

THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE

THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

EDITED BY GIORGIO MELCHIORI



THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE

THIRD SERIES

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THE
MERRY WIVES
OF
WINDSOR

THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE

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GENERAL EDITORS' PREFACE

The Arden Shakespeare is now over one hundred years old. The earliest volume in the series, Edward Dowden's *Hamlet*, was published in 1899. Since then the Arden Shakespeare has become internationally recognized and respected. It is now widely acknowledged as the pre-eminent Shakespeare series, valued by scholars, students, actors, and 'the great variety of readers' alike for its readable and reliable texts, its full annotations and its richly informative introductions.

We have aimed in the third Arden edition to maintain the quality and general character of its predecessors, preserving the commitment to presenting the play as it has been shaped in history. While each individual volume will necessarily have its own emphasis in the light of the unique possibilities and problems posed by the play, the series as a whole, like the earlier Ardens, insists upon the highest standards of scholarship and upon attractive and accessible presentation.

Newly edited from the original quarto and folio editions, the texts are presented in fully modernized form, with a textual apparatus that records all substantial divergences from those early printings. The notes and introductions focus on the conditions and possibilities of meaning that editors, critics and performers (on stage and screen) have discovered in the play. While building upon the rich history of scholarly and theatrical activity that has long shaped our understanding of the texts of Shakespeare's plays, this third series of the Arden Shakespeare is made necessary and possible by a new generation's encounter with Shakespeare, engaging with the plays and their complex relation to the culture in which they were – and continue to be – produced.

THE TEXT

On each page of the work itself, readers will find a passage of text followed by commentary and, finally, textual notes. Act and scene divisions (seldom present in the early editions and often the product of eighteenth-century or later scholarship) have been retained for ease of reference, but have been given less prominence than in the previous series. Editorial indications of location of the action have been removed to the textual notes or commentary.

In the text itself, unfamiliar typographic conventions have been avoided in order to minimize obstacles to the reader. Elided forms in the early texts are spelt out in full in verse lines wherever they indicate a usual late twentieth-century pronunciation that requires no special indication and wherever they occur in prose (except when they indicate non-standard pronunciation). In verse speeches, marks of elision are retained where they are necessary guides to the scansion and pronunciation of the line. Final -ed in past tense and participial forms of verbs is always printed as -ed without accent, never as -'d, but wherever the required pronunciation diverges from modern usage a note in the commentary draws attention to the fact. Where the final -ed should be given syllabic value contrary to modern usage, e.g.

Doth Silvia know that I am banished?
(*TGV* 3.1.221)

the note will take the form

221 **banished** banishèd

Conventional lineation of divided verse lines shared by two or more speakers has been reconsidered and sometimes rearranged. Except for the familiar *Exit* and *Exeunt*, Latin forms in stage directions and speech prefixes have been translated into English and the original Latin forms recorded in the textual notes.

COMMENTARY AND TEXTUAL NOTES

Notes in the commentary, for which a major source will be the *Oxford English Dictionary*, offer glossarial and other explication of verbal difficulties; they may also include discussion of points of theatrical interpretation and, in relevant cases, substantial extracts from Shakespeare's source material. Editors will not usually offer glossarial notes for words adequately defined in the latest edition of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* or *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, but in cases of doubt they will include notes. Attention, however, will be drawn to places where more than one likely interpretation can be proposed and to significant verbal and syntactic complexity. Notes preceded by * involve discussion of textual variants in readings from the early edition(s) on which the text is based.

Headnotes to acts or scenes discuss, where appropriate, questions of scene location, Shakespeare's handling of his source materials, and major difficulties of staging. The list of roles (so headed to emphasize the play's status for performance) is also considered in commentary notes. These may include comment on plausible patterns of casting with the resources of an Elizabethan or Jacobean acting company, and also on any variation in the description of roles in their speech prefixes in the early editions.

The textual notes are designed to let readers know when the edited text diverges from the early edition(s) on which it is based. Wherever this happens the note will record the rejected reading of the early edition(s), in original spelling, and the source of the reading adopted in this edition. Other forms from the early edition(s) recorded in these notes will include some spellings of particular interest or significance and original forms of translated stage directions. Where two early editions are involved, for instance with *Othello*, the notes will also record all important differences between them. The textual notes take a form that has been in use since the nineteenth century. This comprises, first: line reference, reading adopted in the text and closing

square bracket; then: abbreviated reference, in italic, to the earliest edition to adopt the accepted reading, italic semicolon and noteworthy alternate reading(s), beginning with the rejected original reading, each with abbreviated italic reference to its source.

Conventions used in these textual notes include the following. The solidus / is used, in notes quoting verse or discussing verse lining, to indicate line endings. Distinctive spellings of the basic text (Q or F) follow the square bracket without indication of source and are enclosed in italic brackets. Names enclosed in italic brackets indicate originators of conjectural emendations when these did not originate in an edition of the text. Stage directions (SDs) are referred to by the number of the line within or immediately after which they are placed. Line numbers with a decimal point relate to entry SDs and to SDs more than one line long, with the number after the point indicating the line within the SD: e.g. 78.4 refers to the fourth line of the SD following line 78. Lines of SDs at the start of a scene are numbered 0.1, 0.2, etc. Where only a line number and SD precede the square bracket, e.g. 128 SD], the note relates to the whole of a SD within or immediately following the line. Speech prefixes (SPs) follow similar conventions, 203 SP] referring to the speaker's name for line 203. Where a SP reference takes the form e.g. 38 + SP, it relates to all subsequent speeches assigned to that speaker in the scene in question.

Where, as with *King Henry V*, one of the early editions is a so-called 'bad quarto' (that is, a text either heavily adapted, or reconstructed from memory, or both), the divergences from the present edition are too great to be recorded in full in the notes. In these cases the editions will include a reduced photographic facsimile of the 'bad quarto' in an appendix.

INTRODUCTION

Both the introduction and the commentary are designed to present the plays as texts for performance, and make appropriate

reference to stage, film and television versions, as well as introducing the reader to the range of critical approaches to the plays. They discuss the history of the reception of the texts within the theatre and scholarship and beyond, investigating the interdependency of the literary text and the surrounding 'cultural text' both at the time of the original reproduction of Shakespeare's works and during their long and rich afterlife.

P R E F A C E

Though cover and title-page of the present volume pay homage to the title traditionally established by the Folio text of 1623, the original conception of this play is much more truly expressed by the form in which it appears on the title-page of the 1602 Quarto edition and in the entry in the Stationers' Register: *Sir John Falstaff and the Merry Wives of Windsor*.

This comedy is the last touch added to a figure created by Shakespeare in the two parts of *Henry IV*. It turns that figure into an icon; an image; an impression 'from the life of the mind', as Walter Hodges says of the sketch of the fat knight that he jotted down in my room in Clare Hall, Cambridge, when he visited me there in the summer of 1985 to discuss his illustrations for my edition of the second part of *Henry IV*. Now all those admirable illustrations for a number of Shakespeare plays are collected in his splendid volume *Enter the Whole Army* (Cambridge, 1999) but I remain the proud possessor of that vivid image of Falstaff, reproduced here for the first time (Fig. 10). It was the constant presence of that image that encouraged me to undertake an inquiry into the origins, the nature, the transformations, of the Falstaff icon, the results of which I set out some nine years later in my *Shakespeare's Garter Plays*.

My first acknowledgements must be to Walter Hodges, and to the Presidents, the Fellows and the staff of Clare Hall, who welcomed me summer after summer for so many years: their friendliness and interest contributed to create the right atmosphere in which to carry on my work.

By far my greatest debt is to my old friend Richard Proudfoot, who helped and taught me so much, long before he became the

General Editor of the Arden Third Series and entrusted to me the editing of *Merry Wives*. The time and patience he devoted to this volume, his many suggestions as well as much-needed corrections, together with the stimulating advice and substantial improvements and additions prompted by his fellow General Editor Ann Thompson and Associate General Editor George Walton Williams, make of this edition a collaborative work. For my own part, I claim all those mistakes that their scholarship and friendly care did not manage to make good. It was a privilege to have the extremely competent attention as copy editors, first of Jane Armstrong, and later of Hannah Hyam, and above all the constant, cordial, acute and indulgent support of Nelson's Jessica Hodge, without whose encouragement I should never have got to the end of my task.

Editing a Shakespeare play is an exacting craft, and I had the good fortune to be instructed in it in my previous undertakings by some exceptional teachers and friends as general editors, from Clifford Leech, David Hoeniger, Ernst Honigsmann, to Philip Brockbank, and Albert Braunmuller. My gratitude goes to them, and even more to the previous editors of *Merry Wives*. I had no scruples in plundering their scholarly contributions and acute comments, especially in the case of George Hibbard (New Penguin, 1973), H.J. Oliver (New Arden, 1971), and T.W. Craik (Oxford, 1990), although my conviction that the play as it stands cannot have been written before 1599 may occasionally have obscured the extent of my debt to those who have argued for an earlier dating. I wish to acknowledge how substantial are my borrowings from their editions, and at the same time to express my gratitude to Jay Halio, who enabled me to publish my views, in the book I mentioned earlier, on the genesis, background and dating of the Falstaff plays.

Leo Salinger provided invaluable advice over the years, and Doreen Brockbank provided generous hospitality in Stratford, together with affectionate friendship. Patricia Parker's *Shakespeare from the Margins*, which I received from her unexpectedly

in 1996, opened for me new perspectives on this and other plays.

My daughter Miranda helped with the reading of print-outs and proofs, while to Barbara, my other self for many golden years, I owe my still being alive and happy. With her I share the recollection of so many friends and colleagues that have helped us in a variety of ways. Some (perhaps too few) of them are mentioned in the prefaces and dedications of our previous books, especially in the editions of *Sir Thomas More*, *The Second Part of Henry IV* and *Edward III*. But what stands out most in our minds in the present context is the Falstaffian figure of the Italian Shakespeare scholar Gabriele Baldini, translator of the complete works, walking back with us at night from the Rome opera house, in the deserted streets of fifty years ago, singing in his powerful baritone the Verdi arias we had just heard in the theatre.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this book to the memory of another writer, scholar and friend, Nemi D'Agostino, whose last work, or rather labour of love, was a translation of *Merry Wives* into an extraordinary blend of Italian linguistic forms from all ages and parts of the country – a true comedy of (Italian) languages.

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and Clare Hall, Cambridge

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INTRODUCTION

This is Falstaff's play. The two entries in the Stationers' Register (the book where publishers recorded the works they wanted to copyright) for 18 January 1602 leave no doubt about it; in modern spelling they read: *an excellent and pleasant conceited comedy of Sir John Falstaff and the Merry Wives of Windsor*.¹ This is confirmed by the title of the first edition published in the same year: 'A Most pleasaunt and excellent conceited Comedie, of Syr Iohn Falstaffe, and the merrie Wiues of Windsor.'² Though his name has disappeared from the title of later editions of the play, Falstaff is firmly established as an archetypal figure in world literature, and this excellent conceited comedy is one of the most popular plays of Shakespeare on the modern stage: it is hardly possible to keep track of the numberless productions and adaptations staged every year, not only in the original but in all known languages. Its appeal to English-speaking audiences consists mainly in its being Shakespeare's only thoroughly English comedy – apart from the Histories, all his other plays are located in settings distant in place or time – while foreigners appreciate what they consider its robust English humour.

Until recently, though, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* did not meet with the same favour in most critical opinion. Untold damage to it derived from the legend, circulated at the beginning of the eighteenth century, that Shakespeare wrote it in a fortnight at

¹ The first entry, to John Busby, spells Falstaff's name *Sr Io. ffaulstof*. This is immediately followed by a transfer from J. Busby to Arthur Johnson, who actually published the book; in this second entry the name is spelt *Sir Iohn ffaulstafe* (see Greg, *BEPD*, 18 and 298).

² Cf. Knutson, 74: 'The language both of the entry in the Stationers' Register . . . and of the advertisement on the title page of the quarto (1602) indicates that the play was to be called *A . . . Comedy of Sir John Falstaff*'.

the request of Queen Elizabeth¹. In fact it can hardly be said that the comedy shows 'Falstaff in love', as the Queen supposedly requested, and crediting this narrative confines the play to the limbo of instant – albeit royal – pot-boilers, an impression confirmed by its being nearly exclusively in prose, apart from some passages of serviceable verse². It was one of such passages, the speech of Mistress Quickly as the Queen of Fairies at 5.5.56–77 – a passage not in the Quarto of 1602, making its first appearance in the Folio of 1623 – celebrating the supreme chivalric Order of England, the Most Noble Order of the Garter, that, while confirming the label of 'occasional play' for *Merry Wives*, suggested that the occasion was of a most exalted kind. The play, as Leslie Hotson first suggested in 1931³, vigorously supported with a wealth of new arguments by William Green in 1962⁴, was conceived and written as a royal entertainment to be performed at the feast held in Westminster Palace on St George's Day, 23 April 1597, to celebrate the election of five new knights (one of them being George Carey, Lord Hunsdon, the patron of Shakespeare's company) to the Order of the Garter.

¹ John Dennis, in the dedicatory epistle to his adaptation of the play under the title *The Comical Gallant: or the Amours of Sir John Falstaffe*, published in 1702, wrote that '[t]his comedy was written at [the queen's] command, and by her direction, and she was so eager to see it Acted, that she commanded it to be finished in fourteen days'. In turn, Nicholas Rowe, in the introduction to his edition of Shakespeare in 1709, stated that Queen Elizabeth 'was so well pleased with the admirable character of Falstaff, in the two parts of *Henry IV*, that she commanded [Shakespeare] to continue it for one play more, and to show him in love.'

² Only about 12 per cent of *Merry Wives* in the Folio text is in verse, including Pistol's doggerel found here and there in early scenes (1.1 and 1.3, 2.1–2) – by far the lowest percentage of any Shakespeare play. The young courtier Fenton is the only character that speaks consistently in verse in all his appearances (3.4, 4.6, 5.5.208–39) except at 1.4.124–50, while Anne Page and the other Windsor citizens use verse only in his presence. 4.4 and the fairy masque at 5.5.37–102 are the other scenes in verse – possibly based on some kind of earlier court entertainment partly incorporated in the play. The comparative table of percentage distribution of prose in Shakespeare's plays in Vickers, 433, shows that the other plays in which prose prevails, though to a much smaller extent, are *Much Ado About Nothing* (69 per cent), *Twelfth Night* (59 per cent) and *As You Like It* (55 per cent), all written between 1598 and 1601, where prose marks a distinction in the social status of the speakers or between comic and serious scenes.

³ Leslie Hotson, *Shakespeare versus Shallow* (1931).

⁴ William Green, *Shakespeare's Merry Wives of Windsor* (Princeton, N.J., 1962).

Although there is no positive evidence of the nature of the entertainment offered the new knights on the otherwise well-documented Garter Feast of 1597, this notion has found a very wide measure of acceptance, with a few exceptions and a number of provisos, among recent scholars and editors of the play¹. It is a view that not only affects, among other things, the question of the dating of *Merry Wives* and of the second sequence of Shakespeare's Histories, but obscures some of the subtleties of a play that occupies an isolated position in the Shakespearean canon. If we take it to be the stray offshoot – whether responding to a royal command or to the celebration of a more solemn occasion – from a man who was at the time busy writing the second part of *Henry IV*, then indeed the play is nothing more than a hastily conceived jolly prank to please a court audience that could appreciate certain topical allusions, and a popular audience fond of buffoonery.

THE ENGLISH COMEDY AND THE COMEDY OF ENGLISH

What gets overlooked is the fact that, even granting that Falstaff's play was written at command (either the Queen's or the box office's), its distinguishing feature and supreme merit consists in its being an extraordinary document of Shakespeare's skill in his 'mystery', the job of playwriting.² Whatever the

¹ It is taken for granted, for instance, in the recent editions by T.W. Craik (Oxford, 1990) and by David Crane (Cambridge, 1997), while the Oxford editors (*TxC*, 1987, 120) and the Norton Shakespeare (1997) suggest a date 1597–8, and so does Knutson (64–5), who maintains that '[n]ow, with the assignment of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to the repertory of 1597–98, we see that the Chamberlain's men acquired a play with humorous characters within six months of the show at the Rose [of *The Comedy of Humours* (presumably Chapman's *An Humorous Day's Mirth*) in May–June 1597,]'. Riverside, 2nd edn (1997), 82, dates the play '1597 (revised c. 1600–1)'. The most cogent and convincing rejection of 1597 as the date of the play is Elizabeth Schafer, 'The date of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*', *N&Q*, 236 (1991), 57–60. For a fuller discussion of the dating and destination of the play see the section 'Garter comedy: date, occasion and Falstaff's metamorphoses' below.

² In her memorable Clark Lecture of 1968 Muriel Bradbrook considers *Merry Wives* 'an example of craftsman's theatre . . . one of the most thoroughly professional jobs in the English theatre'.

occasion that suggested it, Shakespeare made *Merry Wives* into a joyous exploration of the main tool of his trade, i.e. the English language, or rather language as such. The pleasant conceited comedy of Sir John Falstaff and the merry wives of Windsor is the culmination of Shakespeare's experiment with English as a living organism subject to infinite individual variations. The consciousness of the instability of language would come naturally to a man of the theatre like Shakespeare, supremely aware of the instability of the texts he provided for his fellow players, in the knowledge that no two performances would be identical, subject as they were to the daily changes in the acting conditions, according to the varying times, places and dispositions of actors and audiences. A marked differentiation in the languages of the people appearing in the plays emerges in the late Histories, where characterization is based on the linguistic peculiarities of persons belonging to different social strata or of different ethnic origin. In the earlier plays the language vagaries of the clowns or the servants, including the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, respond to current comic conventions, while as late as in the First Part of *Henry IV* (1596) Bardolph is characterized not by his language but by the redness of his complexion, and Hostess Quickly (here a married woman) is content to stick to her interjection 'O Jeshu' without any of her extraordinary malapropisms. In *Henry V* and still more in *Merry Wives* language manipulation takes a different turn.

The manipulation of language serves a double purpose. At the level of linguistic differentiation, *Merry Wives* is a unique example of representation of a cross-section of contemporary English social structures: as Walter Cohen puts it, the play creates 'the impression of life in an English provincial town as it is being lived at the moment of the play's first performance'; it 'retains a contemporary, domestic, and nonaristocratic feel unique in Shakespearean drama'.¹ Its uniqueness, i.e. the fact of being

¹ Norton, 1225. For similar approaches to the social implications of the play in the course of discussions of the origins of the Quarto and Folio texts see Siegel (1986), Marcus, 'Levelling' (1991) and Kinney (1993).

Shakespeare's one and only 'English comedy'¹ – though large sections of the plot and action derive from obvious Italian models – as well as his only 'comedy of humours',² is achieved through a subtle gradation of linguistic distinctions in a play where verse is used only in a very few scenes and individual nuances of social rank are established by the grammatical and syntactical usages of English by each speaker. In some of them, such as Shallow and Slender, the Host of the Garter, the servants Simple and Rugby, the linguistic peculiarities border on deliberate mannerisms, which make of them humorous figures – the whole comedy insists on the interplay between the natural speech conditioned by each character's social status and the verbal quirks that tend to transform them into 'humours'. It is this interplay that makes of *Merry Wives* a satire of the conventions of the 'comedy of humours', even apart from Nim's repeated tag line 'the humour of it'.

In fact *Merry Wives* is not so much an 'English comedy' as 'the Comedy of English', or rather 'the Comedy of Language'.

THE COMEDY OF LANGUAGE(S) AND THE LATIN LESSON

At the level of linguistic experimentation, the manipulation of language places *Merry Wives* side by side with *Love's Labour's Lost*: the latter is the most consistent and successful Shakespearean exploration of the language of rhetoric in all its aspects, while Falstaff's play is the most thorough exploitation of the potentialities of the English language in all its nuances.³ *Merry Wives*, while on the one hand reviving and carrying to new

¹ The most comprehensive treatment of the Englishness of the play is Jeanne Addison Roberts, *Shakespeare's English Comedy: The Merry Wives of Windsor in Context* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1979). For a more specific contextualization see Leggatt, 146–9.

² See the section 'Translating: Italian into English – Falstaff's ancestry and the comedy of humours' below.

³ Vickers, 142, sees *Merry Wives*, with its 'anthology of linguistic oddities', as 'an obvious development from the exuberance of *Love's Labour's Lost* with its fantastics . . . we must concede that [*Merry Wives*] shows a virtuoso control of styles'. Cf. Salmon for a thorough study of the language of Falstaff's plays.

extremes Falstaff's richly articulated verbal inventions in the two parts of *Henry IV*, plays on the whole gamut of linguistic variations peculiar to the characters of previous plays: from the bombastic language of Pistol and Mistress Quickly's involuntary equivocations (see 2 *Henry IV* and *Henry V*) to Nim's verbal tags (*Henry V*), from Parson Evans's Welsh accent to Doctor Caius's Frenchified English (compare, respectively, Fluellen and the French characters in *Henry V*). In fact, *Henry V* is already, in a way, a comedy of languages: the meeting of the four captains (3.2), an Englishman, a Welshman, an Irishman, and a Scot, characterized by their accents, under the walls of Harfleur, marks the merging of separate nationalities in a common cause under British leadership, in preparation for the overcoming of linguistic and political barriers in the union of Henry and Katherine of France, anticipated by the English lesson imparted to Katherine by a French gentlewoman (3.4). While in the history play the comedy of languages is functional to the mood of celebration of a 'charismatic leader who . . . forges the martial national state',¹ in *Merry Wives* it becomes the central motif of the play, as revealed by what could be called its pivot scene, 4.1, Evans's Latin lesson to the boy William Page, interspersed with the grotesque misconstructions and salacious equivocations of Mistress Quickly – a scene absent from the earlier versions of the play and irrelevant to the development of the action, but providing the essential clue to its inner meaning, in the same way as *Titus Andronicus* 3.3, where the killing of a fly reveals the nature of the villain Aaron the Moor; 2 *Henry IV* 3.1, the night musings of a sick king (both scenes missing from the first issues of the respective plays); or *Hamlet* 4.4.9ff., the hero's last soliloquy; and *King Lear* 3.6.17– 55, the mock arraignment of Goneril and Regan, passages suppressed in the final 1623 Folio versions. All these scenes and passages are expendable from the point of view of

¹ See Stephen Greenblatt's 'Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*', first in *Political Shakespeare*, ed. John Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester, 1985), 18–47, then in his *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford, 1988), 21–65.

theatrical narrative, but they have a pivotal function at the level of the ideological structures of the plays in which they appear.¹ The Latin lesson in *Merry Wives*, though apparently patterned on the English lesson in *Henry V*, and undoubtedly ‘intended for an educated audience’² who had some knowledge of Latin, carries much more complex implications because of the very fact of playing not on a living language but on the ‘father language’ surviving as a set of rules in a school grammar.³ The word-play, mostly with marked sexual innuendos, on the terminology of grammar and on (mis)translation is by no means limited to this scene, but runs through the play like a hidden linguistic thread that links together all or most of the characters. The most obvious example is when Falstaff says to Pistol of Mistress Ford:

I can *construe* the action of her *familiar style*, and
the hardest voice of her behaviour – to be *Englished*
rightly – is: ‘I am Sir John Falstaff’s’.

PISTOL He hath *studied* her well, and *translated* her will –
out of honesty into English.

(1.3.42–7)⁴

Again, Ford disguised as Brook tells Falstaff, referring to Mistress Ford, that ‘there is shrewd *construction* made of her’ (2.2.212–13), and speaking of himself he fears that he will ‘stand under the adoption of abominable *terms*’ (2.2.279–80).⁵ In no other Shakespearean play does the word ‘English’ with reference

¹ See Melchiori, ‘Pivot’, 154–9, where I mistakenly consider *Merry Wives* 4.1 as a ‘decorative’ dramatic insertion in respect of the pivot scenes in *Titus*, 2 *Henry IV*, *Hamlet* and *Lear*.

² H.J. Oliver in Ard², 102.

³ The grammatical and lexical expressions used in the scene are based on William Lilly’s and John Colet’s *A Shorte Introduction of Grammar . . . for the bryngynge vp of all those that entende to attayne the knowledge of the Latine tongue* (1549, frequently reprinted) that Edward VI commanded to be used in all schools. See T.W. Baldwin, *Shakespeare’s Small Latine and Lesse Greeke* (Urbana, Ill., 1944), 1. 557–68.

⁴ Italics in this and the following quotations are mine.

⁵ For an extremely perceptive study of the relevance of the ‘Latin lesson’ to an understanding of the network of wordplay in *Merry Wives* and its social, sexual and gender implications, see Parker, 116–48: “Illegitimate construction”: translation, adultery, and mechanical reproduction in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

to the language and its misuse appear so frequently. Actually it is Mistress Quickly, herself an arch-equivocator and manipulator of language with a 'genius for unintended and unperceived obscenities',¹ who first calls attentions to the abuses of the English tongue by saying of Doctor Caius:

here will be an old *abusing of God's patience and the King's English*.

(1.4.4–5)

Page comments on Nim's verbal tic, 'the humour of it':

Here's a fellow frights *English* out of his wits.

(2.1.124–5)

The Host of the Garter, who takes pride in his rhetorical gifts and in his skill in preventing the duel between Parson Evans and Doctor Caius, says of them:

Let them keep their limbs whole and *hack our English*.

(3.1.70–1)

And in order to be reassured about the German gentlemen who wish to hire his horses he asks 'they speak English?' (4.3.6). In the end Ford, cured of his jealousy, cracks a joke with Parson Evans:

I will never mistrust my wife again, till thou art
able to woo her *in good English*.

(5.5.132–3)

And finally Falstaff resents the Welsh Parson's jokes at his defeat:

Have I lived to stand at the taunts of one that makes
fritters of English?

(5.5.141–2)

Though the linguistic vagaries of such characters as Doctor Caius and Parson Evans are emphasised also in the version of the play preserved in the Quarto edition of 1602, no such attention is drawn there to the misuses and abuses of English. For instance, Falstaff's last comment quoted appears in the Quarto (sig. G3v) as

¹ Gary Taylor (ed.), *Henry V* (Oxford, 1982), 63.

‘haue I liued to these yeares / To be gulled now, now to be ridden?’, and Page does not say that Nim frights *English* out of his wits, but ‘Heres a fellow frites humor out of his wits’ (Quarto, sig. C1r).¹

TRANSLATING: ITALIAN INTO ENGLISH –
FALSTAFF’S ANCESTRY AND THE
COMEDY OF HUMOURS

The much shorter version of the play preserved in the 1602 Quarto, by omitting the Latin lesson and most of the references to the manipulation of language, seems much more concerned with the presentation of ‘sundry variable and pleasing humours’ (as promised by its title page) than with the uses of language as the basic tool of Shakespeare’s trade. The nature of the Quarto will be discussed in a later section, but this reduced attention to the linguistic factor should be taken in connection with another feature of the Quarto: as compared with the Folio, it is much less specific in pointing out the precise Windsor locale and its implications in the matter of class distinctions. The absence from it not only of the speech celebrating the Order of the Garter (5.5.57–74) but also of most references to the court scattered through the Folio text justify an acute scholar like Leah Marcus in asking the question ‘Windsor or Elsewhere?’² and in drawing the conclusion:

¹ Most of the other passages quoted have no counterpart in the 1602 Quarto, except in the case of the exchange between Falstaff and Pistol at 1.3.42–7, but the omission in it (sig. B2r) of the mention of ‘translation’ renders it nonsensical: ‘And euery part to be constured rightly is, I am / Syr *Iohn Falstaffes*. / *Pis*. He hath studied her well, out of honestie into English’; the Host of the Garter’s remark about the prevented duel between Caius and Evans figures verbatim in the Quarto (sig. D3r: ‘Let them keep their limbs hole, and hack our English’) but is assigned to Shallow.

Further discussion of linguistic self-consciousness and the manipulation of language will be found throughout the commentary notes but especially at the following points: errors in Latin: 1.1.5–8, 1.1.113, 1.1.151 and 166, 4.1 *passim*; Welsh pronunciation: 1.1.16–17, 1.1.42–55, 3.1.63 and 70–1, 5.5.142; French pronunciation: 1.4.40ff, 1.4.101 and 110, 3.1.70–1 and 89, 3.3.220; archaic language: 1.3.19, 1.3.91, 2.3.67; specialist legal terminology: 1.1.34–5, 2.1.195; specialist fencing terminology: 2.3.21–4; linguistic affectation: 1.3.53–4, 2.1.116–23 and 127, 3.3.56–7; ‘Quicklyisms’ and other mistakings of words: 1.1.231–5, 1.4.139, 142 and 148–9, 2.2.39 and 58, 3.5.38, 4.5.42; sexual innuendo: 1.1.207, 1.4.75–6, 2.1.69, 4.2.133–4, 5.5.18; disappearance of accents: 5.5.36.3 and 37SP, 5.5.49, 5.5.128–9, 131.

² Marcus, *Unediting*, 84–8.

The folio version of *Merry Wives* is a comedy of small-town and rural life, steeped in rustic customs and topography but also imbued with the “high” presence of the royal court; the quarto version is “lower”, more urban, closer to the pattern of city and “citizen” comedy.¹

In other words, the Windsor of the Quarto *Merry Wives* resembles London or any other town, the normal setting for a story of middle-class life whether in England or elsewhere. And in fact its main plot-line, like that of many citizen and ‘romantic’ comedies, is akin to that on which most continental and especially Italian story-telling is based, so as to justify the adjective ‘Italianate’ in respect of the background of the play.²

The question of the relationship between the Quarto and Folio versions of the play will be examined in a later section. What should be noted now is that the ‘*pleasant conceited comedy of Sir John Falstaff and the Merry Wives of Windsor*’ is a multiple-plot play. There is first of all Falstaff himself, a character already familiar to English audiences who would expect to see him surrounded by his usual retinue of ‘Irregular Humorists’:³ fiery complexioned Bardolph from *1 Henry IV*, swaggering Pistol and the page boy from *2 Henry IV*, and Corporal Nim from *Henry V*. Significantly they disappear after the second or third act of the comedy⁴ and are not integrated in a consistent plot. Only Bardolph, no longer as Falstaff’s follower but as a drawer in the Garter Inn, is involved later in the subsidiary plot of the horse-

¹ Marcus, *Unediting*, 88. See also Leggatt, *passim*, and cf. Slights, 152–70, pointing out the pastoral element in *Merry Wives*, within the context of Shakespeare’s later comedies.

² See Campbell, ‘Italianate’ (1932). Cf. Bradbrook (1979), 85–6. Fleissner (1978) discusses in detail the problem of the sources of *Merry Wives* and finds the closest analogy in a novella in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Miola (1993), 373, maintains that *Merry Wives* ‘presents an Italianate appropriation of [Latin] New Comedic characters’, especially from Plautus’ *Casina*.

³ The definition is from the list of ‘Actors’ names’ appended to the text of the Second Part of *Henry IV* in the 1623 Folio.

⁴ Only in the Folio version does Pistol improbably reappear in Act 5, rather incongruously impersonating Hobgoblin in the fairy masque.

stealing from the Host (4.3 and 4.5). Other characters who had figured in Shakespeare's Histories fit more precisely both the real main plot suggested by the title of the play (Falstaff and the merry wives), and its subplot, the Anne Page/Fenton love story: in both plot and subplot fairly substantial parts are played by Mistress Quickly – who shares the linguistic peculiarities of her previous Hostess-self, but has changed her basic role – and by Justice Shallow, unaccountably transplanted to Windsor from his Gloucestershire domain in *2 Henry IV*. And surely the Welshman Captain Fluellen and the pompous French characters of *Henry V* live again in the humours of the Welsh Parson Evans¹ and the French court-doctor Caius, for whom, beside their participation in main- and subplot, Shakespeare has devised the mock duel (2.3/3.1) as a further sideshow².

The characters originating in previous plays and engaged in secondary actions (the Caius/Evans mock duel, the horse-stealing episode) are in fact the 'humours' that the author presents as a deliberate take-off of the latest theatrical fashion, the comedy of humours³. These subsidiary episodes share with the

¹ The role of Fluellen was apparently created for Robert Armin, when in 1599 he replaced Will Kemp as the company's clown: Armin, as his own play *The Two Maids of More-Clacke* shows (see A.S. Liddie's introduction to his critical edition of that play, New York, 1979), specialized in the role of the comic Welshman. See Melchiori, 'Which Falstaff', 98–9, and *Garter*, 71–2 and 93, n. 2. This tends to confirm that the date of *Merry Wives* cannot be earlier than 1599.

² According to plot logic Caius should have challenged Slender, his rival in Anne Page's love, instead of Evans. Bradbrook, 81, observes that Shakespeare might have heard from his future son-in-law John Hall, a Cambridge graduate, that Dr John Caius, the third founder of Caius College, 'had such an antipathy to Welshmen that he forbade their admission to his foundation'. Cf. Cam¹, xxxiii. I suspect Shakespeare's choice of duellists was suggested by the comic possibilities offered by the linguistic Welsh/French confrontation, as a compensation for an opportunity missed in *Henry V*, where the Welshman Fluellen never comes face to face with the French.

³ Dover Wilson, Cam¹, xxxi–xxxii, suggests that the character of Nim was devised to ridicule Ben Jonson. *Merry Wives* is treated as a humour comedy by Knutson (see note 1 on p. 3) and Tiffany, 'False Staff', 254ff.; but compare 'Fie on sinful fantasy: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Every Man in His Humour*', in McDonald, 31–55, which deliberately does not discuss the theory of humours, but considers Jonson's comedy to place 'less emphasis on the story, more on peculiarities of character' than those that preceded it (31), and Shakespeare's play as a 'brief detour from the path of romantic comedy' (55).

main plot and subplot the central theme of the play, i.e. the hoax, the trick played at the expense of people who in their turn think they are cozening other persons. In fact 'cozen' and its derivatives (cozenage, cozener, etc.) occur ten times in *Merry Wives*, more often by far than in any other Shakespearean play. The Host deceives Doctor Caius and Parson Evans by appointing different places for their duel, but is in turn deceived by the thieves disguised as 'Germans' who steal his horses. In the love subplot, while Master Page and Mistress Page think of deceiving each other by manipulating Anne's disguise in the fairy masque so as to have her 'stolen' either by Slender (Page's choice) or by Caius (her mother's favourite), they are both deceived by the young lovers, who get married with the help of the Host – a typical example of 'the deceits in love', an expression that occurs on the title pages of many plays, beginning with one published in 1585:

Fedele and Fortunio. The deceites in Loue: excellently
discoursed in a very pleasant and fine conceited
Comoedie, of two Italian Gentlemen.

The hoax theme, implying both deceit and disguise, is the dominant feature of the main plot, culminating in the exposure of Falstaff in the emblematic disguise¹ as a buck at Herne's oak in 5.5, anticipated by his two previous experiences in the buck-basket in 3.3 and under the guise of the 'witch of Brentford' in 4.2. Ford in turn deceives Falstaff by appearing to him disguised as Master Brook, but is subjected to the 'honest deceit' ('Wives may be merry and yet honest too' – 4.2.100) intended to cure him of his jealousy, that is to say to translate him out of the stock

¹ Steadman connects Falstaff with Actaeon the mythical hunter who was transformed into a stag for spying on Diana's nymphs bathing, and was killed by his own hounds – a myth mentioned twice in *Merry Wives*, by Pistol with reference to Ford at 2.1.106 and by Ford with reference to Page at 3.2.39, in both cases alluding to the stag's horns as emblematic of cuckoldry. Roberts (*Context*, 76) sees Falstaff's disguise as representing a scapegoat for his threat to the social and sexual order and his dis-horning as a symbolic castration, an interpretation upheld by Cotton. Cf. Freedman, 'Punishment', and Hinely.

‘humour’ of the jealous husband into a sensible and sensitive human being.

While stories of lovers who deceive their parents in order to avoid the miseries of enforced marriage (see 5.5.223–4) are so traditional that it would be idle to suggest a specific novel or play as the inspiration of the Anne/Fenton subplot, source-hunters have been asking for a long time where Shakespeare could have found the major situations on which to construct the main plot of his play, particularly the lover or would-be lover who keeps a husband informed of his love-exploits, unaware that his mistress is the man’s wife, or the ways he avoids detection when surprised by the husband in the mistress’s house. Parallels have been found with stories in English collections: ‘Of Two Brethren and their Wives’, in Barnaby Riche’s *Riche his Farewell to the Militarie Profession* (1581), where a wife gets rid of two lovers by persuading a third to beat them soundly, and then returns to the love of her husband, who is all unaware of her misbehaviour; or ‘The Tale of the two Lovers of Pisa’ in *Tarltons Newes out of Purgatorie* (1590), where Tarlton, transferring the action from Padua to Pisa and changing the names of the characters, adapts a novella from Gianfrancesco Straparola’s *Le piacevoli notti*, in which a young student informs his teacher of his love for a woman without realizing that she is the teacher’s wife; the teacher becomes suspicious, but the student, after avoiding being caught with her three times, induces the woman to run away with him, and the foolish old doctor, not finding her at home, dies of despair.¹ But the one really close analogue is not

¹ For a discussion of these sources and their texts as well as a translation of the novella from *Il pecorone* see Bullough, 2: 3–58. Cf. Oliver, introduction to Ard², lviii–lxv. The theory according to which *Merry Wives* might have been based on the lost *Jealous Comedy* entered in Henslowe’s *Diary* as performed on 5 January 1593 (see Campbell, ‘Italianate’, 84ff.) is firmly rejected by Bullough (2: 5), and the same treatment has been reserved for Nosworthy’s notion (*Occasional Plays*) that Shakespeare’s play was modelled on Porter’s *The Two Merry Women of Abingdon*, a merely hypothetical companion piece to his *The Two Angry Women of Abingdon*. See Bradbrook, 95: ‘I do not think that he took an old play, whether the lost “Jealous Comedy” or the much more unlikely *Two Merry Women of Abingdon*, and rewrote it.’ More convincingly, Gurr, 197–200, noting thematic and other affinities between *The Two Angry Women* and *Merry Wives*,

an English (or 'Englished') story but an Italian one. It is the second novella of the second 'day' of the collection *Il pecorone* by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, a book not translated into English but certainly known to Shakespeare, who had borrowed from the first story of its fourth 'day' all the main situations and the plot-line of *The Merchant of Venice*. The second novella of the second day is once again a story combining the themes of a student who unwittingly deceives his master and of a young wife deceiving her old husband; as the title announces, it deals with Bucciolo, a student in Bologna, and 'how he asked his master to teach him the art of loving, and how he profited by it'. As soon as Bucciolo receives his first assignation from a young woman whom he does not know to be his master's wife, he reports it to his teacher, who becomes suspicious and follows him to the appointed house. He knocks at his own door as soon as the young man is inside, but the woman hides Bucciolo under a pile of washing, where the master in his search of the house does not think of looking for him. The master goes back to the school, while Bucciolo enjoys his wife, and the next morning the young scholar reports to him what has happened and informs him of his next assignation in the evening. This time the woman manages to let her lover out while her furious husband is breaking into the house, and when relatives and neighbours turn up at the fracas and find the master, sword in hand, cutting up a pile of washing, they think he has gone mad and put him in chains. Only the next morning, visiting the supposed madman with his fellow students, does Bucciolo realise that his lover was his master's wife and, pitying him, leaves Bologna for good with the comment 'I have learnt so much that I don't need any more schooling'. What is notable is that in transferring a plot with so many details in common from an Italian to an English setting Shakespeare has omitted the central point of the hoax, adultery: for all the talk of 'horns' in

places Porter's play, for the 'second part' of which the author received payments from Henslowe in December 1598 and February 1599, in the context of the rivalry between the parallel repertories of the Admiral's Men and Chamberlain's Men. This prompted a rejoinder by Roslyn L. Knutson, and Gurr's reply, in *SQ*, 39 (1988), 391–8.

Merry Wives there is no consummation. The roles of husband and lover in the play are reversed: not only is the husband not cuckolded (though he is subjected to a certain amount of deception in order to be cured of his jealousy), but he is also considerably younger than the would-be lover, who is the real butt of the tricks played upon him. Furthermore, the wife is no young thing married against her will, but a happily married matron, no longer 'in the holiday-time of [her] beauty'.¹ Though Falstaff, in 'construing' Mistress Ford's 'familiar style', is deluded into 'Englishing' it as evidence of her love for him, Pistol's already quoted comment 'He . . . translated her will – out of honesty into English' (1.3.46–7)² should be reversed. In fact Shakespeare translated the plot of Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's novella out of Italian into honesty.

Shakespeare, confronted with the task of writing, presumably at short notice, either an entertainment in honour of the Queen and of the Order of the Garter or a full-fledged comedy on the character of Falstaff, looked for the basic plot to those Italian models that, as Leo Salingar has convincingly demonstrated,³ conditioned the writing of his comedies from the early 1590s to at least 1601, not only through borrowed plots and situations but also in dramaturgic technique. Salingar actually singles out *Merry Wives* to illustrate the strength of the Italian influence in the one play that, because of its firm location in Windsor, seems least amenable to it.⁴ In fact the model in theatrical terms for

¹ See Bradbrook, 86: 'The Italian works, and many of the English comedies derived from them with likenesses to Shakespeare shew one startling difference – All are tales of *youthful* and *successful* adultery. None has more than one heroine; the cornuto may be an ancient professor, and the successful intruder one of his own undergraduates. This is the sort of comedy Falstaff imagines himself to be part of, with his scornful description of 'the peaking cornuto, her husband', and his own assumption of youthful energy.'

² For further sexual and social implications of the phrase see Parker, 143–7, 'Out of Honesty into English: Ingles, Angles, Englishmen'.

³ 'Shakespeare and Italian comedy', Salingar, *Traditions*, 175–242. Cf. Louise George Clubb, *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* (New Haven, CT., 1989).

⁴ Salingar, *Traditions*, 228–38. In a later paper Salingar vindicates 'The Englishness of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*' through a revealing analysis of the play's language and by reference to ancient folk rituals and customs, echoed in Shakespeare's invention of the Herne the Hunter legend. I am grateful to Leo Salingar for his as yet unpublished paper.

Shakespeare's comedies that are now called 'romantic', from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* to *Twelfth Night*, is Italian, but it undergoes a peculiar process of transformation. The earliest such model of a 'very pleasant and fine conceited comedy', going back to 1585, is the one mentioned before, bearing three alternative titles: 'Fedele and Fortunio', 'The deceits in Love', or 'The Two Italian Gentlemen'. It is an early work in elaborate verse by that extremely versatile writer, Anthony Munday,¹ meant for presentation to a literate court audience. In fact, after giving the title(s) of the comedy, the title-page advertisement goes on:

Translated out of Italian, and set downe according
as it hath beene presented before the Queenes
moste excellent Maiestie.²

It purports therefore to be the English translation of an Italian '*commedia erudita*', *Il Fedele*, by the Venetian nobleman Alvise (or Luigi) Pasquàligo, first published in 1576. *Commedia erudita* was an elitist dramatic genre practised by eminent men of letters, fusing together classical allusions, stylistic refinements and for good measure unrestrained bawdiness. In fact *Il Fedele* is a story of rampant conjugal unfaithfulness in which Vittoria, a married woman (her husband has the emblematic name of Cornelio, alluding to his 'horns'), freely dispenses her favours alternately to her lovers Fedele and Fortunio and, when one of them threatens to reveal the situation to her husband, tries to have the lover killed by a boasting and ineffectual henchman whom she chooses as her third lover. The plan fails and she is reconciled with the 'unfaithful' lover when he manages to hoodwink her husband into believing in her married chastity. The whole is

¹ He was not only a brilliant playwright, but also novelist, pamphleteer, historian, translator of voluminous French romances, deviser of pageants for the London City Guilds, and government informer against Roman Catholics. See Celeste Turner, *Anthony Munday: Elizabethan Man of Letters*, University of California Publications in English, vol. 2, no. 1 (1928).

² Quotations and references to the play-text are from *Anthony Munday, Fedele and Fortunio 1585: A Critical Edition* by Richard Hosley (New York, 1981).