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# The Merry Wives of Windsor

*The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare*

VOLUME 22

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

EDITED BY JOHN DOVER WILSON



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BY

SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH  
AND JOHN DOVER WILSON

## THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

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# THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR



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# THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

## I

Shakespeare wrote for the stage: and on the stage, in spite of many loose ends in the dialogue and (still worse) in the intrigue, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* seldom misses to please an audience<sup>1</sup> or to justify itself as one of the briskest, heartiest and most *playable* of comedies. It has had less luck in the library, the majority of its editors having taken it at once too seriously and not seriously enough: too seriously, being preoccupied with the text (one of the most tantalising in the whole canon) and with two famous legends which have attached themselves to the play; and not seriously enough, being prejudiced by one of these traditions—that *The Merry Wives* was a slight thing, turned off in a hurry to fulfil a royal command—and using this prejudice to explain their disappointment that its Falstaff does not satisfy their ideal conception of Falstaff derived from *King Henry IV*, Parts i and ii. For example Maurice Morgann, who in 1777 published a famous *Essay On the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff*, simply ignored this play: which must mean that he found in it no significant portrayal of the man, or, at any rate, none congruent with the Falstaff of *King Henry IV*.

<sup>1</sup> We must except Samuel Pepys, who saw it, for the third time, on the 15th of August, 1667: 'Sir W. Pen and I to the Duke's house; where a new play. The King and Court there: the house full, and an act begun. And so we went to the King's, and there saw *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; which did not please me at all, in no part of it.'

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We shall deal in due course with the legend which connects the opening lines of our play with a deer-stealing escapade for which Shakespeare in his youth had been (so the story runs) put to the law by Sir Thomas Lucy, Knight, of Charlecote near Stratford-on-Avon; its interest being personal and almost quite extraneous from our consideration of the play and its merits.

The other tradition—that Shakespeare wrote *The Merry Wives* under royal command and produced it in a fortnight or so—is obviously of far greater, indeed of capital, importance to the critic and the textual editor; and therefore we make it our starting-point.

## II

We first pick up this tradition in 1702, in a dedicatory epistle prefixed by John Dennis to *The Comical Gallant*, an attempt to adapt and ‘improve’ *The Merry Wives*, of which he tells us:

First I knew very well that it had pleased one of the greatest queens that ever was in the world...This comedy was written at her command, and by her direction, and she was so eager to see it acted that she commanded it to be finished in fourteen days; and was afterwards, as tradition tells us, very well pleased at the representation.

In a prologue he repeats the story:

But *Shakespeare's* Play in fourteen days was writ,  
And in that space to make all just and fit  
Was an attempt surpassing human Wit.  
Yet our great Shakespeare's matchless Muse was such,  
None e'er in so small time perform'd so much;

and in his *Letters* he reduces the allowance to ten days.

In 1709 Rowe, in his *Life of Shakespeare*, expands the legend. Queen Elizabeth, he says,

was so well pleased with that admirable character of Falstaff in the Two Parts of Henry the Fourth, that she commanded

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him to continue it for one play more, and to show him in love. This is said to be the occasion of his writing *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. How well she was obeyed, the play itself is admirable proof.

A year later Gildon, in his *Remarks on the Plays of Shakespeare*, thus concludes upon *The Merry Wives*:

The Fairies, in the fifth Act, make a handsome compliment to the Queen in her Palace of Windsor, who had obliged Shakespear to write a Play of Sir John Falstaff in Love, and which, I am very well assured he performed in a Fortnight; a prodigious thing, when all is so well contriv'd, and carried on without the least confusion.

These are all the 'authorities' for the legend, which (as Malone conjectured) may have come down to Dennis through Dryden, who had it from D'Avenant. We must observe (1) that it crops up precisely a hundred years after our play first saw print, in a Quarto of 1602; (2) that Dennis was born in 1657, Gildon in 1665, Rowe in 1674; and (3) that the first-named allows Queen Elizabeth's delight in the play to be a 'tradition.' Indeed the whole story is that and no more.

Nevertheless we accept it. Apart from its *looking* true—apart from its signal advantage of relevancy over nine-tenths of the *Shakespeariana* commonly used to distend the biographies, and its merit of providing a lively hypothesis to account for certain definite difficulties in a particular play—we accept it with a confidence that grows experimentally as we apply the story and find it the key to other difficulties, to puzzles of which neither Dennis nor his informant could have been aware. Gildon, again, is right in opining that to compose [and produce?] *The Merry Wives* in a fortnight was 'a prodigious thing,' as he is wrong in adding that 'all is so well contriv'd, and carried on without the least confusion.' The plot, when analysed, almost resolves itself into confusion: yet the confusion can be accounted for—with the help of his anecdote.

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## III

But puzzles and problems so crowd themselves upon this play as to compel a preliminary word upon the texts in which it has come down to us<sup>1</sup>. For all practical purposes they are two: (1) the Folio of 1623, (2) a Quarto of 1602—so eminently a Bad Quarto that every editor finds himself inflexibly driven back upon the Folio version<sup>2</sup>.

This looks like plain sailing. But, fortunately or unfortunately, the Bad Quarto can be cursed more easily than despised. Its history begins with a couple of entries in the Register of the Stationers' Company:

18 Januarij [1602]

Iohn Busby	Entred for his copie vnder the hand of master Seton/A booke called An excellent and plea- sant conceited commedie of Sir Iohn ffaulstof and the merry wyves of Windesor	}	vjd
------------	--	---	-----

Arthur Iohnson Entred for his Copye by  
assignement from Iohn Busbye,  
A booke Called an Excellent and  
pleasant conceyted Comedie of  
Sir Iohn ffaulstafe and the merye  
wyves of Windsor . . . . vjd

In the same year Arthur Johnson [with Thomas Creede for printer] published his Quarto under the title:

A/Most pleasant and/excellent conceited Co-/medie, of  
Syr *Iohn Falstaffe*, and the/merrie Wiues of *Windsor*./Enter-  
mixed with sundrie/variable and pleasing humors, of Syr

<sup>1</sup> A second Quarto appeared in 1619—a mere reprint of the first, with an altered title-page: a third Quarto in 1630, reproduced from the First Folio with some changes in spelling and punctuation. They need not concern us. Of the Folios, here as elsewhere, we use the First as the only one having authority.

<sup>2</sup> We discuss the provenance of the copy in detail on pp. 93–101.

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*Hugh/the Welch Knight<sup>1</sup>, Iustice Shallow, and his/wise Cousin M. Slender./With the swaggering vaine of Auncient Pistoll, and Corporall Nym./By William Shakespeare./As it hath bene divers times acted by the right Honorable/my Lord Chamberlaines seruants. Both before her/Maiestie, and else-where./London/Printed by T. C. for Arthur Iohnson, and are to be sold at /his shop in Powles Church-Yard, at the signe of the/Flower de Leuse and the Crowne./1602.*

Every editor who tries to handle this Quarto has very soon to admit that he cannot base a text on it. He may hesitate among various ways of accounting for it (we shall by-and-by suggest the likeliest), but its naughtiness, as we have said, forces him back upon the twenty-years-later Folio. And yet he must be constantly collating: since, bad though it so obviously is, at any moment out of the Quarto's chaos some chance line, phrase or word may emerge to fill a gap or correct a misprint in the better text. For an illustration or two:

(1) At 1. 1. 118, a gap in the Folio leaves us at a loss concerning the ground of Slender's grievance against Bardolph, Nym and Pistol. The Quarto supplies it convincingly and deliciously—'They carried mee to the Tauerne and made mee drunke, and afterward picked my pocket.'

(2) At 3. 1. 99, a gap in the Folio deprives us of six necessary words in the reconciling of Caius with Evans:

Giue me thy hand (Celestiall) so: Boyes of Art, I haue deceiu'd you both.

The Quarto supplies

Giue me thy hand terestiall,  
So giue me thy hand celestiall:  
So boyes of art I haue deceiued you both...

(3) For a last sample, at 4. 5. 94—the Folio makes Falstaff say 'I neuer prosper'd, since I forswore my selfe

<sup>1</sup> A slip. The printer who set up the title-page had read the play carelessly, no doubt.

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at *Primero*: well, if my winde were but long enough; I would repent....' But the Quarto gives us

and my winde  
Were but long enough *to say my prayers*,  
Ide repent...

with its addition inserting the true and only point.

For a single counter-illustration—to show how vicious the Quarto can be—a few lines before, when mine Host of the Garter learns that he has been robbed of his horses, it makes him cry out

I am cosened *Hugh*, and coy *Bardolfe*  
where the Folio teaches us to amend '*Hugh*, and coy'  
into 'Hue and cry!'

Now for our point.—As an editor goes on collating and comparing, the conviction is borne in upon him, not to be resisted, that these two texts, the bad and the better, cannot really be separated; that both must derive from some common original. It was Halliwell's theory that the Quarto gave a first rough draft of the play, the Folio a version vastly improved upon it. But this theory no longer holds water: since the labours of P. A. Daniel, and more recent critics<sup>1</sup> conclusively prove the Quarto to be no first sketch, but a compressed, 'cut down,' version of some pre-existent play, and the Folio a later, still imperfect, but far better version of the same.

## IV

Having assured ourselves of this, we begin to examine our texts in the light of Dennis' tradition. They support it at once with evidence that the play was written in a hurry: and the farther we go into it the faster that evidence grows concurrently with evidence that the bulk of the play, as we have it, was written for a command performance before Queen Elizabeth, almost certainly

<sup>1</sup> For references see p. 101.

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at Windsor itself<sup>1</sup>, somewhere about the years 1598–1600.

We soon note, as we read, that while the main intrigue is worked deftly and runs intelligibly, the piece abounds with loose ends and threads that Shakespeare has failed to work into the texture: abortive plots, plots either addled or hatched out and designed to fly but dropped unfledged; with hints of other plots which at some time must have meant something but are left otiose. To take the opening scene—Justice Shallow has, it seems, come up from Gloucestershire to Windsor to lay complaint at Court against Sir John Falstaff for having poached his deer-park. He brings up with him, as witness, his cousin Master Abraham Slender, with further intent to fix up a match between him and the daughter of a comfortable burgher of Windsor, with a dowry. [As Parson Evans comments, ‘Seven hundred pounds, and possibilities, is goot gifts.’] Master Slender has moreover a grievance of his own against Falstaff, whose henchmen—Bardolph, Nym and Pistol—have carried him into a tavern, made him drunk, and picked his pocket ‘of seven groats in mill-sixpences, and two Edward shovel-boards, that cost me two shilling and two pence a-piece of Yed Miller.’ Now here, for an opening, we have, out of *King Henry IV*, Part ii one of the best-imagined foolish characters in Shakespeare, with a newly invented kinsman so true to blood and family feature that he positively enlarges the Cotswold estate in foolishness; the pair confronted with Falstaff in circumstances which promise a most admirable renewal and development of the old rivalry in mirth. But

<sup>1</sup> The fairies in Act 5 being enacted by Her Majesty’s ‘children of Windsor.’ Several entries in Cunningham’s *Accounts of the Revels at Court* (now vindicated for a genuine document) mention these ‘children’ with payments or rewards bestowed by the Queen for their performances. ‘So that,’ as Hart says, ‘the materials for producing a Windsor play, children and all, were ready to her Majesty’s hand.’ On one occasion at least she summoned them up to London, to divert her.

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what happens? Nothing, or next to nothing. Falstaff, that 'shouldering whale,' heaves the whole business off him in a sentence, and starts (in the third Scene) his real intrigue, in which Justice Shallow plays no part but that of a purely negligible spectator. At the end we look back and remind ourselves that this juicy character, who started so full of import and importance, really lost his wind in the middle of the very first Scene, and has been thereafter carried along perfunctorily until such time as he could be dropped unnoticed in a ditch [5. 2.].

So much for one loose thread. But our play contains another no less remarkable; in the imperfectly excised plot whereby our Host of the Garter [4. 5.] is robbed of his horses. Who contrives this plot, and why? Obviously Caius and Evans should be the conspirators, in revenge for the trick the Host has played over the *venue* of their duel; and as obviously Bardolph, the new tapster at the Garter, is the accomplice made to their hand<sup>1</sup>. As the texts run, they present us with a casual, almost meaningless, episode. For our part, we make no doubt that the play, at one time and in some form, included a scene of contrivance which, if we could recover it, would make the affair neat and intelligible.

At these two points then—points of construction and therefore of first importance—we find evidence of carelessness which we can only attribute to haste. Other signs which indicate haste are—

(1) The proportion of prose to verse, which is higher than in any other play of Shakespeare's. Indeed *The Merry Wives* is almost all prose<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> For Hart's view, which is somewhat different, v. note 4. 3. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> We would not over-stress this as evidence of haste. Shakespeare has everywhere a most delicate sense of the separate capacities of verse and prose, and alternates them with an easy tact quite superior to rule. Nine-tenths of *The Merry Wives* naturally demands prose, and appropriately gets it.



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(2) The vileness of the small amount of verse employed. It is, to be sure, so vile in general as to raise another question—Could Shakespeare, even in a hurry, have written it? Now we have admitted in our General Introduction that Shakespeare could, and often did, write extremely ill: and we there expressed our impatience with the critics who, finding a bad line in any play of his, seek to bastardise it upon some one of his contemporaries. But Shakespeare has a way of his own when writing carelessly or badly or even abominably: and we can catch no echo of the familiar poet, even at his worst, in these lines of Fenton's declaration of love to Anne Page:

Quarto, sc. 12, 11–15:

Thy father thinks I loue thee for his wealth,  
 Tho I must needs confesse at first that drew me,  
 But since thy vertues wiped that trash away,  
 I loue thee *Nan*, and so deare is it set,  
 That whilst I liue, I nere shall thee forget.

Folio, 3. 4. 13–18:

Albeit I will confesse, thy Fathers wealth  
 Was the first motiue that I woo'd thee (*Anne*):  
 Yet wooing thee, I found thee of more vawlew  
 Then stamper in Gold, or summes in sealed bagges:  
 And 'tis the very riches of thy selfe  
 That now I ayme at.

The author of the Quarto lines, at any rate, was neither Shakespeare nor any rival of Shakespeare's nor any poet at all: he was either a dishonest actor who could not deliver his stolen goods, or (as we believe and shall attempt to show) more probably the plotter of a wooden original on which, as on a mannequin, Shakespeare hastily draped his comedy.

(3) The play, as a piece of writing, starts with admirable vivacity; but lags, almost at midway, to tail off into careless or sorry stuff; and these slipshod passages multiply as we near the end—a characteristic of work done at a push against time

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(4) On the other hand, we make less than some editors do of the ‘confusion in the time-table’—especially in 3. 5.—as evidence of hurry. All we require of a comedy on the stage is an *illusion* of time—a sense that the events are happening in probable sequence at reasonable intervals. No doubt, if we set to work to enquire curiously and tick off the action by the clock, we invite trouble. We begin to tell ourselves that Master Page has married a good wife and is rewarded with plenteous and even protracted meals—as Milton would say, ‘frequent and full’—but not (it would seem) with regular ones: that his feasts are moveable—nay, mercurial: that he invites you in heartily at any time, and you are always in time if you do not boggle over the course you begin upon—venison pasty, or pippins, or cheese—for the others will come around; and that his custom of early rising, carried to a virtuous excess, coincides in result with the opposite practice alleged of the Snark:

Its habit of getting up late you'll agree  
That it carries too far, when I say  
That it frequently breakfasts at five-o'clock tea,  
And dines on the following day.

Yet if we persevere, remembering that the Elizabethans took breakfast (when they took it at all) at about 7 or 6 a.m., or even earlier, and dined at 11.30 or noon, we can construct a time-table plausible enough: as thus—

*First Day:*

1. 1.; 1. 2. Shortly before noon.

1. 3. Afternoon (after an interval long enough for Falstaff to return from Page's dinner to the Garter, and to write his love-letters).

1. 4. Afternoon. (Simple, dispatched in 1. 2., has just arrived at Dr Caius' as the scene opens.)

During the evening of this day, Falstaff's letters are received by the merry wives and Caius' letters by Evans and the Host, while the latter makes his arrangements for the duel.

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*Second Day:*

2. 1. Early morning (before eight). Shallow's slip 'good even and twenty' (l. 177) may be a relic of an evening scene following 1. 4. in the earlier version; but 'You'll come to dinner, George?' (l. 141) shows it is morning and Shallow and Host are clearly on their way to the duel.

2. 2. About 8 a.m. (Pistol back at the Garter after his interview with Ford in 2. 1., 'Eleven o'clock the hour...better three hours too soon,' etc. (l. 285) makes 8 a.m. an appropriate time for this scene. *N.B.* 'Come to me soon at *night*,' ll. 246, 264; but Ford comes in the morning at 3. 5.

2. 3.; 3. 1. Between eight and ten. *N.B.* 'This raw rheumatic day' (3. 1. 44) suggests early morning.

3. 2. About 10.30 a.m. The clock strikes (l. 41) the half-hour, we suppose.

3. 3. About 10.30–11 a.m. At the end of the scene the dinner, to which Ford has invited Page, etc., is not quite ready (v. note 3. 3. 214).

3. 4. Shortly after noon. Page and his wife return from Ford's dinner in the middle of the scene (v. head-note 3. 4. and S.D. 3. 4. 67).

Quickly's 'another errand to Sir John Falstaff from my two mistresses' (l. 109) is an error: (i) there has been no opportunity for her to hear of this errand, (ii) 'what a beast am I to slack it' suggests that she hurries off to the Garter forthwith, whereas we find her in the next scene arriving in the morning. The words may have been actor's or stage-manager's gag, to work a bustling exit.

*Third Day:*

3. 5. About 8 a.m. Quickly gives Falstaff 'good-morrow,' tells him Ford goes 'this morning a-birding,' and bids him 'come to her between eight and nine.' Ford (Brook) later says "'Tis past eight already.'

4. 1. A little past 8 a.m. Quickly has called upon Mrs Page on her way from Falstaff's. William is setting forth to school.

4. 2. Between eight and nine. Ford has drawn Page, Shallow, etc. 'from their sport,' i.e. the 'birding.'

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4. 3. Immediately after the previous scene—during the explanation of the wives.

4. 4. Following on 4. 2. (with an interval for the explanation).

4. 5.; 4. 6.; 5. 1. Also following on 4. 2. In 4. 5. Falstaff has just arrived at the Garter in Mistress Prat's gown, and Simple has followed him along the street. In 4. 6. note that Fenton has already had news of the Herne plot from Anne, possibly by Quickly's means.

Ford makes a slip at 5. 1. 12, where he should say 'this morning' instead of 'yesterday.'

The rest of the day is taken up with preparations by the various parties for the rendezvous at Herne's Oak.

5. 2.; 5. 3.; 5. 4.; 5. 5. The night of the third day. Note that Shallow (5. 2. 10) says 'It hath struck ten,' which is probably an error for 'twelve'; the rendezvous being 'twixt twelve and one' (4. 6. 19)<sup>1</sup>.

(5) Lastly, to us a far more evident sign of haste is found in the futile, almost puerile attempts, here and there, to hitch this comedy of Elizabethan England back upon the days of King Henry IV—e.g. in Page's objection against Fenton (3. 2. 64) that 'the gentleman is of no having—he kept company with the wild Prince and Poins.' It becomes merely absurd when, towards the end of the Quarto, Falstaff is made to cry:

What hunting at this time of night?  
 Ile lay my life the mad Prince of *Wales*  
 Is stealing his fathers Deare

<sup>1</sup> The above table reduces the time-errors in the Folio text to five: (1) Shallow's slip 'good *even* and twenty' at 2. 1. 177, when the time is early morning: (2) Falstaff's 'come to me soon at night' (2. 2. 246, 264), answered in 3. 5. by Ford's coming in the morning: (3) Quickly's 'another errand to Sir John Falstaff' (3. 4. 109), already explained: (4) Ford's slip 'yesterday' (5. 1. 12) for 'this morning': and (5) Shallow's 'ten' (5. 2. 10) ? for 'twelve.' Although all these five errors may be imputed to haste in the original planning, they might easily pass unnoticed on the stage, and certainly do not deserve the severe judgments of Daniel and others upon the time-sequence.

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just after (in the Folio) the elf Cricket has been commanded to hie to Windsor and pinch the maids who have left the Castle hearths unswept, because

Our radiant Queen hates sluts and sluttery  
—a line which, though spoken of the Fairy-Queen, might, with a bow to Elizabeth, be carried over as a compliment to Elizabeth herself.

## V

But with this in mind—that the play is to all intents and purposes an Elizabethan one—almost entirely of that time, with its Cotswold games and its ‘Sackerson’ and its contemporary Windsor residents, their manners and customs, and its Herne’s Oak at an age when Herne the Hunter really was a traditional ghost (*temp.* Henry IV ‘neither born nor thought of’)—we strike, in the Quarto, upon a single word, ‘Garmombles’ which, while in itself neither illuminating nor attractive by beauty of its own, is no less a clue than was the glimmer of daylight at the end of Sindbad’s cave. The Folio version, when we arrive at the theft of mine Host’s horses, indicates the culprits by making Parson Evans (4. 5. 67) break in upon the scene (at the heels of Bardolph) with

Haue a care of your entertainments: there is a friend of mine come to Towne, tels mee there is three Cozen-Iermans, that has cozend all the *Hosts* of *Readins*, of *Maidenhead*; of *Cole-brooke*, of horses and money...

In the Quarto Sir Hugh breaks in (after Bardolph and Dr Caius) with

Where is mine Host of the gartyr?  
Now my Host, I would desire you looke you now,  
To haue a care of your entertainments,  
For there is three sorts of cosen garmombles,  
Is cosen all the Host of Maidenhead & Readings...

Now in 1592—let us mark the date—a Count Müm-pellgart (in F. ‘Duke *de Iaminie*,’ in Q. transliterated to

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‘Garmombles’), who next year became Duke of Würtemberg, visited Queen Elizabeth at Reading and was received affably. He was at Reading from the 17th to the 19th of August; and went on to Windsor, where he abode until the 21st, putting in some deer-shooting, visiting Eton College, and carving his name on the leads of the highest tower of Windsor<sup>1</sup>. In short, this German Count made himself very much at ease in Sion, and seems to have earned unpopularity by his pompous manners (he rode with a retinue cased in black velvet) and more especially by his trick of commandeering horses, under the Queen’s warrant, to take him from one town to another. An entry, of Oxford, is significant. He was compelled to remain in that city sorely against his will because no post-horses could be procured. Now it may be that our Cousin Mümpellgart had made himself something of a nuisance and something of a figure of comedy with his passion for post-horses free of charge; or again it may be that in 1592 certain rogues played upon this notorious itch by levying and stealing horses in his august name<sup>2</sup>. At any rate there was a scandal; and it lent itself to laughter; and it happened in 1592.

But we have not done yet with Count Mümpellgart. As Duke of Würtemberg he conceived a strong desire to be Knight of the Garter; had a fixed idea that Elizabeth had promised it to him; and annoyed her for some years

<sup>1</sup> A narrative of his visit to England, entitled *A Bathing Excursion*, was written by his private secretary, Jacob Rathger, and printed at Tübingen in 1602. This was digested by Rye in *England as Seen by Foreigners*, 1865; and the clue has been admirably worked by Hart in his Introduction to *The Merry Wives* (Arden Edn, 1904). See also Daniel and Greg. Mümpellgart left our shores on Sept. 6th after ‘riding over from there with post-horses to visit Rochester.’

<sup>2</sup> Cp. *Henry IV*, Part ii (5. 3. 142), ‘Let us take any man’s horses: the laws of England are at our commandment.’

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with reminders. At length in 1597—the date again should be noted—she allowed his election, though the insignia took a long while in travelling. They were at length conferred upon him with pomp at Stuttgart on September 6, 1603, by mission of James I.

Now here we have a topical allusion—and the further we examine it the fuller we scent this play to be of topical and personal allusions—which ('save Your Majesty') was a neat side-hit of scandal in 1592 or 1593, when the fun of Cousin Mümpellgart's visit was fresh in men's laughter, or might anywhere in 1597–8, when the Queen passed him for the Garter, be revived as a back-hit at a command performance, a little audaciously, but with some certainty of provoking a laugh or, at least, a smile in the audience of courtiers. But the business was stale in 1602, and allusion to it only survives by accident in the word 'garmombles': and King James comes to the throne, and our play is revived for a court performance in 1604<sup>1</sup>, by which time it is staler yet. So out goes the last trace of 'cosen garmombles' to make room for an indefinite 'Duke *de Iaminie*' and a train of 'Cozen-Iermans': even as out went the oaths that besprinkle the Quarto and no doubt delighted Elizabeth (who was not squeamish) or, when not excised, were watered down to pallor in the Folio in fear of the new law against Blasphemy.

<sup>1</sup> 'By his Matis plaiers. The Sunday ffollowinge (Hallowmas Day) A Play of the Merry Wives of Winsor.'—*Revells Booke*. The authenticity of this book of Accounts, long suspected for a forgery, has been well vindicated by Mr Ernest Law (see our Introduction to *The Tempest*, p. xlv n.) and is supported by Sir James Dobbie, Government Analyst, upon analysis of the ink of the incriminated handwriting. The question was re-opened while our *Tempest* volume was passing through the press, and we had to speak with caution. But in the upshot Mr Law's vindication has been handsomely confirmed. We shall have more to say on this matter when we come to *Measure for Measure*.

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## VI

We have brought together the salient difficulties of the text, and so have reached a point at which we can present our hypothesis to account for them and for the process by which this play reached its form in the Folio version—our hypothesis, that is, by partial adoption, since Mr A. W. Pollard was largely responsible for suggesting it<sup>1</sup>. We shall present it in the form of a narrative, using positive words, because by so doing we help future scholars to correct us where we are wrong: but we ask the reader to bear in mind that we know ourselves to be speaking hypothetically.

We believe, then, that *The Merry Wives* was produced in a hurry and in obedience to a royal command by Elizabeth, who was just the sort of lady to order a comedy of 'Falstaff in love.' But we do not believe for a moment that Shakespeare and the Lord Chamberlain's Players hatched out an entirely new play in a fortnight—if only for the simple reason that this kind of thing does not happen in real life.

What happened (we suggest) was this. The Company, harried by this violent order, hunted out of their repertory a play, *The Jealous Comedy*, of which (be it admitted) we know nothing save that they had performed it on January 5, 1593; and turned Shakespeare upon it to work it up. As part of its plot this comedy of 1592–3 contained some topical fooling on Count Mümpellgart and a 'borrowing' of horses. On the face of it we think it improbable that in January 1593 Shakespeare's company had *two* 'jealous comedies' on the stocks.

But what kind of play was this *Jealous Comedy*, on which we suppose Shakespeare busy as reviser? Well, it was a play of *bourgeois* life, probably located in London, with an intrigue based on some Italian tale.

We believe the original to have been a play of com-

<sup>1</sup> In *The Times Literary Supplement*, Aug. 7, 1919.



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fortable middle-class life, because *The Merry Wives*, as we have it, is that in essence, and we cannot conceive of it as having been at any time, under any form, anything else. We believe that it dealt with London tradesmen and their wives; because certain passages in the Quarto cannot (by us at least) be accounted for otherwise. In the Quarto Dr Caius' closet is always a 'counting house.' What use should an eminent physician, practising at Windsor and in Court favour, have for this counting-house? Moreover, the house would seem to have had a stall outside it, since Caius bids his servant Rugby look out 'ore de stall' for the approach of Parson Evans in his fury. Also, and as Mr Hart has observed, the Quarto lines in the fairy scene—

Where is *Pead*? Go you & see where Brokers sleep,  
And Foxe-eyed Seriants with their mase,  
Goe laie the Proctors in the street,  
And pinch the lowsie Seriants face...

'sound pure London.' We think it possible that this original play derived its plot from an Italian story, and maybe was taken from Tarleton's *Newes out of Purgatorie*, 1590. But in Tarleton's story (derived from Straparola and closely resembling *The Merry Wives* in plot) the lover is hidden in a tub, or 'driefatte' of feathers: whereas in a somewhat similar tale, *Il Pecorone* by Giovanni Fiorentino, he is pushed *sotto un monte di panni di bucato*, which directly suggests 'buck-basket.' And while in the Italian *novelle* the devices of women to spirit away their lovers are endless, we cannot help suspecting that 'buck-basket' was derived from some translation of *Il Pecorone* unknown to us. As Thoreau has observed, there *is* such a thing as circumstantial evidence, as when one finds a trout in the milk-jug. But—and we may as well announce it here once for all—we hold the quest after Shakespeare's 'sources' to be in general, and save when he is obviously working upon Holinshed or North's *Plutarch*, a sad and mistaken waste of labour.

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Shakespeare did not sit down in a library and pick out books to hunt in them for his plots. He 'stole his brooms ready-made.' He worked upon old stage-material, as often as not, to refurbish it. No one can get at grips with the true problem of any text of his until he has bitten it deep in his understanding (1) that Shakespeare's plots were plots of the playhouse, derived from Heaven-knows-where, and (2) that his plays attained print in 1623 upon playhouse versions often after a considerable and (by us) incalculable amount of alteration with or without his authority.

## VII

We take up our tale. It is possible that the original 'jealous comedy' of middle-class life had already undergone transformation into an Oldcastle play<sup>1</sup>—with the horse-stealing business included—before Shakespeare set to work on the 1598 revision. But far more certain (as Mr Pollard has shown) than any traces of Oldcastle are the tracks of the original philandering 'hero,' left un-effaced in Shakespeare's hurry: of a lackadaisical sentimental swain, Euphuistic in address. Now Falstaff, as we know, could parody that address to perfection ['As the camomile, the more it is trodden,' etc.]: but nothing can be farther than Euphuism from Falstaff's habitual speech, as nothing can be emptier of the true Falstaffian

<sup>1</sup> Dr Greg first raised this suspicion over Sc. 15 (l. 1305) of the Quarto—'Sir *John*, theres his Castle, his standing bed, his trundle bed,' etc.: and Mr J. M. Robertson, following this up, has shown that several of the Quarto verse lines in which Falstaff occurs lack a syllable which 'Oldcastle' would supply. See also our Note on 'bully-rook,' 1. 3. 3. But the whole Oldcastle-Falstaff imbroglio is an intricate question, to be discussed when we come to *K. Henry IV*, Pt i. We may observe here, however, that, although Shakespeare had to drop the actual name 'Oldcastle,' it persisted in public recollection, and he might have risked retaining some allusions to it, or even slipping in a few back-hits which his audience would understand and enjoy.

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accent, than his answer to Ford (2. 2. 221), 'Would it apply well to the vehemency of your affection, that I should win what you would enjoy? Methinks you prescribe to yourself very preposterously'—unless it be his sanctimonious words of repentance (5. 5. 117):

And these are not fairies! I was three or four times in the thought they were not fairies—and yet the guiltiness of my mind, the sudden surprise of my powers, drove the grossness of the foppery into a received belief, in despite of the teeth of all rhyme and reason, that they were fairies.

These and some few other utterances of his—besides a tendency on the part of Mistress Quickly and others to impute scholarship to him, of all virtues!—convince us that the gross bulk of Falstaff was superimposed upon an attenuated prig of a character, whose wriggings Shakespeare just misses, through haste, to stifle.

Shakespeare in his first scene opens with verve upon the true Falstaff, and most admirably. But his hand tires; his flats are not joined; and as the play proceeds he (or somebody) inclines more and more to scamp the job of adaptation. And the Queen might command, but art and nature alike forbade him, to represent Falstaff, cuddler of Doll Tearsheet, as 'in love' in any sense under which that term can be extended to cover Romeo or Othello, or even Biron or Orlando or Benedick. The command suits well with what we know of Elizabeth; and, if it be not blasphemy to question Shakespeare's performance, he might have obeyed it more artistically by presenting Sir John to us as *infatuated*—there being proverbially no fool like an old fool. Instead, and in his hurry, he chose to catch at this plot and present him to us as a deliberate and mercenary intriguer, immoral even beyond the stomaching of his retainers, Pistol and Nym:

There is no remedy: I must cony-catch, I must shift... Briefly: I do mean to make love to Ford's wife...I have writ me here a letter to her: and here another to Page's

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wife...I will be cheaters to them both, and they shall be exchequers to me...We will thrive, lads, we will thrive.

Here, in brief, is the mainspring of the action: but it retorts Italianate intrigue upon the genial English opening, and so as almost to kill it. The plot, definite to hardness in patches—that Italian hardness which gives a story by Boccaccio the precision of a police-report—in places flounders in a mizmaze of quags, and almost founders. But the vitality of the characters, the vivid pictures of Windsor and of Windsor life, redeem the plot; while, to pull it through, there is ever the resource of Shakespeare's hand which, however tired, never lost its tact of the theatre. In the end he has done his task and fulfilled the royal behest with a thoroughly actable play, stuffed full with topical allusions for Her Majesty's mirth.

## VIII

At this point comes in the rogue who reported, or dictated, large portions of the Quarto version. He was (as Dr Greg sufficiently proves) an actor who took at some time the part of mine Host of the Garter: for not only are mine Host's speeches far more accurately given than those of any other player, but the scenes in which he appears are always rendered more accurately than those which omit him; and, to quote Dr Greg, 'when he disappears for good and all, at the end of the fourth act (and the actor very likely went home or to the tavern), we find what remains of the play in a more miserably garbled condition than any previous portion.'

To sum up: we hold it demonstrable (*a*) that the Folio text derives from a play written by Shakespeare (with help, perhaps, from others), under royal command, in 1598 or thereabouts; (*b*) that this play was improvised (almost) upon a pre-existent 'jealous comedy' of middle-class London life, of date about 1593 and having a high-falutin Euphuistic lover for its victim; (*c*) that Shakespeare worked the transformation, but that his hand

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tired; and (d) that the Quarto gives a version of this feat of Shakespeare's conveyed to the printer by a rascal actor, who possessed some kind of text of the earlier 'jealous comedy' to fall back upon when his memory gave out.

## IX

We emerge from this thicket of difficulties with a sigh of relief which, we have no doubt, will be echoed in double by the reader. But we emerge, at any rate, upon one of the pleasantest brick-and-green open spots in Elizabethan England; upon Windsor by the Thames, with its royal castle crowning the slope high over the river, and, around it and beside, a comfortable well-kept town, all the inhabitants whereof dwell within easy stretch of green fields, stiles, and such simple sports as that on which intent Izaak Walton would start, a few years later, from the City of London, up Tottenham hill, to fish the River Lea for chub and bring back 'the herb called heart's ease.'

Upon this setting, and among these honest provincial burghers, Falstaff and his rogues intrude with a very pretty contrast and promise of comedy to come; as they proceed to play it very happily and with no more infraction of the probable than may be allowed to a comedy impinging upon farce. It is rubbish to say that the Falstaff who played confederate in the Gadshill business and 'receiver' at least in the affairs of Master Shallow's venison and Mistress Bridget's fan, was incapable of amorous double-dealing with Mistress Page and Mistress Ford as a means of gilding his pockets and refurbishing his ragged and clamorous retinue.

What then is the matter? Well, the mischief, we hold, lies partly in us and our preconceptions: and we think this may be put most obviously in the matter of Mistress Quickly. She is sib to the Mistress Quickly whom we left in London, in charge of the beadles, and shall meet

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in London again (*Henry V*), married to Ancient Pistol and somehow restored to her old disorderly charge of the Boar's Head, Eastcheap. We may, if we choose, tell ourselves that she is far too nearly sib to be accounted for as a sister-in-law; and, if we choose (and in defiance of history<sup>1</sup>), invent a theory of a Mistress Quickly purging, or having purged, her offence, and taking a temporary rest-cure as housekeeper or 'in the manner of his nurse, or his dry nurse, or his cook, or his laundry, his washer and his wringer' to Dr Caius, French physician at Windsor. But the question is, If Shakespeare had chosen to call her Mistress Chickley—as he chose to substitute a Slender for a Silence—should we not all be praising this woman of *The Merry Wives*, with her hopeless (but unjudged) morality, her rambling head, her sinful irrelevancies and indelicacies of tongue and conduct, as one of the best of Shakespeare's minor inventions in Comedy; ranking her, for example, at least as high as Dogberry<sup>2</sup>, and maybe tempted to set her above her original in *King Henry IV*?

In fact when we carp at the Quickly of *The Merry Wives* we are paying tribute to Shakespeare's unrivalled power of transforming any given 'character' into a real person. We take these folk to intimacy, to affection: we follow them from play to play as in real life we follow the adventures of a friend; and if, in any separate play, the author's whim makes any one of them behave otherwise than we suppose ourselves to have a right to expect, we feel that a tried friend has betrayed our trust: and in

<sup>1</sup> For, of course, 'the mad Prince of Wales' had left off stealing his father's deer and was crowned King before handing Mistress Quickly to the beadles. Moreover, at their first meeting in this play, Falstaff does not recognise her.

<sup>2</sup> Whoso would permeate his mind with the essential oil of Shakespeare's comic humour is advised to study the Dogberry Scenes in *Much Ado about Nothing* and the Latin Grammar Lesson (4. 1., purely episodic) in our play.