



# *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

by  
William Shakespeare

## Audience Guide

researched and written by  
the Education Department of  
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# Shakespeare's Comedies

“As a group, Shakespeare’s comedies are in many ways his most complicated plays. Their plots are often convoluted; the multiple identities of many of their characters can be confusing, and the emotions they produce range freely from delight and wonder to anxiety and grief. But the [comedy category] also includes many of Shakespeare’s most satisfying, spectacular, and popular plays. At one level, there is the sheer humor: the comedies are rife with extravagant characters given to outrageous behavior. At another, there is romance galore, although love can be unrequited or frustrated. But audiences also accompany characters into fantastic or seemingly ungoverned realms, where personalities can suddenly change, for better or for worse. Characters and audiences alike also discover that intrepid exploration of new territories, whether out in the world or within themselves, can alter and improve reality for the better. It is hardly surprising, then, that the comedies continue to give new generations good cause for celebration.”

Excerpts from *The Essential Shakespeare Handbook*

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* has always been a popular play in the theatre. Though it has undergone the vicissitudes of theatrical taste—interloping songs, omitted and rearranged scenes, and the like—it has never been regarded as essentially unsuitable for performance, as *Measure for Measure* or *Cymbeline* have for different reasons sometimes been regarded. The one attempt to remodel it completely for the altered taste of the time, John Dennis’s *The Comical Gallant* (1702), failed to dislodge it. Undoubtedly its theatrical popularity is chiefly due to its robust and easily followed plot, its situations of broad comedy with a large amount of physical action, its gallery

of humorous character-sketches, its domestic atmosphere and local colour, and its uncomplicated moral assumptions and conclusions. Audiences like the play because it entertains them, actors because it gives them plenty of parts in which to shine.”

-T.W. Craik,

Introduction to *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Merry Wives of Windsor*

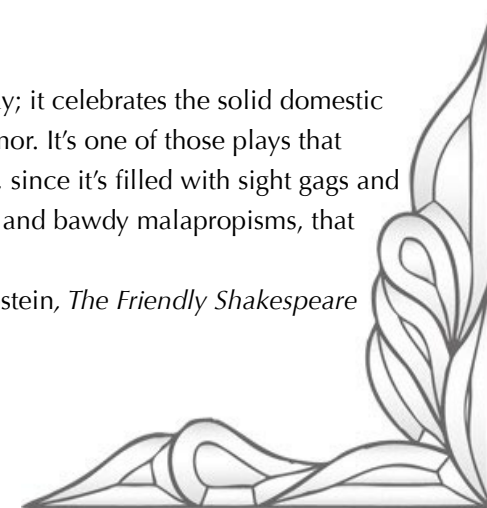
“*The Merry Wives of Windsor* is Shakespeare’s warmest and richest comedy. How Alice Ford and Margaret Page earn their ‘Paradise’ is played out against an acute and lovingly observed tapestry of Shakespeare’s own country, Elizabethan England, its follies, strengths and new emerging society. It is the only bourgeois play Shakespeare wrote: it is perhaps the funniest.”

-Terry Hands,

Introduction to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* from *Introductions to Shakespeare*

“There’s nothing heavy-handed about this play; it celebrates the solid domestic virtues of thrift, marital fidelity, and good humor. It’s one of those plays that work better in performance than on the page, since it’s filled with sight gags and spoken humor, including outrageous accents and bawdy malapropisms, that are hilarious on stage.”

-Norrie Epstein, *The Friendly Shakespeare*



# The Merry Wives of Windsor

## *A Synopsis*

At the beginning of the play it is learned that Sir John Falstaff and his men—Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol have been causing trouble for Shallow, a justice of the peace. Shallow threatens to press charges against Falstaff and his friends, but luckily for the “Falstaff entourage” Master Page is able to talk him out of it.

Page’s daughter, Anne, has many suitors. Not only is she beautiful, but upon her marriage, her husband will receive a very large dowry. She has three suitors which include Shallow’s nephew, Abraham Slender (a country squire), Doctor Caius, and Master Fenton. Master Page wants Anne to marry Slender and Mistress Page desires her to marry Doctor Caius. However, Anne is in love with the young, handsome courtier Master Fenton. All of the suitors seek the help of Mistress Quickly in gaining Anne’s hand in marriage. She promises them all that she will convince Anne to love them, and she takes their money as a service fee. When Doctor Caius finds out that Sir Hugh Evans, the local priest, is promoting Slender’s cause, he challenges Sir Hugh to a duel. To prevent the fighting, the Host of the Garter Inn sends the two men to different locations and the duel is prevented.

In the interim, the financially beleaguered Falstaff decides to woo Mistress Ford and Mistress Page in the hope of accessing their wealth. He sends them both identical love letters and asks Pistol and Nym to deliver them. They refuse his request, stating that delivering letters is beneath them, but mainly because he has cut them off financially. Falstaff sends his page, Robin, to deliver the love notes instead. Pistol and Nym get back at Falstaff by telling Masters Ford and Page about his plan to woo their wives.

Mistress Ford and Mistress Page tell one another about their letters from Falstaff, and they realize that their letters are identical. They decide that Falstaff must be taught a lesson, and plan to lure Falstaff to Mistress Ford’s house while her husband is away. Once there they will convince Falstaff that Master Ford is coming home in a jealous rage, and they will tell Falstaff that the only safe way to leave the house is to go out in a basket of dirty laundry.

When approached by Pistol, the chronically jealous Master Ford believes that his wife will have an affair with Falstaff. Master Page on the other hand, who has received the exact same news from Nym, trusts his wife completely and doesn’t believe anything Pistol or Nym have told him. Ford, however, puts his wife’s virtue to the test. He disguises himself as a man named “Brook” and petitions Falstaff to “acquire Mistress Ford” for him. Not realizing he is speaking to Master Ford, Falstaff brags of Mistress Ford’s already promised meeting. Believing his wife plans to “entertain” Falstaff when he is away from the house, Ford rushes home while Falstaff is there. Falstaff is hidden in a buck basket and carried out with the laundry as planned, and then dumped into the muddy Thames River.

The wives send another message to Falstaff enticing him into another meeting with Mistress Ford. Ford, dressed as “Brook,” again visits Falstaff and finds out about the second meeting. Determined to not be duped again, he decides to once again come home during their appointed meeting time. Mistress Ford and Falstaff are again together in Ford’s home when Mistress Page comes to warn them that Ford is again in a jealous rage and is arriving to find his wife’s supposed lover. This time Mistress Page and Mistress Ford dress Falstaff up as the Witch of Brentford,



Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I by George Gower

a woman whom Ford despises. He beats Falstaff thinking he is the woman he so detests, and both men are once again tricked.

At this point the women reveal their plans to their husbands and the four decide to play one final trick on Falstaff.

The wives invite Falstaff to meet them in the forest, in Windsor Park, and tell him to come disguised as the ghost of Herne the Hunter. Anne and others are disguised as fairies. Doctor Caius is told by Mistress Page that Anne will be wearing a green gown and that he should take her away during the ceremony and marry her. Master Page tells Slender Anne will be dressed in white and tells him to carry Anne off and marry her.. Anne does, in fact, get married that night, however she isn't married to Doctor Caius nor to Slender. She has her own plan, and runs away to marry her true love, Fenton. Doctor Caius and Slender are tricked into running away with boys who are dressed like Anne.

In the forest, the Mistresses and the townspeople, also disguised as fairies, pinch and prod Falstaff until he is forced to beg for mercy. It is then that the women and the others reveal themselves, and the last trick against Falstaff is a success.

The play ends on a happy note because Master Ford learns to trust his wife, Mistress Anne Page ends up with her true love Fenton, Master and Mistress Page accept Fenton and Anne's union, and perhaps most importantly, Falstaff admits his folly and he is forgiven for his machinations. The play ends with celebration.



Heinrich Füßli's *Falstaff en la cesta*



# The Merry Wives of Windsor

## *History & Sources*

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* most likely premiered as part of Queen Elizabeth's Garter Feast (a celebration for her knights at Westminster) on April 23, 1597. The audience would have known Sir John Falstaff and his compatriots (Pistol, Bardolph and Nym) from Shakespeare's earlier trio of plays known as *The Henriad* (*Henry IV, part 1*, *Henry IV, part 2*, and *Henry V*). Shakespeare transplanted Falstaff from the Boar's Head Tavern in Eastcheap and the battlefield at Shrewsbury to the much more tranquil town of Windsor, even using real Windsor locations (the Garter Inn, Windsor Park and Frogmore) as the backdrop for Falstaff's fumbling attempts to woo both Mistress Page and Mistress Ford.

*Merry Wives* is the only one of Shakespeare's comedies where all of the action takes place in England, and features a story that appears to be mostly of his own creation; though it's believed that he borrowed some plot points and settings from various bawdy stories called "fabliaux" which were popular in 13th century France and 14th century Italy. Shades of these fabliaux (stories of jealous husbands, surprised lovers and outrageous characters) can be seen throughout Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, reflected in the situations and characters which populated his Windsor. One of the only (and certainly most striking) differences lies in the *Merry Wives* themselves. The wives in the original fabliaux often relish and delight in making cuckolds of their husbands. Shakespeare chooses to have his leading ladies remain chaste and true, deciding to turn the tables on their would-be suitor instead. It is also important

to remember that the fabliaux were intended to be read in privacy, not acted out before an audience; and certainly not for an audience as noble as the one in attendance at the Queen's Garter Feast.

Interestingly enough, while Shakespeare's initial audience for this play may have been the most noble of nobles, *Merry Wives* is unique in that it is the first major play in the English language to focus on characters drawn from England's rising middle-class. While most of Shakespeare's previous plays deal with lower-born characters in a secondary role, *Merry Wives* celebrates these characters, making them, and domestic life, the focus of the action of the play.

*Merry Wives* became wildly popular in 1660 after Charles II reopened London's theaters, and it has remained popular ever since. From the titular "Merry Wives", to the larger than life Falstaff, to the outrageous Doctor Caius, Windsor's inhabitants have graced the stage time and again. Productions of every shape and size; from "traditional" productions like the 1959 American Shakespeare Festival production to the RSC's 1985 production set in the 1950's, where Mistresses Page and Ford hatch their plot under the driers at a hair salon, have been presented throughout the years. The play has also been adapted for film, television and two very popular operas; Verdi's *Falstaff* and Nicolai's *Die Lustigen Weiber von Windsor*.

### Falstaff in Love?

Before her death in 1603, Queen Elizabeth I had been a patron and admirer of Shakespeare's work. It is widely believed (and generally accepted) that she herself had requested Shakespeare write a play where Sir John Falstaff was featured in a romantic leading role. Previously, Shakespeare's audience would only have known Falstaff as Prince's Hal's carousing companion from *Henry IV, part 1* and *Henry IV, part 2*.

# Who's Who in *Merry Wives*

## FALSTAFF AND FRIENDS:

**SIR JOHN FALSTAFF:** an English knight who tries to woo the wives of Master Page and Master Ford.

**PISTOL:** follower of Falstaff

**NYM:** a follower of Falstaff

**BARDOLPH:** a follower of Falstaff, and later the tapster at The Garter Inn

## THE WIVES AND FAMILIES:

**MISTRESS MARGARET PAGE:** loyal wife of Master George Page, mother to Anne and William Page, and friends with Mistress Ford; one of the wives Falstaff falls in "love" with, she conspires with Mistress Ford to trick Falstaff

**MASTER GEORGE PAGE:** citizen of Windsor, husband to Mistress Page; in a disagreement with his wife about who should marry their daughter

**ANNE PAGE:** daughter to the Pages; she intends to marry her true love Fenton, against the wishes of her parents

**WILLIAM PAGE:** son of Master George and Margaret Page

**MISTRESS ALICE FORD:** wife of Master Frank Ford; one of the wives Falstaff falls in "love" with, she conspires with Mistress Page to trick Falstaff

**MASTER FRANK FORD:** a citizen of Windsor; the jealous husband to Mistress Alice Ford; adopts the disguise of "Brook"

## ANNE'S SUITORS:

**MASTER ABRAHAM SLENDER:** kinsman to Shallow (The Justice of the Peace); Anne's unlikely suitor, favored by Master Page

**DOCTOR CAIUS:** A French physician and suitor to Anne, favored by Mistress Page

**MASTER FENTON:** a young gentleman loved by and in love with Anne Page



Costume renderings for Shallow, Dr. Caius and Slender by Yao Chen.

## OTHER PLAYERS:

**MISTRESS QUICKLY:** Dr. Caius' servant; she acts as go-between for all the courting lovers and between the merry wives and Falstaff

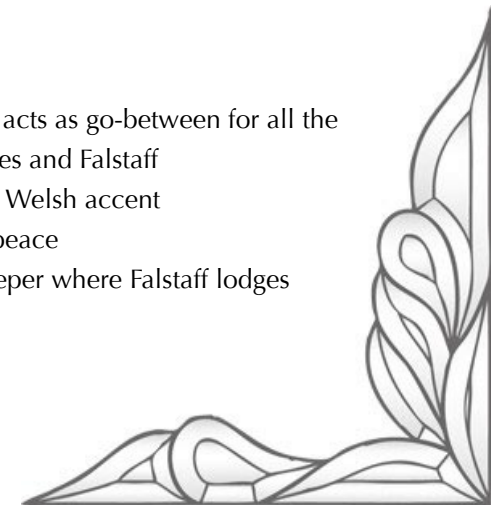
**SIR HUGH EVANS:** a local clergyman with a Welsh accent

**ROBERT SHALLOW:** a county justice of the peace

**THE HOST OF THE GARTER INN:** the innkeeper where Falstaff lodges

**PETER SIMPLE:** Slender's servant

**JOHN RUGBY:** Dr. Caius' servant



# Glossary of Words and Phrases

## ACT I

**Grandsire** – grandfather

**Esquire** – a noble ranking, just below that of a Knight

**Star-Chamber** – the highest court in England

**fallow** – light brown

**pacua verba** – Latin for “few words”

**fidelicet** – Sir Hugh’s attempt at *videlicet*, which is Latin for “namely”

**bilbo** – sword; specifically a thin Spanish sword made in Bilboa

**forsooth** – in truth, indeed

**pippins** – apples

**bully rook** – jolly comrade

**tapster** – one who draws liquor from a cask

**filching** – stealing

**casement** – window

## ACT II

**counsel** – advice given in private, in confidence

**gentry** – inherited social rank

**trou** – know

**wrangle** – fight or struggle

**greasy** – filthy

**gallimaufry** – a hodge podge, a variety of

**cataian** – untrustworthy boaster

**paltry** – trivial, measly

**gratis** – for free

**vouchsafe** – grant

**wanton** – a promiscuous woman

**troth** – truth; true oath

**importuned** – urged

**cuckold** – the husband of an adulteress

**epicurean** – devotee of Epicurus, a 4th century BCE philosopher who believed pleasure was the chief good in life

**forbear** – refrain from doing

**choler** – anger

## ACT III

**rheumatic** – brings on rheumatism (arthritis)

**fourscore** – eighty

**asunder** – apart

**gallant** – a man who pays special attention to women, a flirt

**beseech** – to ask imploringly

**canary** – wine imported from the Canary Islands; also Mistress Quickly’s mispronunciation of the word “quandary.”

**whitsters** – those who bleach clothes

**cog** – (verb) to fawn

**galld** – irritated

**hither** – away

**sack** – a fortified white wine

## ACT IV

**obsequious** – excessive

**Eve’s daughters** – women

**kiln-hole** – oven

**varlet** – a dishonest or unprincipled man

**henceforth** – from now on

**Herne** – the ghost of a hunter believed to haunt the forests around Windsor

**device** – plan, plot or scheme

**cozened** – tricked

**larded** – interspersed

**vicar** – a member of the clergy in charge of a chapel

## ACT V

**lewdsters** – lewd people

**scut** – tail

**Jack-a-lent** – a target

**pander** – a pimp

**deanery** – home of a religious dean

## Man of Many Words

Shakespeare used over 20,000 different words in his plays and poems. Of these, 8.5% (1,700 words) had never been seen in print before Shakespeare used them.

To give you a sense of just how extraordinary this is, consider that the *King James Bible* uses only 8,000 different words.



# Commentary & Criticism

## A PERFECT COMEDY:

“In the system of intrigued comedy, the “Merry Wives of Windsor” may be said to be almost perfect in its composition; it presents a true picture of manners, the denouement is as piquant as it is well-prepared; and it is assuredly one of the merriest works in the whole comic repertory. “

Francois Pierre Guillaume Guizot, *Shakespeare and His Times*, 1852

## IT ENDS TOO SOON:

“The conduct of this drama is deficient; the action begins and ends often before the conclusion, and the different parts might change places without inconvenience; but its general power, that power by which all works of genius shall finally be tried, is such, that perhaps it never yet had reader or spectator, who did not think it too soon at end.”

Samuel Johnson, *Observations on Shakespeare’s Plays*, 1768

## IT STILL WORKS:

“The Merry Wives of Windsor is perhaps Shakespeare’s most professional play, worked out in performance and through performance, and it still works in performance when the Quarto and the Folio are used together. It is finally the language that triumphs, the words, images, ideas, perfectly expressing each several character.”

-Terry Hands, introduction to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*  
from *Introductions to Shakespeare*

## THE PARADISE OF MARRIED WOMEN:

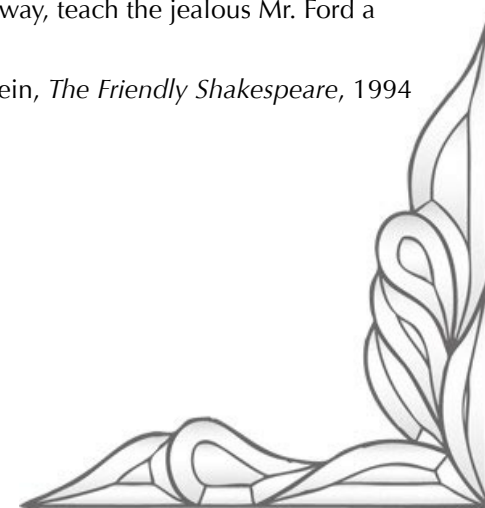
“Wives in England...are not kept so strictly as they are in Spain or elsewhere. They go to market to buy what they like best to eat. They are well dressed, fond of taking it easy...They sit before their doors, decked out in fine clothes, in order to see and be seen by the passers-by...their time they employ in walking and riding, in playing cards or otherwise, in visiting their friends and keeping company, conversing with their equals (whom they term gossips) and their neighbours, and making merry with them at child-births, christenings, churchings and funerals...England is called the Paradise of married women.”

-Van Meteran, 1575

## A DESILU PRODUCTION:

“The only play set in Shakespeare’s own middle-class suburbia, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is an Elizabethan “I Love Lucy.” And, indeed, according to legend, the play mocks Sir Thomas Lucy, who caught the young Shakespeare poaching deer on his territory and had him run out of town. Some scholars maintain that the play was hastily written in two weeks to comply with the queen’s request to see Falstaff in love. But Falstaff isn’t in love; he simply wants to con the two merry wives, Mistresses Ford and Page (Lucy and Ethel), out of some cash. The pair manage to outwit Falstaff and, along the way, teach the jealous Mr. Ford a lesson.”

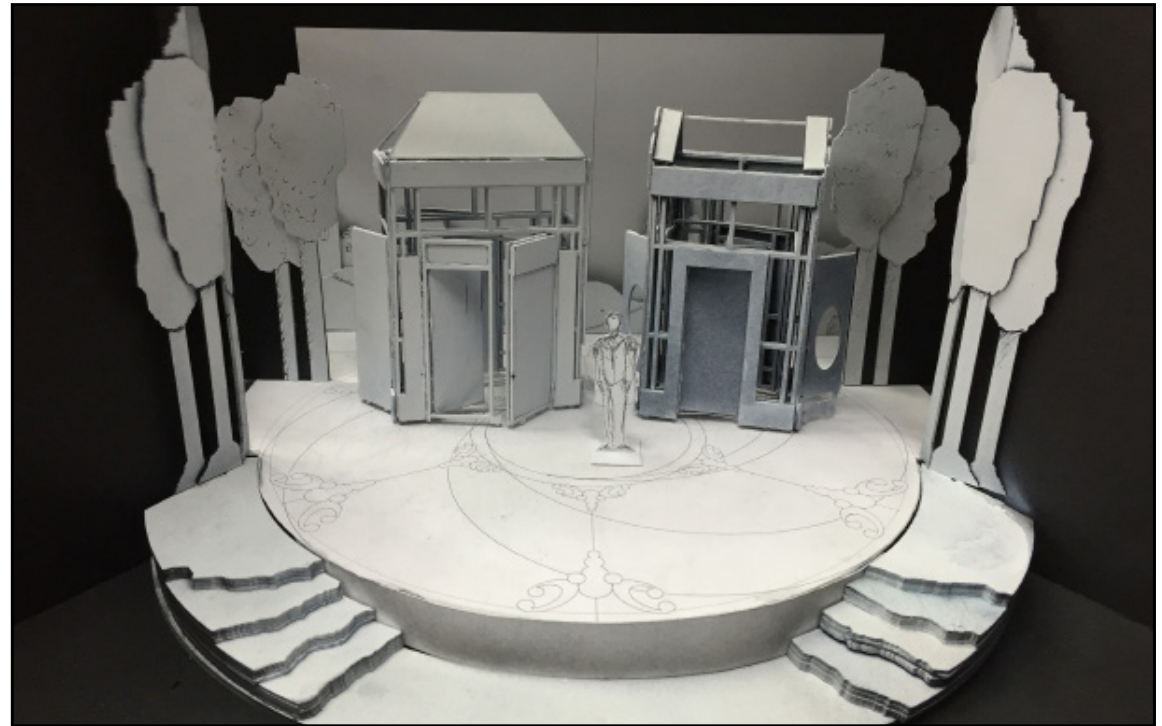
Norrie Epstein, *The Friendly Shakespeare*, 1994



# In This Production

Right: A "White Model" of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* set, designed by Jonathan Wentz.

Below Right: Costume renderings for Falstaff, Mistress Ford, Mistress Page and Anne Page by Yao Chen.

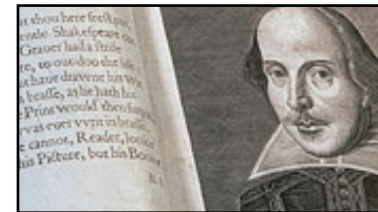
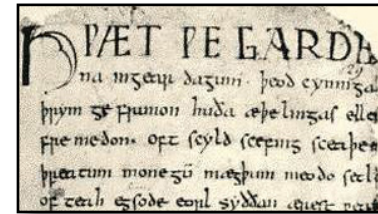


# Explore Online

A link to some YouTube videos where you can hear the difference between Old English and Middle English  
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL071DC49FD027E2A2>

A link to the Folger Shakespeare Library's *Merry Wives* page  
<http://www.folger.edu/merry-wives-of-windsor>

A link to the Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust website  
<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/home.html>





# Sources & Further Reading

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A READER'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE by Muriel B. Ingham

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SHAKESPEARE FOR BEGINNERS by Brandon Toropov

SHAKESPEARE FOR DUMMIES by Doyle, Lischner, and Dench

SHAKESPEARE'S IMAGERY by Caroline Spurgeon

SHAKESPEARE IN PERFORMANCE, Consultant Editors Keith Parsons and  
Pamela Mason

SHAKESPEARE: THE INVENTION OF THE HUMAN by Harold Bloom

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THE ESSENTIAL SHAKESPEARE HANDBOOK, by Leslie Dunton-Downer and  
Alan Riding

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