

An early quarto edition of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*

William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. London: Arthur Johnson, 1619. 7 inches x 5 inches (178 mm x 127 mm), [56] pages, A–G4.

A | Most pleasant and excellent conceited Comedy, | of Sir Iohn Falstaffe, and the | merry
Wives of Windsor. | With the swaggering vaine of Ancient Pistoll, and Corporall Nym. |
Written by W. SHAKESPEARE. | [Heb Dieu device] | Printed for Arthur Johnson, 1619.

Shakespeare's quartos, so named because of their format (a single sheet folded twice, creating four leaves or eight pages), are the first printed representations of his plays and, as none of the plays survives in manuscript, of great importance to Shakespeare scholarship. Only twenty-one of Shakespeare's plays were published in quarto before the closure of the theaters and outbreak of civil war in 1642. These quartos were printed from either Shakespeare's "foul papers" (a draft with notations and changes that was given in sections to actors for their respective roles); from "fair copies" created from foul papers that presented the entire action of the play; from promptbooks, essentially fair copies annotated and expanded by the author and acting company to clarify stage directions, sound effects, etc.; or from a previously published quarto edition. The quartos were inexpensive to produce and were published for various reasons, including to secure the acting company's rights to the material and to bring in money during the plague years in London when the theaters were closed.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the impecunious knight Sir John Falstaff devises a scheme to obtain money: he will seduce two women, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, to get access to their husbands' wealth. The women, however, compare the identical letters Falstaff sent each of them and decide to have some fun at his expense; both send him encouraging letters. Falstaff's disgruntled companions meanwhile tell the women's husbands of Falstaff's plan. Ford dons a disguise and, professing to be a prospective lover of Mistress Ford, asks Falstaff to court her on his behalf. Falstaff agrees to Ford's proposal. Mistresses Ford and Page subject Falstaff to

humiliations as the “seduction” unfolds, then they share the game with their husbands. The spouses concoct a final prank to shame Falstaff involving the Page’s daughter Anne, who will lead the town’s children, dressed as fairies, in an attack on Falstaff. (Anne is being courted by three men: her father wants her to marry one, her mother another, but she loves the third.) The disguised children frighten Falstaff and pinch him repeatedly, after which the spouses reveals the game to Falstaff and Anne announces her marriage to Fenton, her love. All are reconciled.

This second quarto of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, now at the National Library of Scotland, is in a nineteenth-century half-leather binding with dark green straight-grained morocco spine and tips edged with gold rules, dark tan boards. Lettered in gold: “MERRY | WIVES | OF | WINDSOR” in the second compartment; “WM. | SHAKESPEARE” in the fourth and “1619” in the last. The bookplate of John Patrick Crichton Stuart, the third Marquis of Bute is on the front pastedown; the bookplate for the Bute Collection of English Plays is on the back pastedown.

This second quarto of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* likely belonged English book collector Richard Forster. It was acquired 1806 by John Stuart, the first Marquis of Bute (1744–1814). Stuart added it to the Bute Collection of early English plays that was initially formed by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762) and expanded by her son-in-law John Stuart, third Earl of Bute. The first Marquis of Bute notably acquired 39 Shakespeare quartos. The collection contains 1,266 English plays and includes seventeenth- and eighteenth-century adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays and examples of the foremost dramatists from Elizabethan, Jacobean, Caroline, and Restoration periods; also included are a number of promptbooks. The Bute Collection is now in the National Library of Scotland, which purchased it from Major Michael Crichton Stuart on 3 April 1956.

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