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Paper Title: "Oh Foolish Fortune: Unfamiliar Territory and the Pedantic Fool in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*."

Erasmus, noted for planting the seed of not only the Renaissance literary fool, but also the approach, curriculum and design of the Renaissance grammar school, believed that boys should get just enough grammar to allow them to access the best texts of the classical tradition, offering "the preliminary minimum of theory, the illustration from authors, and the application in actual composition, both oral and written" (Baldwin 92). Shakespeare's fools seem to be inherently pedagogical figures, playing educational roles that can be tracked back to Erasmus' pedagogical philosophy. My paper, excerpted from my graduate thesis, will attempt to illustrate a pedagogical manifestation of the Fool in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*—that of the unlicensed or pedantic fool. I aim to draw a parallel between the role played by Falstaff and the "pedantic schoolmaster[s] who doted on rules of grammar and minutia" whom Erasmus loathed (Baldwin 79).

The fortunes of nearly every character in *MWW* are intimately tied to the acquisition and skillful use of an education in language and rhetoric. Mrs. Page seeks to ensure Will's future fortune by presiding over his tutoring sessions, and most of the characters either succeed or fail based solely upon their ability to wield language effectively—Fenton, the character who stands victorious at the play's end, was, "in Shakespeare's prosiest play, the only character who speaks reliably in verse" (Landreth 444).

Drawing on recent articles by David Landreth, Natasha Korda, Timothy Billings and Will Stockton, as well as classic texts on Fools and education by Enid Welsford and T.W. Baldwin, I will attempt to show that Pedantry is closely connected to the venue in which a character attempts to teach. Falstaff, master of the beer hall, has no authority in the household—an authority clearly held by the titular Merry Wives. As the Erasmian pedant claims authority based on rules and minutia (rather than on deep knowledge and visceral experience), the pedantic fool claims authority based on social rules and constructs that do not apply in his present venue. He attempts to teach a language that he does not truly understand.

My paper will show that the result of such pedantic foolery is the fool's ultimate ruination by means of reduction. Falstaff not only experiences a metamorphosis of gender, but he also goes through a pedagogical reduction. He begins the play as a would-be teacher, but by the close of the drama, he has been reduced to little more than a lesson for the benefit of Ford and Fenton (Landreth 438). By assuming authority in a venue where he did not speak the language of power, Falstaff becomes the pedantic fool, resulting in a loss of fortune in his romantic, masculine and pedagogical potency.