocal part accompanied by the double-bass, with quite detailed key words, which enables researchers to form some idea of the music, be it very fragmentary. The discovery of this remnant of Ritter’s opera is all the more valuable as, by comparison, it clarifies the matter of the libretto of the following opera based on Shakespeare’s play, namely Dittersdorf’s *Lustigen Weiber*, on which information is downright meagre.

The fourth opera recorded by music history as based on Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives* was the first one written by an important, significant author. The Austrian composer<sup>6</sup> Carl<sup>7</sup> Ditters von Dittersdorf had a somewhat exotic, transnational destiny which took him to what is today referred to as Eastern Europe. Between 1764 and 1769 he was the conductor of the Bishop of Grosswardein’s orchestra at Pressburg (today’s Bratislava in Slovakia), for whose theatre he wrote his first opera buffa – *Amore in musica*. In 1764, Ditters accepted the post of Kapellmeister at the court of Ádám Patachich, a Hungarian nobleman who was then

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he only mentions two Johns (and the connotation in English is even naughtier). The reference to Saint John the Baptist and Salome does not seem to have any connection with eroticism (unless the reference is to Wilde’s *Salomé* and *Jokanaan*), but the association is intriguing.

<sup>4</sup> Composer and poet Arrigo Boito wrote the brilliant libretto to Giuseppe Verdi’s last opera, *Falstaff*, after Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1893).

<sup>5</sup> Otto Nicolai’s *Singspiel* is also entitled *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor*.

<sup>6</sup> As well as violinist and... silvologist!

<sup>7</sup> Also spelt Karl.

the Bishop of Oradea in Romania. That is why a great part of the composer's discography has been recorded in Romania, with a special homage brought to the composer by the Oradea Philharmonic Orchestra.

Dittersdorf achieved great popularity as a composer. He wrote twenty-eight operas, oratorios, cantatas and masses, about one hundred and fifteen symphonies (twelve of which were based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, out of which only six have survived, and have also been recorded), thirty-five concertos for violin, piano and other instruments, cassations, divertimenti, twelve string quartets, seventeen violin sonatas, thirty piano sonatas, etc. (Thompson 549).

Dittersdorf's symphonic and chamber compositions lay the emphasis on a melodic sensuousness of Italian influence over motivic development (which is often entirely absent even in his best works, unlike the works of his greater contemporaries Haydn and Mozart). Even so, Dittersdorf was one of the important composers of Classicism.

His comic *Singspiel* in two acts based on *The Merry Wives* premiered at the Herzoglich Braunschweigisch-Oelsische Hoftheater in 1796, as part of Dittersdorf's afore-mentioned exotic destiny, since Oels is modern day Oleśnica, a town in the Lower Silesian Voivodeship, in south-western Poland.

The full autograph score of the opera is preserved at the Dresden Library and is entitled *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor und der dike Hanns (The Merry Wives of Windsor and Fat Jack)*, but its quality is so poor as to defy research. Mine was a case of musical archaeology. I obtained the 700 page manuscript of the orchestra score of Dittersdorf's *Singspiel* from the Dresden Library and resorted to a specialist in score-writing software, who retraced the lines of the staves and improved the legibility of each page.

From the same library I also got the eighteenth century manuscript of the libretto attributed to Römer and written in Gothic spelling, and then turned to Dr. Thomas Schares, a former DAAD lecturer of the Department of German at the University of Bucharest, who transcribed the text, transforming it into a modern Word document.

Over a century ago, Richard Kruse undertook a painstaking and extremely valuable analysis of the opera in comparison with the sketches that are left of Falstaff's part in Ritter's *Singspiel*.

As Kruse asserts, the indication that the libretto after Shakespeare was written by Herklots, which Carl Krebs<sup>8</sup> gives in his book *Dittersdorffiana*, was obviously not based on Krebs' own study of the score and is therefore wrong (Kruse, vol. 20, 70). Kruse rightly remarks that the libretto (whose manuscript has been preserved) is practically identical with Ritter's, both being therefore signed by Römer. Lothar Riedinger, who wrote the most comprehensive critical study on Dittersdorf's style as opera composer in 1914, agrees with Kruse's opinion. He also considers this libretto better than von Mosenthal's later one for Nicolai's *Singspiel*. The fact that he eliminates the superfluous second trick – that of Falstaff cudgelled

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<sup>8</sup> Kruse signals two other surprising mistakes made by Krebs – his spelling of the German name given to the Page couple – Kuthal instead of Ruthal – and that of Frau Clapper instead of Klapper.

as he flees travestied as the fat woman of Brainford – lends it greater fluidity. In this he is a precursor of the intuition evinced by the pair Arrigo Boito – Giuseppe Verdi in their 1893 *Falstaff*, as well as of Ralph Vaughan Williams in his *Sir John in Love*, written in 1929. However, the whole of Römer's libretto can hardly be called better than von Mosenthal's since, as an adaptation of Shakespeare's play, it is extremely free, it departs from the original vertiginously and often resorts to mystifying turns of events.

However, what renders this libretto highly interesting from the point of view of its transnational dimension is the topicality that its author confers upon it. Römer moves the action from the reign of Henry IV/Henry V to his own times (that is, to the end of the eighteenth century) and from England to Germany: "Actually, what Römer did with Falstaff and all the other well-wrought characters no longer has anything to do with the poet's play; only the external actions have been partially preserved. The whole clumsy dilution of the comedy could not have been successful, even with potent music like that created by Ritter and Dittersdorf" (Kruse, vol. 20, 73, my translation).

Dittersdorf's list of *dramatis personae* is identical with Ritter's, displaying the same translation or replacement of the original names. In this opera, Sweet Anne is once more rechristened as Luise and is the daughter of the Wallauf couple. Warnek corresponds to Fenton, and he finally marries his sweetheart. Römer makes Falstaff help the two young lovers in order to take revenge against Ford-Wallauf. Frau Klapper, the German equivalent of Mrs. Quickly, is the hostess of the inn where Falstaff keeps rooms, rather as in *Henry IV*, not *The Merry Wives*, where she is Dr. Caius' maid. It is also she who takes the knight's letters to the two ladies, replacing Pistol, Bardolph, Nym, the page and the rest of the train.

Even if *The Merry Wives* is indeed Shakespeare's only work that depicts domestic life in Elizabethan England (although the action is set earlier), Römer's libretto is far more bourgeois than the Bard's play and great emphasis is laid on money issues. From the beginning, Falstaff is literally hounded by creditors, who follow him to the inn in which he lodges and break down the door in order to collect the knight's debt. The latter dashes past them – an extremely weak and bathetic dramatic solution to the crisis. The ensuing dialogue between Sir John and Frau Klapp offers a very clever solution. He tries to blackmail his landlady by threatening to tarnish the reputation of her inn and by saying that he has never been worse protected than on her property. Slyly, she turns the tables on him, feigning an inordinate concern for decorum. She expresses her regret that the strife with the creditors should have taken place under her roof, as this might bring prejudice to her inn, in which case Falstaff is responsible and must be held accountable. Seeing that things have not gone his way, the knight quickly cuts her short and tells her not to worry about the event.

On the other hand, this is the only opera based on *The Merry Wives* which preserves the reason for which the girl's father – Page in the play, Wallauf in the *Singspiel* – rejects Fenton/Warneke as a suitor. A gentleman by birth, the young man has ruined his fortune through bad husbandry. His prospective father-in-law accuses him of being a gold-digger. In the play, Fenton admits to this initial ulterior motive, assuring Ann that once he got to know her he fell in love with her truly. Luise, on

the other hand, very German-minded, is extremely cautious and asks her beau if her father is not right about his pecuniary intentions. Warnek is offended by the implication and rejects any such “hidden agenda”.

Madam Wallauf supports her daughter’s love, once again foreshadowing Boito and Verdi’s *Falstaff* and their intuition that a sympathetic mother makes for a much more appealing character. In her trio with the two young lovers, she pronounces words of wisdom, advising them not to cast sad shadows on their youth, as only youth is life, and once it is gone, no one can give you a light heart, thus seeming to be a far less merry wife than her counterpart in the play. The spirit and philosophy of the characters change completely, as Shakespeare’s only live in the here and now, unconcerned with the future and with brooding over the passage of time.

On the other hand, Frau Ruthal, the equivalent of Mrs. Page, also evinces a wide departure from the original. In her aria, she teaches her friend how a woman must defend herself against a jealous husband. Surprisingly, she exclaims: “Sie mögen sich brüsten die Thoren,/Das Weib ist zum Herrschen geboren! Wir schmieden durch Blike, /Und listige Tüke, /Die Männer in Ketten,/Was kann sie erretten.” (“He may boast all he wants, the fool./But woman is born to rule!/We hook with our eye./Our cunning is sly./The men are en fettered:/Who’ll rescue the tethered?” – my translation). In this battle between genders, she is obviously a feminist avant-la-lettre, and this is less a case of transnational change than one of temporal shift. Two centuries separate the Elizabethan play from the Singspiel written in the Austria of Habsburg Emperor Franz II. Even in Shakespeare’s play, Alice and Meg are cast in roles of great importance, which is rare for that age and for the author’s well known preference for weak, sinful or vicious female characters. In *The Merry Wives*, they are, however, astute stage directors, managing the farce and duping the men with ease. Two centuries later it stands to reason that they should be even more empowered. At the end of the Enlightenment, mentalities and the role of women in society are no longer the same. If Madam Wallauf is less merry than Mrs. Ford, Madam Ruthal is less pure than Mrs. Page<sup>9</sup>, as she gives the following prescription in case a husband accuses his wife of betrayal: if she knows herself blameless, she must hurl herself, scream and lament ravingly, but still behaving with grace and dignity. But, if she knows her morality to be less than perfect, the wife must patiently flatter her husband, accuse him of being unfair and claim her virtue. Yet, in her buoyant initiative which today would be called “pro-active”, Madam Ruthal is much more akin to Shakespeare’s character than to her operatic counterparts in Salieri’s, Nicolai’s and Verdi’s works, who are meek followers of the leading Mrs. Ford.

Another great variance from the original text is that Herr Wallauf finds his wife reading Falstaff’s letter and grabs it from her, accusing her of faithlessness, proving that a German man cannot be duped. In a completely implausible fit of open-mindedness and magnanimity, he lets this transgression go and forgives her.

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<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Page says of her husband: “He’s as far from jealousy as I am from giving him cause; / and that I hope is an unmeasurable distance” (II, 1, 95-97).



This character differs significantly from his Shakespearean counterpart. His actual activity as a merchant is much more prominent here. When Herr Ruthal sees him after the buck basket scene, he asks his friend where he has been tarrying all this time, for, if it had not been for him, their wool transactions would have gone to the dogs while Wallauf indulged in whims and fantasy. Dittersdorf's character is far more vicious than Ford and he has vindictive thoughts.

So does Falstaff. In the buck basket scene, he is not thrown into the Thames, which makes us wonder what lesson he is taught. Instead, he actually makes his escape and is taken to a washing room, where Wallauf has locked his daughter Luise lest she should elope with Warnek. Eager to take revenge against Wallauf, the knight decides to help Luise thwart her father's wishes.

After his meticulous analysis, Kruse concludes that Dittersdorf's opera had no chance of survival because of Mozart's crushing vicinity:

The score of Dittersdorf's *Lustigen Weiber* is, from all points of view, very close to all his well-known operas, even if his power of invention often seems downright weak and long passages were completed in tedious routine. The hand of the master skilled in technique is just as unmistakable as the talent with which he very aptly contours his characters musically and thus we already notice very felicitous outlines in his pencilling Falstaff and his mood swings. The soubrette tone of the merry wives, the lyrical coloration of the lovers' couple, the choleric nature of one husband and the phlegmatic one of the other, get – taking into account the age in which they were created – an entirely appropriate expression. Nevertheless, five years after Mozart's death, it becomes apparent how far behind Dittersdorf remained from the depth and the richness of the art of Figaro's creator. Even by comparison with *Die Entführung*, Dittersdorf's score seems poor compositionally and, besides the total absence of the clarinet and trombone, scanty and empty in instrumentation. After the wonder revealed to the listeners by *Die Zauberflöte* [1791], only the works already presented (*Doktor und Apotheker* – 1786 and *Hieronymus Knicker* – 1789) managed to last on stage, while the later ones no longer found their way. (Kruse, vol. 20, 89, my translation)

After a careful comparison of the two German Singspiels, written two years apart on the same libretto, Kruse concludes from the surviving fragment of Peter Ritter's work that the younger composer evinced more freshness in his power of invention and a musical fashioning that drills more into the detail of the text, while Dittersdorf's score proves that he mainly tried to preserve the atmosphere he had created and generally uses tone painting and characterizing colours only in the recitatives. The two share the preference of the age for simple key and metre patterns. However, in Falstaff's extant score, at least, Ritter offers a greater number of rhythm changes and modulations than Dittersdorf. However, the latter makes a first attempt to characterise fat Falstaff musically – through the heavy chords that depict his thudding tread in the overture and throughout the opera.

Since Dittersdorf was a significant composer, famous in his own time and still performed and recorded nowadays, his is the first important adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and, as such, it deserves to be researched and included on the list of noteworthy adaptations of Shakespeare into opera. The highly exotic destiny of this travelling composer for hire as well as the

German mentality impressed by Römer upon the libretto used by both Ritter and Dittersdorf grant an intriguing transnational dimension to the Bard's play in its eighteenth century makeover in the genre of the Singspiel. However, Shakespeare's play was fated to embark upon a long transnational journey in its musical versions – to France (Papavoine 1761, Philidor 1773, Adam 1856), to Germany (Ritter 1794, Dittersdorf 1796, Hoffmann 1800, Nicolai 1859, Zaufke 2005), to Italy (Salieri 1799, Verdi 1893), to The United States of America (Webber 1928, C. S. Swier 1971, F. Gilbert and E. W. Rogers 1977, A. Rea 1982), to Romania (Alifantis 1978 and 1995), as well as upon a long and loving tour of its native Britain (Horn, Parry, Webbe et al. 1824, Balfe 1838, Sullivan 1874, Vaughan Williams 1929, Gilbert 1971, Englishby 2006). Thus, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has achieved utmost international and transnational fame in its musical adaptations rather than in the Bard's initial version for the theatre.

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