

HOW MUCH, DID YOU SAY AGAIN?

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (4.6.1), Fenton persuades the Host to help him by offering some money:

FENTON: Assist me in my purpose,
And, as I am a gentleman, I'll give thee
A hundred pound in gold more than your loss.

HOST: I will hear you, Master Fenton, and I will, at the least,
keep your counsel.

The Host is suitably impressed, as well he should be, for, if £1 then was equivalent to £100 today (see the sources in my previous article), that was a tidy sum, some £10,000 in today's money. The line probably needs to be said with appropriately wide eyes!

Could Fenton really afford it? He must have been doing very well, despite, as he says (3.4.5) 'my state being galled by my expense' and admitting to being initially attracted to Ann Page because of her money. She's a good catch, as others recognize:

SHALLOW: Did her grandsire leave her seven hundred pound?

EVANS: Ay, and her father is make her a petter penny.

SHALLOW: I know the young gentlewoman. She has good gifts.

EVANS: Seven hundred pounds, and possibilities, is goot gifts.

That's £70,000 a year today – a 'good dowry' indeed (1.1.222). Slender doesn't seem quite so well off (3.4.29):

ANNE: O, what a world of vile ill-favoured faults

Looks handsome in three hundred pounds a year!

But he has enough, evidently, to impress her.

In all this, we're talking notional money.

The pound, originally a pound weight of silver, was a standard monetary unit of measurement used in accounting to express values and costs (much as a guinea is sometimes still used today). Until 1583 it did not exist as a coin (nor as a note, which was a much later development), but its value was represented by the gold sovereign, in use since the time of Henry VII, originally equivalent to 22 shillings and 6 pence, and in the later part of the century worth about 20 shillings (= 240 pence). The pound evidently had strong psychological value, as everyone talks about it, from rich to poor. (Shakespeare never uses sovereign in its monetary sense.)

At the top end of the scale, a British tribute to Rome was £3000 a year (*Cymbeline*, 3.1.2). The Bastard is angry because he's losing £500 a year (*King John*, 1.1.67). Among the wealthy, everyday pocket money seems to have been £100 or so. Cloten is prepared to bet £100 on a throw at bowls (*Cymbeline*, 2.1.1). Vincentio thinks to persuade Lucentio to see him by dangling a bait of 'a hundred pound or two to make merry withal' (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 5.1.16). Falstaff manages to get 'three hundred and odd pounds' for pressing 150 soldiers (*1 Henry IV*,

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continues his series on the subject of Shakespeare's money.



Illustration Belle Mellor

4.2.12). That's £2 a soldier – slightly more than Bardolph gets for freeing Mouldy and Bullcalf, £3 for the two of them (*2 Henry IV*, 3.2.237).

At the other end of the scale, although the totals are relatively small amounts, they clearly mean a lot to people. Forty pounds is enough for Sir Andrew to make a strong rhetorical point (*Twelfth Night*, 5.1.173):

I had rather than forty pound I were at home.

Forty was a proverbial amount in conversation, so he probably doesn't mean it literally (though it would in fact be enough to buy him four horses to replace Capilet). *Forty pence* was a traditional amount for a wager, just as *forty winks* is for a short nap. The Old Lady in *Henry VIII* uses the expression, reacting to Anne's acceptance of the King's offer (2.3.89):

How tastes it? Is it bitter? Forty pence, no. And if you're going to exaggerate, that is the sort of sum you might go for (*1 Henry IV*, 3.3.99):

PRINCE HAL: What didst thou lose, Jack?

FALSTAFF: Wilt thou believe me, Hal, three or four bonds of forty pound apiece, and a seal-ring of my grandfather's.

PRINCE HAL: A trifle, some eightpenny matter. Eightpence was a thirtieth of an old pound. 'Not worth twopence', we'd say today.

But even £20 can show strength of feeling (*The Taming of the Shrew*, Induction 1.19):

I would not lose the dog for twenty pound.

And the Hostess decides to do something about Falstaff's debts when they reach that level (*1 Henry IV*, 3.3.70):

We need to know as much about relative values as possible, if we are to appreciate the dramatic effect of mentioned moneys.

HOSTESS: You owe money here besides, Sir John, for your diet, and by-drinkings, and money lent you, four-and-twenty pound.

Actually, that isn't so much. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1.3.8), we learn that a week's lodging costs Falstaff £10. So, if that includes his rent, Falstaff is behind only by some three weeks. The hostess evidently has something of a cash-flow problem, hence her insistence.

Falstaff is quick to counter nonetheless. When he refuses to pay, he blames the Hostess for having his pocket picked (3.3.80):

I have lost a seal-ring of my grandfather's worth forty mark. A mark, as we saw in my last article, was equivalent to about two-thirds of a pound, so his ring was worth – what a coincidence! – roughly the same amount as he owes.

The cash-flow problem surfaces again in *2 Henry IV* (2.1.146), when Falstaff offers the Hostess a tenner in lieu of what he owes her:

Let it be ten pound if thou canst.

This is quite a sum – enough to buy twenty 'good ewes', according to Silence (3.2.49) – but it doesn't cut any ice. The Hostess is panicking about having to pawn all her possessions. So she makes another plea (2.1.152):

Pray thee, Sir John, let it be but twenty nobles.

But just how much was this? A noble was a gold coin with the value of a third of a pound – so she's hoping for £6 or so. The point is that a noble was a relatively low denomination. A stronger request would have been to ask for the more valuable 20 angels (a gold coin with a value of between a third and a half of a pound) or the even more valuable 20 royals (a gold coin with a value of half a pound). Whatever Falstaff has said to her, when he takes her aside ('Come hither, hostess'), her choice of the noble suggests she is falling over backwards to appease him.

We need to know as much about relative values as possible, if we are to appreciate the dramatic effect of mentioned moneys. Why is Escalus suspicious about Froth (*Measure for Measure* 2.1.116, 185)?

POMPEY: I beseech you look into Master Froth here, sir; a man of fourscore pound a year, whose father died at Hallowmas. ...

ESCALUS: Are you of fourscore pounds a year?

FROTH: Yes, an't please you, sir.

ESCALUS: So.

£80 a year would be the income of a country gentleman, which Froth patently isn't. So Escalus follows it up with a leading question:

What trade are you of, sir?

POMPEY: A tapster, a poor widow's tapster.

That confirms it. A tapster would be paid, at most £18 a year, and Escalus, seeing the deception, sends Froth away with a flea in his ear. For the actor playing Escalus, that *so* carries a lot of weight.

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