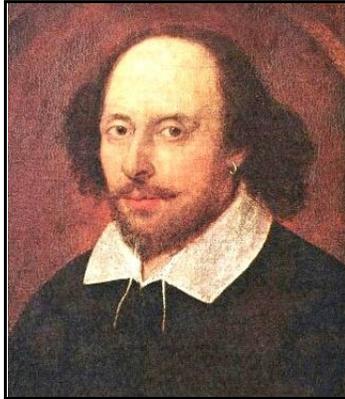


# THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

by William Shakespeare



## THE AUTHOR

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born into the family of a prosperous tradesman in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. While in his mid-teens, he was forced to leave school because his family fell into a period of poverty, so that he had only a rudimentary education. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior and already three months pregnant. The marriage produced three children in three years, but in 1585, Shakespeare left Stratford to go to London to seek his fortune in the big city.

In London, he embarked upon a career on the stage, becoming a popular actor by the early fifteen nineties. In 1591, he penned his first play, *Love's Labour's Lost*. His early plays were comedies, and show nothing of the depth that characterized his later works. His plots were borrowed from a variety of sources, both ancient and contemporary. During his career, he wrote 37 plays, three narrative poems, and 154 sonnets.

His writing brought him fame and popularity, but he continued to act as well as write (critics love to speculate about which of the characters in his plays would have been played by the author). He eventually became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men when James I ascended the throne). Most of his plays were performed at local theaters like the Rose, the Globe, and the indoor Blackfriars. When the Globe burned to the ground in 1613 (a cannon misfired during a performance of *Henry VIII*), Shakespeare retired, and died in Stratford three years later on his fifty-second birthday.

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* was written in 1597, probably at the express request of Queen Elizabeth. The occasion may have been the installation of knights who were to receive the Order of the Garter, a ceremony that always took place at Windsor. According to one tradition, Elizabeth had seen and thoroughly enjoyed performances of the *Henry IV* plays, and specifically asked Shakespeare to write a play that involved Falstaff entangled in romantic adventures, giving him two weeks to do so. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was the result. The play is a light comedy, by no means one of Shakespeare's best, and, unlike most of his other comedies, is written almost entirely in prose.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Sir John Falstaff - A boisterous, carousing, fat old nobleman who seeks liaisons with Mistress Page and Mistress Ford.
- Bardolph, Nym, Pistol - Falstaff's cronies who betray him because he treats them badly.
- Robin - Falstaff's servant.
- Robert Shallow - A country justice of the peace.
- Abraham Slender - Shallow's nephew who desires to marry Anne Page; his suit is favored by her father.
- Peter Simple - Slender's servant.
- Sir Hugh Evans - A Welsh parson whose accent is used to ridicule his countrymen by Shakespeare.
- Fenton - A young gentleman in love with Anne Page; his suit succeeds in the end despite the opposition of her parents.
- George Page - A citizen of Windsor and father of Anne and William.
- Meg Page - His wife and Anne's mother; an object of Falstaff's affections.
- Anne Page - Their teenage daughter, and the play's main love interest; she is courted by Slender, Caius, and Fenton.
- William Page - Anne's young brother who is being tutored by Sir Hugh Evans.
- Doctor Caius - A French physician, in love with Anne Page; his suit is favored by her mother. His accent is worse than Sir Hugh's.
- Mistress Quickly - Caius' housekeeper, she is a close friend of Anne and is recruited by all Anne's suitors to intercede for them, and by Mistresses Page and Ford to carry messages to Falstaff; she is constantly using malapropisms.
- John Rugby - Caius' servant.
- Frank Ford - A citizen of Windsor, he becomes jealous of his wife and pretends to be a man named Brooke to discover Falstaff's intentions.
- Alice Ford - His wife, and an object of Falstaff's amorous desires.

- Host - The owner of the Garter Inn, where Falstaff and his men are staying.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“For revenged I will be, as sure as his guts are made of puddings.” (Mistress Page, Iii, 30-31)

“Why, then the world’s mine oyster,  
Which I with sword will open.” (Pistol, Iiii, 2-3)

“Wives may be merry, and yet honest too.” (Mistress Page, IVii, 100)

## NOTES

**Act I, scene 1** - Outside the Page house, Shallow, Slender, and Sir Hugh Evans gather to confront Falstaff and his cronies for having abused Shallow’s men and poached his deer, and also made Slender drunk and picked his pockets. Before knocking on the door, they discuss the possibility of Slender marrying Anne Page, the lovely daughter of the house, who brings with her a handsome dowry. Falstaff appears with Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol and admits to the deeds, though caring nothing for them. He then plants a kiss on Mistress Ford. Page invites them all to dinner, but Shallow and Sir Hugh leave; Slender goes in while insisting that he will eat nothing.

**Act I, scene 2** - Outside the Page house, Sir Hugh gives a message to Simple, Slender’s servant, to take to Mistress Quickly, the housekeeper of Dr. Caius, asking her to intercede for Slender with Anne Page.

**Act I, scene 3** - In a room at the Garter Inn, Falstaff convinces the Host to train Bardolph as a bartender, then tells the others that he is glad to be rid of him because he is a thief. He then declares his intention of wooing both Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, both of whom he imagines have eyes for him. Nym and Pistol then plot how they can foil his amorous plans.

**Act I, scene 4** - Simple arrives at the home of Caius with Sir Hugh’s message. Mistress Quickly promises to do what she can for Slender, but knows Anne’s interests lie elsewhere. When Caius appears she hides Simple in the closet, but Caius finds him and is furious because he too loves Anne and wants to marry her. He forthwith challenges Sir Hugh, the writer of the letter, to a duel. After Caius leaves, Fenton, a young gentleman, arrives and asks Mistress Quickly to intercede for him with Anne. Quickly promises to do so, but again tells the audience that Anne’s affections lie elsewhere.

**Act II, scene 1** - Mistresses Page and Ford have received their letters, and both are insulted by Falstaff’s boldness. They are determined to revenge themselves on him by pretending to encourage his advances, then revealing their true feelings at the last minute. Meanwhile, Nym and Pistol have gone to Ford and Page and informed them of Falstaff’s designs on their wives. Page is unconcerned, asserting that even if Falstaff succeeded in wooing his wife he would get nothing but a sharp tongue, but Ford is more cautious, and intends to observe the situation while masquerading as a man named Brooke. Mistress Quickly arrives and asks to speak with Anne, and Mistresses Ford and Page draw

her aside to use her as an emissary to Falstaff. The Host of the Garter Inn then tells Page and Ford that a duel between Evans and Caius is in the offing, but that the combatants have been directed to different locations.

**Act II, scene 2** - Pistol asks Falstaff for a loan, but he refuses to lend Pistol any more money. Mistress Quickly then arrives and brings messages from Mistresses Ford and Page; the former says her husband will be out of the house between ten and eleven, while the latter promises to let him know should her husband ever be away from home. Mistress Quickly assures Falstaff that the two women have not communicated with one another. Mistress Page has requested that Falstaff send his young page Robin to serve as a go-between; Falstaff agrees, sending a purse of money as well. Meanwhile, Pistol overhears all of this conversation and sees that the net is being spread for the fat old knight. Bardolph then introduces Ford, who has come to see Falstaff disguised as Brooke. Brooke presents himself as a rich merchant and tells Falstaff he is in love with Mistress Ford, who to this point has resisted his advances despite many presents lavished on her. He offers Falstaff money to seduce her, believing that once she has fallen she will be more willing to give herself to him. Falstaff takes the money and agrees, telling him that he already has an assignation arranged with Mistress Ford at ten o'clock. Ford, convinced his wife is planning to cuckold him, considers how he might trap them, get revenge on Falstaff and his wife, and laugh at Page for his naive trust in his wife.

**Act II, scene 3** - Caius is in a field waiting for his duel with Sir Hugh, who has not appeared (he is waiting at Frogmore for Caius). Caius is angrily fulminating when the Host, Page, Shallow, and Slender appear, allegedly to see the fight. They proceed to insult Caius using English slang he doesn't understand, then the Host sends the others to find Sir Hugh and discover what he is doing while he leads Caius by a roundabout route to Frogmore, all the while telling him that he is leading him to a place where Anne is feasting so he can woo her.

**Act III, scene 1** - Near Frogmore, Sir Hugh wonders where Caius is. Page, Shallow, and Slender then arrive and tell him that Caius is coming, and he soon appears in the company of the Host. They convince the two men to make peace, telling them that the Host sent them to two different places because he didn't want to lose either of them. They agree to be friends, then between themselves decide to get revenge on the Host for deceiving them. Meanwhile, Slender is repeating over and over to himself the name of Anne Page.

**Act III, scene 2** - Mistress Page, with Robin in tow, is going through Windsor on the way to see Mistress Ford. They meet Ford, who asks where Mistress Page got the young boy, and she tells him he came from Falstaff. Ford is more convinced than ever that Page is about to be cuckolded, and he more determined to foil Falstaff and expose the two wives. He soon meets the group returning from Frogmore and invites them home for dinner to see some sport. Slender and Shallow refuse, since the former is to have dinner with Anne Page and attempt to woo her. Page tells the group that he favors Slender's suit, that his wife supports Caius, but that he has no interest in Fenton's efforts to win his daughter. Page, Sir Hugh, and Caius then prepare to accompany Ford to his house.

**Act III, scene 3** - At the Ford house, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page plan to get revenge on Falstaff, telling the servants to be ready to carry a large buck-basket to Datchet Mead and dump it in a muddy ditch. He arrives and begins to speak lavish words of love to Mistress Ford, insisting that

he has no love for Mistress Page. Then Mistress Page runs in and cries out that Ford is on his way with half the town of Windsor in tow. Falstaff hides in the basket and the servants carry it out as instructed just as Ford and the others enter. They search the house and find nothing, and Ford apologizes to his wife while the others mock his suspicions. Meanwhile, the two wives plan to send Robin to Falstaff later to make excuses and invite him over again to make amends. Caius and Sir Hugh are still determined to get revenge on the Host.

**Act III, scene 4** - Outside Page's house, Fenton and Anne are talking. She says her father believes Fenton wants to marry her for her money, and he admits that was his original motive, but says that now he loves her for herself. She insists that he must gain her father's consent. Soon Shallow and Slender arrive. Slender begins awkwardly to woo Anne, but Shallow keeps feeding him words to say, making him look stupid - something at which he needs little assistance. The Pages then arrive, and Anne's father tells her that Slender is his choice. She appeals to her mother, who favors Caius but is willing to listen to what Anne has to say. Fenton is told to go away while the others go inside, but he gives money and a ring to Mistress Quickly to take his part with Anne. Mistress Quickly has now been hired by all three suitors at one time or another, and is in a quandary about what to do.

**Act III, scene 5** - At Falstaff's room in the Garter Inn, he complains to Bardolph about his adventure with the buck-basket and his bath in the muddy ditch by the Thames. Mistress Quickly arrives and tells him that Mistress Ford apologizes for the misadventure, claiming that her servants misunderstood her instructions, and wants to see him between eight and nine that morning. Soon Ford comes in the guise of Brooke, and Falstaff tells him what had happened, exaggerating by saying that he and Mistress Ford had been embracing and kissing before the husband had arrived. He then goes off to his rescheduled rendezvous, with Ford determined to catch him this time.

**Act IV, scene 1** - Mistress Page is taking William to school when they meet his tutor, Sir Hugh Evans, in the street. He gives him a brief quiz on his Latin, which neither one appears to know very well. Meanwhile, Mistress Quickly, understanding nothing of the conversation, mistakes every Latin word that is spoken and makes some inappropriate comment. This scene adds nothing to the plot except for Mistress Quickly to tell Mistress Page that she must go as soon as possible to Mistress Ford's house. Otherwise, it is pure comic relief.

**Act IV, scene 2** - Falstaff is again at mistress Ford's house, and Mistress Page again warns that her husband is approaching in a jealous rampage. Since the basket trick will not work again, they decide to dress Falstaff up in a dress belonging to an old aunt (also called the Witch of Brainford) - one Ford hates and has forbidden to enter the house. While Falstaff is upstairs getting dressed the men arrive, and when the servants bring the basket to the door Ford begins digging madly through it. He finds nothing, and is roundly criticized by the others for his pointless jealousy. Falstaff then comes downstairs in the aunt's dress, and Ford promptly begins to beat him, after which he flees. Sir Hugh, however, notices that the old woman had a beard, and the men set off in pursuit. The two wives then decide to come clean with their husbands after Falstaff has been publicly humiliated.

**Act IV, scene 3** - Bardolph tells the Host that a group of Germans want to rent three of his horses. The Host says he will make them pay dearly for the privilege.

**Act IV, scene 4** - In Ford's house, the wives have told their husbands all, and the four of them now plot to bring Falstaff down once and for all. The plan is to bring him to Windsor Forest at midnight disguised as Herne the Hunter, a local ghost legend. Anne, William, and some other children will play fairies and sprites, and will pinch and burn him until he confesses his sins. Page plans to have Anne dress as the Fairy Queen and have her spirited away by Slender to be married. Mistress Page has her own plans, however, and intends to inform Caius so he can take Anne away before Slender gets the chance to do so. Ford intends to go see Falstaff in the guise of Brooke and discern his intentions.

**Act IV, scene 5** - Simple comes to the Garter Inn to seek the old fat woman who has gone into Falstaff's room. The Host is concerned for the reputation of his house. Then Bardolph arrives and tells him that the Germans have stolen his three horses. Sir Hugh Evans and Caius add that three frauds disguised as Germans have been stealing horses all over the countryside. Mistress Quickly then brings a letter to Falstaff from Mistress Ford.

**Act IV, scene 6** - Fenton is at the Garter Inn. He tells the Host of the plan to humiliate Falstaff and also tells him that both Page and his wife have plans to marry Anne to their respective favorites that night. Page has promised to dress her in white so Slender can recognize her, while Mistress Page has said she would be dressed in green so Caius can spirit her away. Fenton has his own plans, and asks the Host to arrange for a priest to be nearby for his use that night. In exchange, he will give the Host a hundred pounds more than what is needed to cover his losses.

**Act V, scene 1** - Falstaff heads for the forest in his costume, taking Brooke with him and promising to deliver Ford's wife to him that very evening.

**Act V, scene 2** - Page, Shallow, and Slender arrive at the park. Page reminds Slender that Anne will be wearing white, and Slender says that he has arranged passwords - he will say "mum" and she will say "budget."

**Act V, scene 3** - Mistress Page, Mistress Ford, and Caius arrive at the park. Mistress Ford reminds Caius that Anne will be wearing green. After he goes to hide himself, the women speak of how surprised Falstaff is going to be, and note that Sir Hugh has disguised himself as a monkey/devil.

**Act V, scene 4** - Sir Hugh Evans, disguised as a satyr, and the fairies who are with him, arrive at the park.

**Act V, scene 5** - Falstaff arrives at the great oak with a buck's head on. Mistress Ford and Mistress Page come to him, and he embraces them and speaks of the love they are to enjoy. A terrible noise arises and the women flee. Then Sir Hugh, Anne, and the young boys come in in their disguises, with Mistress Quickly disguised as the Fairy Queen. Falstaff is frightened, thinking they are real spirits of the night. As he cringes on the ground, they circle around him and burn his fingers with candles and pinch him as they sing their song. As the circle dance continues, Slender runs up and steals one of the young boys dressed in white, Caius takes one of the boys dressed in green, and Fenton makes away with Anne. A horn blows and the fairies run away. The Pages and Ford reveal the ruse to Falstaff and ask him how he ever could think that a miserable wretch like himself could

attract respectable women. The Pages tell one another that Anne has been married to the man each one chose, but Slender and Caius soon appear and report that they had made off with boys. Then Fenton arrives, married to Anne, and all accept the inevitable and decide to return, Falstaff included, to have a good laugh over the whole business.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In addition to being the central figure in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Falstaff appears in three other plays - the two *Henry IV* plays and *Henry V*. Compare the character of Falstaff as he is presented in the comedy with the same character in the three histories. Give special attention to *Henry IV, part 1*. Be sure to address his personality as well as his manner of speaking and the ideas he communicates.
2. Compare and contrast the treatment of the vice of jealousy in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Othello*. Be sure to go beyond the obvious differences between farce and tragedy and consider how jealousy itself is presented in the two plays.
3. Compare and contrast William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* with Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals*. Consider particularly certain parallel characters - the choleric foreigner (Caius and Sir Lucius O'Trigger), the maid who plays both ends against the middle (Mistress Quickly and Lucy), and the malapropism-spouting comic (Mistress Quickly again and Mrs. Malaprop). To what extent do these characters play the same roles in the two stories and how is the treatment of them different?
4. Compare and contrast the treatments of the multiple-suitor scenarios in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. What elements do the two comic contrivances have in common, and in what key ways are they different?
5. Compare and contrast the use of malapropism for comic effect in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Analyze the linguistic foibles of Mistress Quickly and Dogberry in terms of their comic effectiveness and the structure of the speeches themselves. Give attention, too, to the ways in which the language spoken by these characters contributes to the development of their personalities.
6. Most of Shakespeare's plays deal with the life of the aristocracy. The most significant exception to this rule is *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which pictures life among middle-class people in a provincial town near the end of the sixteenth century. Discuss Shakespeare's view of the middle class as it is pictured in the play. Does he admire the lifestyles and values of such people, or does he find in them an object of mockery? Use specifics from the play to answer the question.

7. Friedrich Engels, co-author with Karl Marx of *The Communist Manifesto*, greatly admired William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In light of the play's portrayal of the English middle class, discuss why this might have been so. Be sure to use specifics from the play to support your answer.
8. Evaluate the marriages pictured in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Page and Ford relationships? Which has a stronger marriage, and why? Support your conclusions with details and quotations from the play.
9. According to the picture painted by the playwright in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, what makes a good marriage? Use specific details and quotations from the play to support the qualities you choose.
10. William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* contains a higher percentage of prose speech than any other of his plays. Why do you think this might be the case? Why would the great playwright choose the vehicle of prose dialogue when he had already proved himself a master of blank verse for this purpose?
11. In William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Anne Page is able to foil her parents' wishes and marry the man of her choice. Discuss the morality of her actions. Should she have honored her parents and accepted the marriage arranged for her (obviously she could not have accepted *both* of them), or was she right to elope with the man she truly loved despite her parents' wishes? Use Scripture in evaluating this aspect of the plot.
12. Discuss the treatment of and attitude toward foreigners in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In today's society, the mockery directed toward Caius and Sir Hugh Evans would be repudiated as lacking political correctness. What do you think of such humor? Is it legitimate, or should we be reluctant to make fun of such differences among people? Support your answer with specifics from the play and from Scripture.
13. William Shakespeare was the master of many kinds of dramatic styles, including slapstick comedy. Discuss the use of slapstick in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Do you find the scenes where Falstaff is tricked funny? Why or why not? Would your conclusion be different if you were watching the play on stage rather than reading it?
14. Compare and contrast the use of slapstick comedy in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Which slapstick scenes do you consider more effective? Why? Be sure to support your answer with quotations from both plays.
15. Discuss the picture of women presented in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The title indicates the centrality of women in the plot, and they certainly control much of the action. What does Shakespeare present as the real source of female power in society? Do you agree with him? Why or why not? Support your conclusions with details from the play.

16. Discuss the role of gender in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Remember that female roles were played by young boys on the Elizabethan stage. How does that fact add extra humor to the second humiliation of Falstaff, as well as to the closing scene of the play?
17. Compare and contrast the tricksters in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* with those in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Consider the motives behind their trickery, the means they use to deceive others, and the consequences of their deception at the ends of the plays. Which do you consider the more effective satire?