INTRODUCTION

In the following introduction I have tried at every point to use information about *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as a way of directly confronting the play.

The date and first occasion of the play

I have argued in the Textual Analysis that the F text of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is very close to Shakespeare's foul papers, the earliest state of the play, and that the play here shows signs of having been completed in haste.[1] The F text also contains matter of an upper-class and educated kind, such as the heraldic discussion with which the play begins, and William Page's Latin lesson at the beginning of Act 4, which suggests that the play was angled towards an audience specifically of this kind, even though the substantial and fundamental conception of the play, as one might expect with Shakespeare, derived not from this sense of the enthusiasms and snobberies of a particular audience but from a much deeper grasp of the forces generally at work among human beings. The targeting of a play substantially written out of other energies towards a specific audience gives these focusing elements of upper-class and educated matter a detachable quality (and they were duly later detached)[2] but they point interestingly to the circumstances within which, even if not out of which, the play arose. A yet more specific pointer and focuser of this kind is found at the end of the play, to ensure no doubt the audience's approbation as they left it. At 5.5.48–65 there is a long speech by the Queen of Fairies about Windsor Castle and the Garter Chapel which in the specificity of its reference is even more easily detachable from its surroundings than the heraldry or the Latin lesson.

As early as 1790 Malone suggested that the first performance of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was connected with the Order of the Garter. A yearly feast was held for the Garter knights, in the presence of the Queen, and as Leslie Hotson showed in 1931,[3] there is good reason for dating the first performance of this play to St George's Day (23 April) 1597, the day of the feast held at Westminster, in Whitehall Palace, at which it was virtually certain that George Carey (the second Baron Hunsdon, who had just succeeded his father as patron of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the company to which Shakespeare belonged) was to be one of the newly elected knights. The probability seems great that the play was commissioned by Lord Hunsdon as his contribution to the festivities, perhaps commissioned at rather short notice (after it had become clear that he was to be elected) and was there acted, as the title page of Q puts it 'by the right Honorable my Lord Chamberlaines seruants . . . before her Maiestie'.

[1] See Textual Analysis, pp. 167–9.
[2] See Textual Analysis, p. 164.
[3] *Shakespeare versus Shallow*, pp. 111–22.

1 Queen Elizabeth viewing a performance of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

The tradition that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was written in response to Queen Elizabeth's desire to see a play about Falstaff in love, which first appears in John Dennis' dedication of his adaptation of the play as *The Comical Gallant* in 1702, may derive from these circumstances of its first performance, or from the title page of the quarto, or may have some truth to it. In the same dedication, Dennis says the play had to be finished in fourteen days and at least that part of his testimony seems borne out by the signs of haste in F.

THE GERMAN ELEMENT

The presence of Germans, and a German Duke, in the play also suggests the Garter celebrations of 1597. On this occasion one of the newly elected knights, elected *in absentia* and so not actually present at the feast (he had not even, indeed, been informed of his election), was Frederick, Duke of Württemberg, who had been touting for election (perhaps in a way that made him seem comic) since he had first visited England in 1592 as Count Mömpelgard (see 4.5.61 n.). It seems conceivable that references of this kind in the play, which would allow a certain private merriment about the persistent German with the funny name, might have been introduced quite late on, when the plot was already shaped and established, as the result of a hint from some of those interested in its coming performance at the feast where Frederick would be an absent presence. That a bit of hasty insertion could come to seem to us important in the play because of its haste and incompleteness[1] is evidence of a genius like Shakespeare's which will take the untidy circumstances of life as they occur and give them permanent significance.

THE BROOM/BROOK SUBSTITUTION

One change, however, Shakespeare had to make very late in the day because of the circumstances of the first performance, which an editor can only unmake. There can be no doubt that Shakespeare's intention was that Master Ford should be called Brook when he appeared in disguise to Falstaff. A ford goes across a brook (that is, the words are cognate) and at 2.2.122 Falstaff decisively quibbles with the name of his mysterious benefactor from whom he has had 'a morning's draught of sack': 'Such brooks are welcome to me, that o'erflows such liquor.'

F's substitution of the name Broom for Q's Brook, occurring because F is directly derived from the foul papers which served as the theatrical text for the first performance,[2] seems the result of a sudden difficulty about the name Brook just before the first performance. We can surmise what that difficulty may have been. George Carey, Lord Hunsdon, became Lord Chamberlain six days before the Garter Feast, following the death in March of the previous holder of the office (and his own father's successor), William Brooke, Lord Cobham. There is evidence that the Brooke family had already objected to Oldcastle, Shakespeare's first name for Falstaff in *The First Part of King Henry IV*, since it was the name of a distinguished ancestor of theirs. That in a play also about Falstaff their own present family name should occur as the alias of a

[1] See Introduction, p. 10.
[2] See Textual Analysis, p. 168.

jealous fool may have provoked sudden objection again from the new Lord Cobham, Henry Brooke, or may indeed have been noticed as an embarrassing coincidence by Lord Hunsdon as he looked through Shakespeare's text before the performance. The performance was, after all, to be in the presence of an audience who would all know the Cobham family name, and who were all going to be asked to chuckle at an absent German duke. The possibility that there might be humour as well at the expense of his recently dead predecessor as Lord Chamberlain had to be ruled out, along with the name Brook. On the public stage, of course, so common a name would not have pointed a finger of fun at the Cobham family. It was only the upper-class coterie who formed the audience for the first performance who had to be prevented from picking up an allusion which was not intended.

THE LUCY FAMILY

One other upper-class allusion in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* clearly was intended, and this derives not from the immediate circumstances of its first performance but from the Stratford of Shakespeare's youth. Shallow's 'dozen white luces' at 1.1.12–13 must be a reference to the Lucy family of Charlecote near Stratford who bore in their coat of arms a rather more modest assemblage of three silver luces (see 1.1.13 n. and 15 n.). We need not accept the tradition, dating only from the early eighteenth century, that Shakespeare had had to leave Stratford because of trouble about stealing deer from Sir Thomas Lucy's park (a tradition which may very well derive from this play and Falstaff's deer-stealing), in order to account for a satiric memory keen enough to adorn Shallow with a touch of Lucy. Important men are often the subject of merriment just because of their importance, and we may have here no more than an echo of the fun Shakespeare and his friends had with the idea of the Lucy family when he was young (see 1.1.15 n.).

LINKS WITH THE MATURE HISTORY PLAYS

The play was probably created amid the circumstances of the Garter feast, then, and of Shakespeare's own private memories; but both Shakespeare and the first audience for the play must also have had memories of what he had already written about Falstaff. The first play in which Falstaff appears, *Henry IV Part One*, can be dated to the winter theatre season of 1596/97. *Henry V*, which contains the account of Falstaff's death, can be dated between March and September 1599; and *Henry IV Part Two*, which continues Falstaff's history from *Part One*, clearly was written between these two bracketing plays. Somewhere within this sequence of histories *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was written, either before, during or after the writing of *Henry IV Part Two*.

It is clear that Shakespeare took no pains to make *The Merry Wives of Windsor* accurately part of the sequence of the three histories when writing about characters who appear in both. Falstaff, for instance, is clearly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* still of the court and not disgraced (since he fears court gossip about his discomfiture at 4.5.75–9, for instance), but equally clearly Prince Hal's mad days are past, and so presumably Henry V is on the throne, since Fenton is said, in the past tense, to have 'kept company with the wild Prince and Poins' (3.2.56 and see 1.1.86n.). Page

speaks disapprovingly of Fenton here, and the suggestion is surely not that Fenton has repented of his association with Prince Hal and left his company, but rather that the wild Prince is no longer available as a companion. In terms of the plot of *Henry IV Part Two* that should mean that Falstaff has been banished the court. Similarly the inconsistent life of Mistress Quickly (who in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* does not know Falstaff, but in the histories has known him for nearly thirty years) makes it clear that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is not an episode in a soap opera begun in *Henry IV Part One* and concluded in *Henry V*. However, some connections there are between the histories and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (see notes to the List of Characters), and it seems plain that Shakespeare would not have introduced a number of characters in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* whom the audience would certainly already know from *Henry IV Part One* unless with some approximate intent to run this horse again.

At one interesting point the horse changed course in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in a way that seems to explain an inconsistency in *Henry IV Part Two*. In the earlier part of *Henry IV Part Two* Falstaff, on his way north to Yorkshire to take part in the campaign against the rebels, calls on Shallow, who is shown in 3.2 talking about cattle prices at Stamford Fair. He clearly lives somewhere near Stamford in Lincolnshire and the Great North Road, a long way from Gloucestershire. By the time we reach 4.3, however, Falstaff is asking permission of Prince John to return through Gloucestershire where, as he says to Bardolph, he intends to visit Shallow. Oliver suggests that Shakespeare moved Shallow's home to Gloucestershire in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* because that was nearer to Windsor and then decided to keep him there for the rest of *Henry IV Part Two*.[1] This would seem to place the hasty writing of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* somewhere between the writing of Act 3 and Act 4 of *Henry IV Part Two*, a dating consistent with the evidence about the Garter Feast of 1597 and explaining, perhaps, the occurrence in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV Part Two* of various words and phrases not found elsewhere in Shakespeare, and the significant percentage of shared vocabulary between the two plays.[2]

SOURCES

Attempts to suggest a specific literary context for *The Merry Wives of Windsor* beyond the obvious one of Shakespeare's own plays have not, on the whole, been fruitful. We may suppose substantially that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* arose from the demand

[1] Oliver p. lv.

[2] Oliver p. lv; Eliot Slater, 'Word links with *The Merry Wives*', *N&Q* 220 (1975), 169–71. The links between *Wiv.* and *H5* are also clear, as Elizabeth Schafer notes, contesting the 1597 dating, in 'The date of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*', *N&Q* 235 (1990), 57–60; but this might be expected if *H5* was written shortly after *2H4* and *Wiv.* Barbara Freedman also contests the 1597 dating in 'Shakespearean chronology, ideological complicity, and floating texts: something is rotten in Windsor', *SQ* 45 (1994), 190–210, rightly pointing out that all the argument for this date falls short of proof, that there is no evidence of any other play ever being commissioned or performed for a Garter ceremony, and that Francis Meres does not mention this play in his list of plays in *Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury* (1598). On the other hand, Barbara Freedman does not directly address the main arguments in favour of the 1597 dating, which still seem to me to stand. Similarly, Giorgio Melchiori in *Shakespeare's Garter Plays: 'Edward III' to 'Merry Wives of Windsor'*, 1994, placing *Wiv.* after *H5*, does not explain why Shakespeare includes in a play written for the public stage specific lines about the Garter ceremonies.

of a particular occasion, and from a mind already creatively involved with a certain period of English history that was both in a sense past history and also present late sixteenth-century reality. It has been often rightly said that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in particular, although in formal terms set in the reign of Henry V, gives a picture of contemporary Elizabethan life. As such, of course, it reflects attitudes, opinions, popular story-telling of the time on the subject of marital infidelity, and it would be surprising if there were not quite frequent resemblances to be found between this play and other contemporary writing in the area of these common motifs. One possible source for an appreciable part of the plot is, however, usually mentioned, a story from a collection called *Il pecorone* (1558) by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino.[1] Even though the story is not known to have been available to Shakespeare in any English translation, another story from the same collection is generally thought to be the source of the main plot of *The Merchant of Venice*, and this one does resemble the plot of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in some notable ways. A student is taught the art of seduction by a professor, and practises it on the professor's own wife. The professor suspects that it is his own wife the student is seducing and follows him to his own house where the student escapes by being hidden under some washing. On a second occasion, the professor stabs the washing, but the student has escaped by another method and the professor is treated as a lunatic by the wife's brothers whom he has asked to witness his search.

Nothing, of course, can be done with such a piece of information as this about *Il pecorone* except to acknowledge it. Shakespeare, if he knew this story, plainly transmuted it beyond a point where it is any longer useful to think of it. By contrast, the history plays about Henry IV and Henry V, and the likely circumstances in which the play was first commissioned and conceived, still have something to offer to any attempt at understanding what Shakespeare created in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

The world of the play

In formal terms, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is in a class by itself among Shakespeare's plays because it is his only citizen comedy. This can be made a more interesting approach to the play than it sounds, for what we appear to find in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is that the world of the play is itself not significant. A play with lords and ladies in it, or famous figures from history, or a play that extends from riches and power to great poverty, that encompasses extremes, has about it a significance of shape even before anything starts to happen; and much modern criticism of Shakespeare has concentrated upon the way in which that spatial significance of the play draws upon and returns upon the richness of individual character, so that we have an acute sense that what is said or done is weighty, asks to be understood, tends towards a philosophy. The world of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is densely populated, full of life and action, but is not in this sense significant. Perhaps Shakespeare felt, as Yeats did, that what distinguished middle-class life was its lack of resonance beyond itself. That lack of

[1] An English translation of the story may be found in Bullough II, 19–26.

resonance is indeed the peculiar strength of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: everything in this play remains itself, whether a laundry basket, a venison pasty or massively, of course, Falstaff, and when passion or rhetoric or the ingenuities of the plot seem to ask for something more, something beyond, it can never be supplied without a comic emptiness, like Pistol's theatrical speech or Ford's pointless jealousy, or a ludicrous lack of real transforming power, like Falstaff into young lover or little boys into frightening fairies. It is precisely this sense of the untransformability of real life that characterises *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

And whatever may be the truth of the tale that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is about Falstaff because Queen Elizabeth wanted to see a play about Falstaff in love, one could argue that in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* Shakespeare found exactly the vehicle he wanted for him. In *Henry IV Part One* and *Part Two*, where Falstaff comes to birth and his first kind of life in Shakespeare's imagination, he is the refuser of chivalry, of honour, the refuser of the fictions that decorate and sometimes transform the lives of lords and kings, but himself seems to produce a counter-fiction, a Rabelaisian icon to stand over against the business of kings and noble wars. By contrast, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Falstaff is just massively himself. The enormous power of his language, which is at the centre of the inexhaustible linguistic vitality of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the great energy continually at play within it, has no design to make him more than the fat old man he is, but only to establish a sense of the tremendous, usually unseen, energy which underpins the ordinary; and the various humiliating accidents that occur to him fail to make him less than the fat old man he is, and it is fat old Falstaff who survives to the end of the play, the big man himself, indestructible, untransformable, whether by an old woman's gown or a set of antlers. It may very well be that simple survival, if you like, that comically empty survival, represents Shakespeare's fundamental view of Falstaff, and that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is Shakespeare's attempt (whether or not the play was written because of the Queen's suggestion or in some sense for a particular occasion) to give the most unvarnished meaning to Falstaff's words in *Henry IV Part One*, at 5.3.58–9: 'I like not such grinning honor as Sir Walter hath. Give me life.'

The play begins in the midst of Shallow's ineffectual protestations of gentility and passes rapidly to the ludicrous and hopeless attempt to transform Slender into a courtly lover. The real people remain who they are, behind the sketched-in rhetoric they persuade themselves or are persuaded into. The whole plot of the play as it develops skilfully and a little untidily (nothing comes, for instance, of Shallow's hostility to Falstaff) is fuelled by the insubstantial rhetoric of love and honour. With the single exception of the lovers, Fenton and Anne Page, who come, as it were, from some other comedy of Shakespeare's, where true love is the final subject, all the characters in this play have as their true subject themselves. There is no enchantment of event which reveals them as different or irrevocably makes them so. So the plot, which offers a wholly ineffectual enchantment of event, is a skilful nothing in this play. Falstaff is not in love and never was, except with money and sack. It would indeed be a massive enchantment by the plot (manipulated by Mistress Page and Mistress Ford) which could find in Falstaff and his belly the great seducer, the young lover; but in reality

Falstaff does not, except for the most fleeting moments, believe it. What he believes is not that he is lovable, but that some lucky combination of chance and lust is forwarding his schemes for repairing his ruined fortunes. It is not plausible that a lover who thought himself truly beloved would, at his beloved's suggestion, put on antlers and pretend to be a stag; but a trickster in the hope of gulling money out of a foolish woman might do it.

If plot as a transformer of reality is not to be found in this play, if the gestures of the plot leave the characters fundamentally untouched, then what shall we say of the teeming richness of the language? The first thing to remark is that this abundance of language does not offer itself to the plot, does not offer its energies to the plot. The language each character speaks remains his or her own language, his or her own peculiar property; it never aspires to alter perceptions on a grand scale, as for instance John of Gaunt's speech about England at the beginning of Act 2 of *Richard II*. Gaunt speaks like 'a prophet new inspir'd', his words sweep out from him and into the march of history. Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, by contrast, who is every bit as inspired as to his words, uses them to travel nowhere, to become nothing that he was not already before the words began.

Are we to say, then, that the language of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is as much a nothing as the plot? I think not. And by trying to understand how language which does nothing can nevertheless be matter of great human substance, we may come to grasp as well how plot which goes nowhere significant can also be the very stuff of life. And see as a consequence that what this play is about is human life lived, not lived for a purpose or in pursuit of a great end.

There is no other play of Shakespeare's which gives us so many characters each with his or her own poetry of speech, utterly distinctive and unrepeatable. Each of these linguistic worlds is both in free and vigorous contact with others and also in a way sealed tight within itself, unaffected by whatever language goes on about it. In some cases, as with Mistress Quickly, or Caius or Evans, these little worlds achieve their intensity by falling short of what would be thought acceptably correct English; and it is astonishing how much energy a language can find within itself when it is broken or fragmented or mishandled. It is as though all the power which would normally hold it in place quietly in a conventional shape of sound or syntax is suddenly nakedly displayed. Only when a building begins to collapse does one realise, as girder springs apart from girder, how much unobtrusively concentrated energy kept it in place, and one may paradoxically have more of a sense of *edifice* in a half-collapsed building, as roof beams swing in the air, than in its quietly complete neighbour. So with the Frenchman, the Welshman, and the garrulously approximate Mistress Quickly; one has an intense sense of language being performed, a poetic sense of it. And as with a poem, one has to stand back and be prepared for a meaning which is not the prosaic sum of all the words used, especially when the words as used do not occur in the dictionary or in the sound or order that would normally be expected.

With Pistol the matter is different. He is *conscious* of resorting to poetic speech in his attempt to claim and hold the energy he wants for his life. He is a conscious poet as the other three are not; but in this he also resembles them: there is something ineluctably

fragmentary about the way this poetic force is made present in his speech. By some obscure instinct Pistol knows that complete quotation of passages from plays would not serve his purpose. Lines have to be wrenched from their sockets, and only the dismembered remains of a rhetorical body will suit his end. Fizzing with energy they often are, like a live electric cable torn out of the wall, and it is that kind of dangerous and (in conventional terms) useless energy that he lives by, not only in his speech but in his actions. His sword, the point of it ever ready for a random target (as distinct from a usefully employed knife, or indeed a sword in the service of one's king), is the analogy in bodily terms for the randomly seeking rhetorical live wire (as distinct from a usefully constructed sentence). Speech and action are of a piece with Pistol, as indeed they are with Caius, Evans, and Quickly, and his speech establishes him, as much as his action, as a character who rivets attention while onstage, but who can disappear for good at 2.2.110 with no damage to the plot of the play. Pistol is a peculiarly powerful example of the degree to which this play is about life being lived and not life being significant. He is closer to Falstaff in his implicit acceptance of non-significance, than to Evans or Caius, for instance, both of whom would give a significant account of themselves and their actions (even though the audience would not for a moment accept it).

There are many others in the play, of course, who would give a significant account of themselves, who would reckon that their activities made up an interesting and meaningful plot, most notably the Ford and Page couples, the middle-class core of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. These middle-class families end the play as they began it, however; their values and attitudes remain unchanged, though the business with Anne Page and Fenton, on the one hand, and with Falstaff and the two wives on the other, has clearly demonstrated with how firm a hold they keep a grip on property, whether that be in terms of money or human beings possessed. The little bit of plot concerned with Fenton and Anne Page (which comes as it were from another comedy by Shakespeare, as I have said) does, it is true, make some significant change to the Page family, because here true love prevails over the love of money, and the victory of love is accepted, though only, one is convinced, on this one occasion. But the whole of the Falstaff plot, his wooing of Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, makes for no change at all. Page trusts his wife anyway, so is not concerned for the security of his property; and Ford gives way to a rage of jealousy, producing rhetorical energy fully in the Pistol and Falstaff league, which is only criticised because it is irrelevant to the situation, which warrants no jealousy. The notion that possessions should be jealously guarded is not called into question, only Ford's belief that the burglar alarm is ringing when it is not. By the end of the play, neither Ford nor Page, nor indeed the audience, have been encouraged to think thoughts about property – the plot has initiated nothing substantial in that line – and we the audience perhaps find that we do not share Ford's and Page's sense that what they do, whatever they do, is solid and significant. That is not our sense of their importance; our sense is that they are important because they are alive.

With Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, we have the emphatic sense of what a joyous thing it is just to be alive; they are wives not husbands and so in a certain contemporary

social sense can by definition do nothing of significance. Their husbands are the important people. All they have in life is living it. The adjective applied to them in the title of the play is peculiarly appropriate, for 'merry' suggests an attitude of mind not derived from a sense of engaging in and affecting important matters. It makes good sense that the character in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* with whom they are most intimately involved is Falstaff, for he is as they are, merry. He has no power to affect the world and no wish to do so, he wishes only to survive and to enjoy being himself. Mistress Ford and Mistress Page likewise live in a small arena hedged about by their husbands' power to do things, and so in a way even more emphatic than is the case with Ford and Page (who themselves do nothing of much significance in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) they do nothing. At the same time, of course, they are the master-plotters behind the main plot, the great doers animating an action which, I have argued, does nothing. Even the two women's expressed desire to teach Falstaff a lesson, which in other circumstances might have produced a 'significant' Morality play, is not in any way central to the delighted energy with which they elaborate and forward their scheme.

Indeed, the measure of how signally *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is about nothing significant is to be found in the degree to which it refuses the Morality play tradition which is lying in wait all about it, as it were, to be brought in. Indignant Virtue punishing Vice is the tradition which might have captured this play, but by merriment Shakespeare's comedy escapes, and with a subtlety typical of him suggests the possibility of a world where it is not the struggle between virtue and vice which has the decisive, the architectural, say; but where rather the play of attraction and escape is what underlies the vigour with which human relationships are conducted, whether in love or any other activity of life. The willingness to be seduced, and then to struggle and throw off seduction so as to be oneself the pursuer, is the game of life in this world, and it is to be seen clearly in the relationship between the merry wives and Falstaff. Although their indignation at Falstaff's attempted seduction expresses itself in Morality play language, it is in reality a delighted indignation, which uses the absurdity of the love situation (fat old man, two women past their best) not its immorality to fuel the response, to reverse the chase, so that hunter becomes hunted, indeed becomes the stag shot down by the end of the play – shot down though not dismembered and eaten but instead invited to supper: a merry world.

The most evident and uncomplicated presence of merriment in the play is, of course, the Host; hosts are by definition merry. His speech in a way resembles Pistol's, in that it is intended to convey, but convey abundantly, little more than the attitude with which he speaks, his angle to the world. It is sometimes suggested that the shreds of plot about Germans and horse-stealing which hang about the Host are evidence of haste or incompleteness on Shakespeare's part; but even if they are, it is somehow very appropriate (especially in a play whose plotting is not central) that the Host should be vividly presented in tattered incompleteness of circumstance matching so well the abrupt inconsequentiality and the casually reached for, highly coloured obscurity of his speech, which nevertheless so marvellously and completely conveys the man: