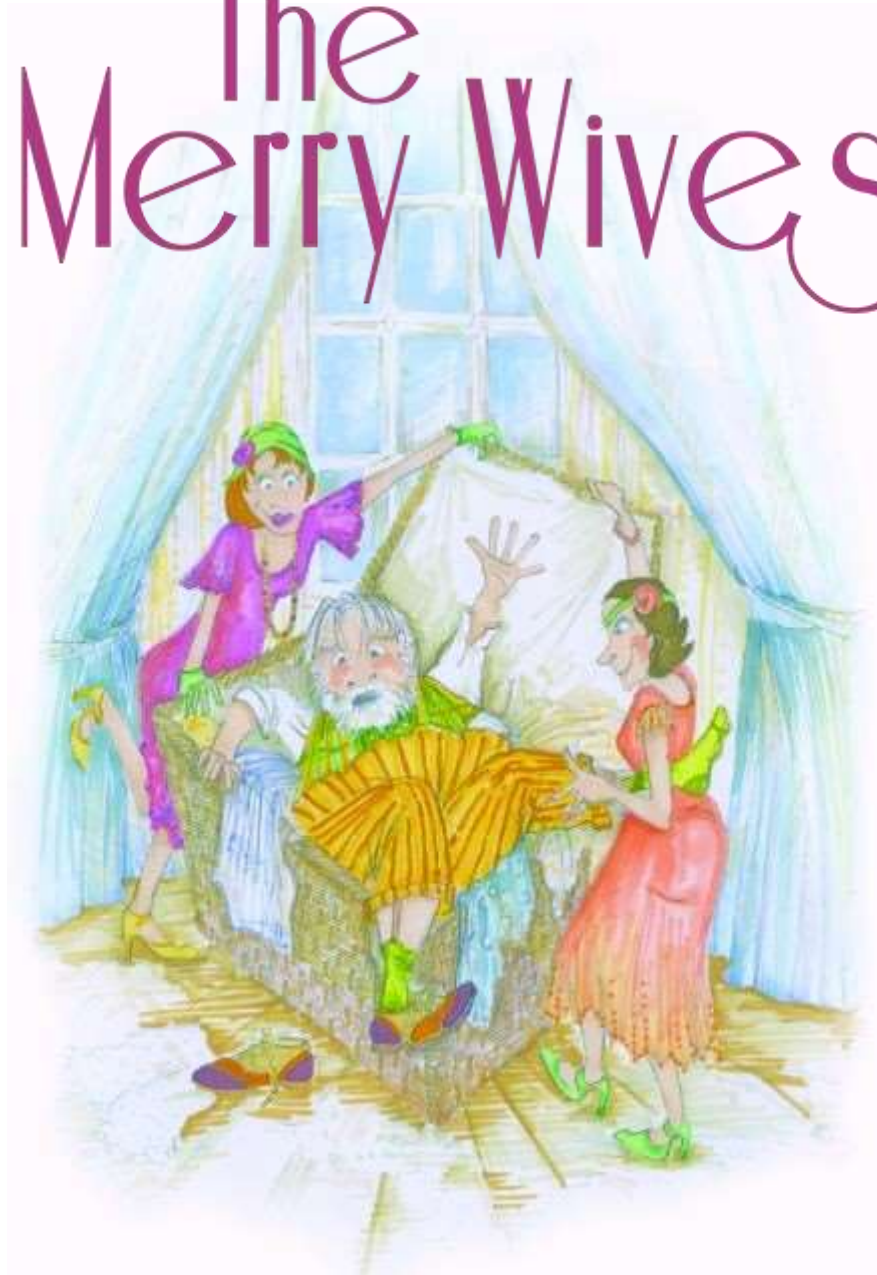




# The Merry Wives



## About this pack

We hope that students from Primary to Advanced Level will enjoy our production and use this education resource pack.

It may be used in advance of seeing the performance – to prepare and inform students about the play; and afterwards – to respond to the play and explore in more depth. Teachers may select, from the broad range of material, which is most suitable for their students.

The first section of this document is a detailed companion to our production: plot and character synopsis, interviews.

The second section seeks to explore the context of the play in greater depth.

The third section includes exercises and suggestions for study.

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# SECTION 1

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## INTRODUCTION

Although regarded by many scholars as one of Shakespeare's weakest plays ***The Merry Wives*** has enjoyed enduring popularity for over four hundred years, and is undoubtedly one of the most enjoyable to watch and to perform. Proof perhaps that 'scholars' don't know everything.

Probably written in haste, possibly to please the Queen, its fast and farcical plot leaves little room for depth of characterization or profound exploration of the human condition – but we have *Hamlet* for that.

This rude and ridiculous play is a celebration of men's folly and women's wit. It pokes fun at the Church, the Judiciary, the Welsh and the French in time-honoured English style. During the 'two hours traffic' of the drama a self-important, greedy, scoundrel is exposed and humiliated, and a true match is made between two young lovers. What's not to like?

Rather like a spin off television series today, where popular characters are given their own show and storylines, in *The Merry Wives* Shakespeare uses several characters from other plays. He gives them a new story and a different context - similar to the way in which *Doctor Who* inspired *Torchwood* and *The Sarah Jane Adventures*. Yes – Shakespeare did it first!

The full title of the play, *Sir John Falstaff and The Merry Wives of Windsor*, is a bit longwinded, and for a northern company the provincial town of Windsor (as it was during Shakespeare's time) could just as easily be Wakefield. Hence, our production is simply ***The Merry Wives*** – a nice, punchy title and all you really need to know. The rest is in the telling...

## CHARACTERS

### AT THE GARTER INN

#### **The Host**

*The landlord of The Garter Inn. He enjoys poking fun at the French doctor and the Welsh Vicar.*

#### **Sir John Falstaff**

*A famously fat knight and a renowned rascal. He lodges with his military entourage at the Garter Inn.*

#### **Corporal Bardolph**

*One of Falstaff's men - characterised by the redness of his spotty complexion.*

#### **'Ancient' Pistol**

*Another one of Falstaff's men and a man of some integrity. The title 'Ancient' doesn't mean he is really old. It is a corrupted pronunciation of his military rank of 'ensign'.*

#### **Corporal Nim**

*Another one of Falstaff's men. His name, sometimes spelled Nym, is probably derived from the old English word meaning 'to take' - implying that he is a thief.*

#### **Robin**

*Falstaff's page-boy.*

#### **Robert Shallow**

*Justice of the Peace. Vain, self-deluded Shallow promotes his nephew as a suitor to Anne Page.*

#### **Abraham Slender**

*A nephew of Robert Shallow and a candidate for the hand of Anne Page. Though he is hopeless at wooing, Slender is favoured by George Page as a prospective husband for his daughter.*

#### **Peter Simple**

*Slender's servant – an honest and innocent lad.*

#### **Fenton**

*A posh but poor young man, who wants to marry Anne Page. Handsome Fenton has a wild past with Royal connections, and though he was first attracted to Anne's money he has truly fallen in love with her.*

## TOWNSPEOPLE

### **Mistress Margaret Page (Meg)**

*A very merry wife, with a good marriage. Mother to Anne and William.*

### **George Page**

*The wealthy husband of Mistress Page and the father of Anne and William.  
A good-natured fellow who trusts his wife.*

### **Anne Page**

*A very eligible (wealthy) young woman, Anne is pursued by a number of suitors  
but she only has eyes for Fenton.*

### **William Page**

*Youngest of the Page family and still a schoolboy.*

### **Mistress Alice Ford**

*The merry wife of Frank Ford, though her marriage is marred by the unfounded  
jealousies of her husband.*

### **Frank Ford**

*Husband of Mistress Ford. A very rich and very jealous man.*

### **Sir Hugh Evans**

*A Welsh clergyman. His accent is the butt of many English jokes – particularly  
from the Host of the Garter.*

### **Doctor Caius**

*A flamboyant Frenchman in love with Anne Page. Like the Welshman he is  
taunted on account of his accent.*

### **Mistress Quickly**

*Doctor Caius's housekeeper. A gossip and all purpose messenger throughout  
the play.*

### **Rugby**

*Doctor Caius's servant.*



## PLOT SYNOPSIS

### Act 1

In a small, provincial town somewhere in England Justice of the Peace, Robert Shallow and his nephew, Abraham Slender, are making complaints against Sir John Falstaff. They air their grievances before Sir Hugh Evans (clergyman) and the three of them call on George Page to seek support.



When Sir John Falstaff himself appears with his entourage (Pistol, Bardolph and Nim) the charges are delivered directly to the accused. He has broken into Shallow's property, beaten his servants and killed his deer. Slender has also been victim to Falstaff's carousing, having been also beaten, carried to the tavern, plied with alcohol and then robbed by Bardolph, Nim and Pistol.

Evans offers himself, Page and the Host of the Garter as arbiters in this matter and makes notes on the accusations and pleas. Falstaff is determined to deny all the charges.

Mistress Page, her daughter Anne, and Mistress Ford arrive on the scene. Falstaff flatters and kisses Mistress Ford (he has wisdom enough not to court Mistress Page in front of her husband) and all exit into the house, except Slender.

Peter Simple (Slender's servant) arrives and Shallow and Evans return to discuss Slender's candidacy for the hand of Anne Page. Slender is nervous, and by no means in love with Anne. Nevertheless, he'll marry her and hope for the best.

Anne comes to call everyone to join the family for dinner. Shallow, Evans and Simple go inside, leaving Slender alone with Anne. He attempts to be interesting and manly - without much success. When George Page enters to call them both in he addresses Slender respectfully – an indication that he will favour Slender's suit to his daughter.

After dinner Hugh Evans sends Peter Simple off to the house of Doctor Caius, with a letter for the housekeeper, Mistress Quickly. He and Justice Shallow hope to engage the services of Mistress Quickly in the wooing of Anne Page for Abraham Slender.

Simple goes off to the house of Doctor Caius, and Evans returns to the house to enjoy the cheese board.

Over at the Garter Inn, John Falstaff tells the Host that he can't afford to lodge all his followers and must dismiss some. The Host offers employment to Bardolf as a tapster (barman). Bardolf is delighted. Falstaff confides in Pistol and Nim that he is broke, but has devised a money making scheme...

Falstaff is convinced that both Mistress Page and Mistress Ford fancy him. He also believes that through them he could have access to their husbands' money. Therefore he has written identical love letters to both women, in an attempt to seduce them and get at some cash.

Both Pistol and Nim are disgusted by this plan, and refuse to deliver the letters. A furious Falstaff sacks them both and exits. His page, Robin, will deliver both letters instead.

Pistol and Nim instantly resolve to be revenged on Falstaff, and they set out to tell Ford and Page about the lecherous knight's designs on the Wives.

Over at the house of Doctor Caius, Simple has arrived with the letter for Mistress Quickly. However Doctor Caius is himself in love with Anne Page, and it would not do for him to discover that his housekeeper has agreed to support another's suit to the same young lady.

Despite Mistress Quickly's best efforts at concealment Doctor Caius returns to find Simple in the house – and his reason for being there. On discovering that he has a rival for the love of Anne Page, Caius sends a letter to Sir Hugh challenging him to a duel.



Left alone, Mistress Quickly reflects that she alone knows the true preference of Anne Page. A third suitor, Fenton, now arrives with money for Mistress Quickly to speak to Anne on his behalf. He does not enjoy the patronage of either of Anne's parents, but he hopes to see his love that very day.

## Act 2

Mistress Page has had a letter! She is surprised to be receiving what is clearly a love letter at her time of life, and reads it aloud. It is clumsily written, and when she reaches the signatory – John Falstaff – she is appalled. Mistress Ford arrives in a state of high agitation. She has received a love letter from the fat knight and is deeply insulted by it. When Mistress Page reveals the identical letter but addressed to her, the two women vow revenge on Sir John Falstaff and step aside to make a plan.

The husbands, Ford and Page, enter accompanied by Pistol and Nim, who are informing on their former master, Falstaff. Page will not believe that his wife would be seduced by the fat knight, but Ford is immediately insecure and brooding.

The Wives approach to greet their husbands. Mistress Ford finds hers to be 'melancholy', which he curtly denies. Mistress Quickly arrives. She has come to see Anne. The Wives have already identified her as a potential messenger in their plot against Falstaff, and the three women exit indoors together.



Ford and Page debate the news about Falstaff's attempted seduction of their wives. Page doesn't believe it, but Ford is jealous. When the Host of the Garter appears – en route to the duel between Sir Hugh and Dr Caius – Ford waylays him and engages him in a plot of his own – to be introduced to Falstaff in disguise and under the false name 'Brook'. Ford assures The Host that he means only a jest against the fat knight, and the landlord agrees to help him.

Shallow has followed The Host and the two of them exit with Page to umpire the fight. Ford exits to lay his plans to investigate into his wife's honesty, in disguise...

Meanwhile, back at the Garter Inn, Pistol needs to borrow money from Falstaff, who refuses. Falstaff has covered for Pistol's and Nim's thieving many times, yet they dared to stand on their honour in refusing to carry the letters to the Wives.

Their argument is interrupted by the arrival of Mistress Quickly, bringing first a message from Mistress Ford and then from Mistress Page. She tells Falstaff that both have received his letters with pleasure and that Mistress Ford's husband will be away from home between ten and eleven, and that though Mistress Page's husband is seldom from home she hopes a time will come when he will be.

Falstaff takes the bait and promises to visit Mistress Ford while her husband is out, and to send his pageboy to Mistress Page to act as go-between. He is assured by Mistress Quickly that the two women have not spoken to each other and do not know that he is courting both at the same time.

Pistol, who has been present throughout this interview, is captivated by Mistress Quickly and exits after her. Bardolph then enters to announce the arrival of a man called 'Brook', who wishes to speak with Falstaff over a cup of wine. Never one to refuse a free drink, Falstaff invites the stranger to approach.



'Brook' is of course Frank Ford in disguise. He offers Falstaff money to woo Mistress Ford (his own wife) on his behalf.

While 'Brook' insists that he believes Mistress Ford is faithful, Falstaff contradicts him – for he has an appointment that very hour with Mistress Ford, who has told him that her jealous husband will be out of the house. Falstaff then goes on to tell 'Brook' that Ford is a fool and a cuckold, and easily overcome. He then appoints 'Brook' to come and see him soon at night, and off goes the fat knight to keep his appointment with Mistress Ford.

Alone, Ford reveals his fury and his jealousy. He feels justified in spying on his wife, and he vows to intercept the liaison between Falstaff and his wife before it's too late.

At the outskirts of the town, Dr Caius awaits the arrival of Sir Hugh for their appointed duel. The clergyman is late, as The Host has sent the two combatants to different places. When Shallow, Page and Slender arrive with the Host of the Garter, Caius is so pumped up he'll fight anybody. The Host then sends Shallow, Slender and Page to the other side of the town where he knows Sir Hugh is waiting, and then promises to guide Dr Caius to a farmhouse where he will find Anne Page and woo her.

### Act 3

On the other side of town Sir Hugh Evans and Simple are looking for Dr Caius, but cannot find him. Shallow, Slender and Page arrive, followed shortly by the Host and Caius himself. The opponents prepare to fight, but are disarmed. The Host tells them that he does not want to lose either his physician or his priest, but the Frenchman and the Welshman sense that they are being made fun of. When the others leave they agree to exact revenge upon the mocking Host of the Garter.

Back in the town Mistress Page is on her way to Mistress Ford's house when she encounters her friend's jealous husband in the street. The fact that she is with Falstaff's pageboy arouses Ford's suspicions. He thinks that Page must be a fool to not see that his wife is also unfaithful. Only he, Ford, can see the truth. He will expose and punish Falstaff and the Wives and be praised for it.

But before he can follow Mistress Page to his house, Ford is accosted by the entire dueling party – Shallow, Page, Host, Slender, Caius and Sir Hugh. They have been discussing who shall marry Anne Page. Page tells Slender that he favours his suit, though he knows his wife prefers Caius. The Host is convinced that another – Fenton – will prevail. Page is determined that if his daughter marries Fenton she shall have no dowry. Ford invites them all to come to his house, where he promises to show them a monster. Justice Shallow and Abraham Slender decline, but the rest go along with Ford.

At the Ford house the Wives are ready and waiting for the fat knight. They prepare a laundry basket which, when full, is to be tipped out into the river. The pageboy Robin has been sworn in as their ally, and is sent out to tell his master that Mistress Ford waits for him alone...

Mistress Page hides and Falstaff enters – ready for love! He says he wishes Mistress Ford's husband were dead so that he could marry her and make her a lady. She plays the coquette and makes him swear it is her he loves - not Mistress Page. Robin enters to announce the sudden arrival of Mistress Page. Falstaff hides within the room as Mistress Page enters.

Mistress Page's part in the charade is to pretend that Ford is on his way with a posse to search for a man he claims is at his house. Mistress Ford denies that she is entertaining a lover, but under pressure from her friend she admits that there is someone there. Mistress Page suggests that he hide in the laundry basket, covered in dirty linen and then be carried out by servants. When Mistress Ford says he's too big to fit in the basket Falstaff reveals himself to try. Mistress Page feigns surprise that he is the man, but he whispers aside that he loves only her.

Servants carry the basket out, just as Ford arrives. Unaware that he has missed his prize he locks the door and begins a search of the house. Alone, the Wives are pleased with their success, though Mistress Ford wonders how her husband could be so convinced that Falstaff was in the house at that very moment. Mistress Page promises to find out more of that, and the two pledge to have yet more fun with the fat knight.



Ford, Page, Caius and Sir Hugh return empty handed. They cannot find anyone else in the house. Ford looks foolish and the Wives can't resist rubbing a little salt in the wound. All the men chastise him for his unreasonable jealousy, and Ford begs everyone's pardon. As they all leave, Caius and Sir Hugh privately reiterate their desire to pay back the Host for mocking their accents.

Over at the Page's house we finally get to meet Anne Page properly. The girl who is the object of everyone's desire is with her own choice of husband – Fenton. In one of the few verse sections of the play Fenton declares his love for Anne. Being high born but poor he admits he was only interested in her money at first, but now he loves her truly. Anne encourages him to try and win her father's favour. The lovers step aside as Mistress Quickly arrives with Justice Shallow and Abraham Slender.

Anne comes forth to speak with Slender, while Mistress Quickly engages Fenton in conversation. In the interview with Anne, Shallow keeps speaking for Slender until Anne insists that her suitor be allowed to woo for himself. Free to speak his mind, Slender admits that Anne's father and his uncle desire the match, but he's really not that bothered either way.



Page and Mistress Page arrive home, and are both vexed to find Fenton there. The young man pleads his case, and Anne begs to be allowed to marry the man of her choice, but her parents stick to their guns. Page insists on Slender, while his wife favours the French doctor – though Mistress Page softens towards Fenton, and promises to question Anne further on the matter.

The family leaves and Fenton thanks Mistress Quickly for her help, giving her money, and a ring to pass to Anne. Mistress Quickly is now resolved to support Fenton's suit. She also has another errand to run for the Wives, and more bait to lay before Sir John Falstaff.

Back at the Garter Inn the fat knight is drowning his sorrows in a jug of wine. He has been carried like cargo in the smelly laundry basket and then tipped into the muddy river and half drowned.

Mistress Quickly arrives with messages from Mistress Ford. She is truly sorry for the events of the morning and wishes Falstaff to come again shortly – between eight and nine - when her husband will once again be out of the house.

Falstaff sends Mistress Quickly away with his agreement to make the appointed hour, and Ford arrives, disguised as 'Brook'. Falstaff then gives him an exaggerated account of how he was at Ford's house, but escaped in a basket and was thrown in the river. Falstaff then reveals that he has another imminent appointment with Mistress Ford and exits hurriedly.

Ford is furious to discover how he was duped. He heads off after the fat knight, determined that this time neither Falstaff nor the Wives will escape discovery, and his vengeful wrath.

## Act 4

Mistress Quickly informs Mistress Page that Falstaff is on his way to see Mistress Ford, despite his earlier soaking. Mistress Page intends to take her son William to school and then go to the Ford's house, but they are stopped in their tracks by the arrival of Sir Hugh, who gives the boy an impromptu Latin lesson. Mistress Quickly doesn't understand Latin and hears rude words and innuendo instead.

At the Ford house, Falstaff is in the middle of professing his love to Mistress Ford when once again Mistress Page arrives suddenly. Falstaff hides and the scene is played again for his benefit. Ford is on his way. He knows how the fat knight escaped last time, and that he is with his wife once again.

When Mistress Ford suggests putting Falstaff in the basket again, he comes out of hiding to refuse. They decide he must be disguised instead, but don't have any clothes big enough to fit him. Then Mistress Ford remembers that there is a gown in the house belonging to her maid's aunt – the fat woman of Brentford (in our version, Ilkley). Falstaff exits to put the gown on, while the Wives find something for him to wear on his head.

With Falstaff temporarily out of the room the Wives wonder yet again at how Ford knew about the secret liaison, and also seems to know that the fat knight was spirited away in a basket on the previous occasion.

They decide to send the basket past him again, to test his prior knowledge.

Ford arrives with Page, Shallow, Caius and Sir Hugh just as the basket is being taken out. He orders it to be set down, and calls his wife to see what is hidden amongst the linen. However, all he pulls from the basket is dirty laundry. Falstaff is not there. Ford will not be satisfied and orders another full search of the house.

Mistress Ford calls Mistress Page and the 'old woman' to come out of the bedroom so it may be searched. Ford is furious to hear that the fat woman of Ilkley is there. He has forbidden her to visit, as she is a known witch. When Falstaff appears, disguised as the old woman, Ford beats 'her' from the house. He fails to recognise the old woman's true identity, though Sir Hugh does comment that he saw a great beard beneath the lady's muffler.

The jealous husband then sets off to search the house from which his quarry has already fled.

The merry wives are highly delighted that in addition to his frustrations and humiliations the fat knight took a beating also.



They now agree it's time to tell their husbands what has been going on – and if the men decide that Falstaff deserves further punishment, the wives will devise and deliver a public shaming.

Over at the Garter Inn another plot is being hatched. Bardolf announces that some German guests require the use of three horses. The Host agrees to this, but they'll pay an extortionate price.

Back at the Ford household the Wives have told their husbands all about the letters and the way they have thus far played tricks on the unsuspecting Falstaff. Ford is humble and apologetic over his jealousy, and everyone is now in on the plot to bait the fat knight.

A plan is made to lure Falstaff to a forest liaison, and bid him disguise himself as the woodland god, Herne the Hunter. There he will be attacked by 'malignant fairies' – pinched and burned for trespassing on their sacred midnight path, dressed as the forest spirit. The 'fairies' will torment him until he admits what he's doing there. The fairies will of course be the townspeople in disguise.

Within this plot is a further plan of Page's that during the tormenting of Falstaff, Slender shall take advantage of the confusion to steal Anne Page away and marry her. He will know her by her white garments. However, Mistress Page intends to use a similar ploy to help Doctor Caius elope with their daughter, whom she will ensure is dressed in green.

At the Garter Inn Peter Simple arrives to speak with the fat woman of Ilkely, whom he saw entering the chamber of Sir John Falstaff. The fat knight appears, but the old woman has mysteriously disappeared. Simple's master, Slender, wants the old witch to tell his fortune – specifically whether it is his fate to wed Anne Page. Falstaff claims that the old woman told him that Slender would indeed marry Anne, and Simple leaves with this good news for his master.

Bardolf arrives with news that the Host's three horses have been stolen by the Germans. Hot on his heels comes Sir Hugh, with a tip off for the Host to be on the look out for three German con men. When he has gone Doctor Caius appears with similar intelligence. The Host runs off calling for help to retrieve his lost horses.

Alone, Falstaff is reflecting on how he has been humiliated and beaten when Mistress Quickly arrives with a message from the Wives. They exit to Falstaff's chamber to speak in private.

Fenton arrives, chasing the Host who is grieving for his lost horses. Fenton asks the Host to help him elope with Anne Page. The plot goes like this...



That evening Falstaff will be lured to Herne's Oak as part of a great jest, involving half the town. Anne Page will be among the crowd, disguised as the Fairy Queen. Anne's father has told Abraham Slender that in the confusion he must grab the figure dressed in white and run away with her. Likewise, Anne's mother has told her favoured suitor, Dr Caius, to run off with the woman dressed in green. In fact Anne will not be either of these women, and she has consented to elope with Fenton – to which end the young lover wishes the Host to have a vicar standing by.

The Host pledges his assistance and the scene is set.

## Act 5

Falstaff and Mistress Quickly return. He'll give this assignation a go – third time lucky. Mistress Quickly heads off to find him props, including some horns, for his disguise as Herne the Hunter.

Ford approaches in his disguise as Brook to question Falstaff about his latest meeting with Mistress Ford. Falstaff relates how he escaped dressed as a woman. The fat knight vows to be avenged on Ford and that very night will deliver Mistress Ford into the arms of Brook. They leave together to talk of the plan.

The action now moves to later in the day and near the castle, where Page, Shallow and Slender are on their way to crouch in the castle ditch to wait for the 'fairies'. Slender checks with Page that he will know Anne by her white garments.

The Wives now appear with Doctor Caius, who is reminded by Mistress Page to look out for the lady in green. Once he has Anne by the hand he must make haste to the deanery to marry her.



Everything is now ready for the big finale. The fairies, led by Sir Hugh, are hidden by Herne's Oak and will appear at the appointed moment. The merry Wives now leave to play their part in the third and final baiting of Sir John Falstaff.

At Herne's Oak the fat knight, with horns on his head, arrives to meet his lady-loves. He's feeling amorous and beastly and when both wives appear he's got love enough for them both.

A sound in the forest frightens the women away and Falstaff is left alone to face the spirits of the night.

Sir Hugh, Anne Page, Mistress Quickly, Pistol, Simple, Bardolf and the Host of the Garter all enter disguised as fairies. (Anne is dressed in neither green nor white.) Falstaff hides up a tree, but they smell him out and start to pinch and burn him. During the fairy song Doctor Caius arrives and runs off with the fairy dressed in green, Slender sneaks on and snatches the fairy in white. Fenton then takes the hand of the real Anne Page and the lovers escape together.



Falstaff manages to get down from the tree and is about to sneak away when Page, Ford and the Wives arrive together. They reveal the jest and Falstaff is the object of much merriment, until Slender appears to complain that the fairy in white was none other than the postmaster's boy, and that he nearly married him by mistake.

Mistress Page's satisfaction that she has confounded her husband is short lived as Dr Caius arrives to declare that the fairy in white was also a young boy. So who got the real Anne?

At this moment the newly-weds, Anne and Fenton, return to beg forgiveness and acceptance. Anne's good-natured parents take no time in accepting the will of love and heaven.

And Ford has the last word – telling Sir John that one promise is fulfilled at least, for tonight 'Brook' shall indeed lie with Mistress Ford.

**THE END**

## OUR PRODUCTION

### THE COMPANY



Back row: Ben Burman, Becky Hindley, Andrew Vincent, Barrie Rutter, Josh Moran, Al Bolland, Andy Hall (CSM), Mark Stratton  
Middle row: Helen Sheals, John Gully, Adam Barlow, Jos Vantylar, Roy North, Gerard McDermott, Nicola Sanderson  
Front row: Sarah Eve, Andy Cryer, Beth Sweeney (DSM)

### **Creative and Technical Company**

Director	Barrie Rutter
Designer	Lis Evans
Music	Conrad Nelson
Lighting Designer	Adam Foley

Choreographer	Sheila Carter
Production Manager	Kay Burnett
Production photography	Nobby Clark
Company Stage Manager	Andy Hall
Deputy Stage Manager	Beth Sweeney
Technical Manager	Adam Foley
Costume Supervisor	Genai Spoors

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## IN DEPTH

### *A word from our Designer:*

#### **LIS EVANS**

#### **The Concept**

When I begin to design a show, the first thing I do is read the play and talk to the director about how they see the production and what they want from the design.



Barrie's initial brief was... 'modern, but no mobile phones'.

And he sort of described the feel that he wanted – of a kind of middle class that somebody (Falstaff) would aspire to be part of. A group of people all quite settled in this middle class, monied setting.

So I think, modern? When is that - some time in the last century? I also wonder about the important things in the play – those battles. And I wonder what the weapons could be? I didn't want it to be about guns and swords and things. So that was kind of the starting point – what weapons could we use...? And I don't know why, but I thought about cricket bats and tennis rackets.

Barrie kept saying, 'it's funny, it's funny, it's really funny. It's larky. We want lots of opportunities for messing about and humour'. So we initially started with 1950s, but then he said he wanted it to be spring-like and fresh colours...

So with this sporting idea for the weapons I kept coming across pictures of women in 1920s tennis dresses. We started talking about the 20s and a country club somewhere in England – a nice setting, inside and out, where people meet – and where Falstaff might tip up thinking ‘I’ll meet some posh people round here’.

## Set and Props

When I’m designing a set for Northern Broadsides there are some basic practicalities to consider. We open the play in the round, but it tours to many different configurations, such as end-on, thrust stage, proscenium arch and traverse.



The image that I used for inspiration was a picture of a country club with a veranda on the front with wooden struts that look a little bit like trees. So when we move out of the round and onto proscenium and end-on staging we made these struts to create a screen for the back of the stage with a gauze behind – that can be lit for day or night, inside or out.

That said, the way that Barrie directs he’s not meticulous about place. It’s a summer’s location, so for much of the play we could be inside or out.

People say where they are in the text, and the props and furniture that are brought on and character’s ownership of the space tells you where you are. There aren’t any big scenic changes. They just disrupt and slow down the action – especially in the round.

I did have fingerposts in an early design that said ‘to the woods’ and ‘to the club’ etc... but that felt too literal and they’ve now gone.

One of the main challenges was the arras. So often in Shakespeare’s plays there’s an arras, for people to hide behind. Hiding places are tricky in the round, but this is a key action in this play. We needed a moveable hiding place that could come on and off the stage, so we came up with the idea of a 1920s seaside changing tent. It also transforms into something later in the play. I won’t say what that is; you’ll have to see the show.

Herne’s Oak was the other challenge. What could it be? Again it had to be moveable and stable, as Barrie has to climb up it. The solution of a tennis umpire’s chair works really well – and is a really nice object that fits with the theme of the play.

This design is full of all the paraphernalia that goes with sports – so we've got bikes, tennis nets, cricket bats and tennis balls and croquet mallets and golf clubs – sometimes being used for their conventional purpose and sometimes with a more creative function.



## Costumes

Once the period of the 1920s was decided, a lot of the costumes fell into place, but there were still a number of challenges to be met.

Falstaff is a famously fat man and Barrie Rutter isn't, so I started looking at fat people and wondering how I could emphasize his size. We are using a fat suit, but it shouldn't really restrict his movement too much. He has a lot of physical comedy to do, and he also has to climb a 'tree' – and the show is on tour for several months.

Barrie said he'd seen lots of Elizabethan/Jacobean productions of this play where the wives were in huge farthingales and look big as Falstaff. Thankfully the 1920s dresses have nice vertical lines and slim female forms, that help to emphasise his size. Plus, everyone could look quite elegant - a purely visual thing, but really nice.

We've had a lot of fun dressing Falstaff. We thought that if he was joining this country club where they were playing tennis and cricket, he might turn up in what he thought of as golf gear that wasn't quite right – something like a flamboyant tweed plus fours suit.

And then there were the 'fairies'. Where to go with that? In our production they're not children, but grown men dressed as fairies so they have to be funny. I found loads of images of 1920s seaside beauty pageants, where they all wear those fantastic stripy swimming suits with mop caps. Things that look like fancy dress, but they are versions of swimwear – so that sent me on a delightful design process.

The swimsuits are mostly being made from scratch. We're using one or two vintage pieces that we've adapted for Anne Page, as her fairy costume becomes her wedding dress so she needs to look pretty.

We've made all the tennis dresses, and it's classic menswear so there's a lot of linen and stripy blazers and cricket trousers. Quite a nice visual language and it all fits together.



## **Profile: Actor, ROY NORTH**

**Roy North is celebrating 50 years in showbiz this year, playing George Page in *The Merry Wives*. It's a role he has played twice before in both of the previous productions by Northern Broadsides.**

**Born Roy Stathers in Hull in 1941, Roy was the son of a fireman. His dad had a very dangerous job, fighting fires during the blitz. Hull was badly bombed during the Second World War and Roy remembers being a very little boy hiding under the stairs as the German planes flew over.**

**It seems a far cry from the life Roy was destined to lead as an actor. We caught up with him during rehearsals to ask him about his long and varied career...**

*"I left school at 16 and went to work as a rat-catcher's clerk at the Guildhall, Hull. I'd got 5 'O' Levels. I went to Hull Grammar, a decent school - but I wasn't that academic.*

*That would have been 1957. Elvis had hit the scene by then, and Bill Haley. Music was exciting. I was a bouncy lad and although I did consider becoming a public health officer, I decided I could do better than 'rat-catcher', so I went for a job at a bank – Lloyds Bank. And at Lloyds Bank there was a woman who ran a drama group. I was always larkin about and she said, 'do you want to do a play?' The play was 'George and Margaret' by Gerald Savory. I've still got the script somewhere.*

*Then in another branch of the bank was a bloke called Roger Chapman – we're still great mates to this day. He was in in another drama group in a posh part of town so I started going there with him.*

*That's when it got quite serious. We used to go in for competitions and festivals in Scarborough and Blackpool, and win shields and trophies. Roger was younger than me but he was quite a precocious boy, and he wrote off to Rose Bruford Drama School. He auditioned, and he got in! He said, 'why don't you come?' So I resigned from the bank, I auditioned and got in as well. The year was 1963.*

*It was a time when a lot of working class kids went to drama school. Not long before that it simply wasn't possible. We could afford to go through grants. I won a scholarship to boost my grant, 45 quid a term – which was quite a bit of extra money.*

*There was a new generation of working class actors coming through. They were pioneers – people like Tom Courtney (also from Hull), Albert Finney, and Ian McKellen too - he's about my age. And of course, the writers were writing parts and plays about working class people. It was the age of what were called 'kitchen sink dramas'. Novels like 'Saturday Night, Sunday Morning' and 'A Kind of Loving' were being adapted for film and stage. The famous playwright, Arnold Wesker, wrote about the working classes in Norfolk.*

**Roy's early life was lived in the shadow of a political cloud that had a big impact on him as a young man. The so-called 'Cold War' between Russia and the Soviet Union and the West was intense during this time, with a nuclear arms race at the centre of it.**

*In the late 50s, it felt quite dangerous – there was the Cuban crisis and the Cold War got really cold. Where I lived, in society it was either the pub or the church you went to for solace.*

*Later on I saw the Cold War for myself. It was while I was still at drama school and I was going out with this lass whose dad was a ship's chandler. She said 'dad might be able to get you a job on the ships'. So me and a mate, after we'd done our first year at Brufords, got on this Greek ship sailing to Archangel (Arkhangelsk) in Russia.*

*We sailed down the White Sea into Archangel and there was a massive placard saying 'peace to the world' in English. We met a lot of Russian kids, and we felt a bit more hopeful after that.*

**Roy came out of drama school in 1966 – the year England won the World Cup. He was 25 years old and he was still called Roy Stathers.**

*An enterprising lad in our year set up a company after drama school. There were ruins at Bolingbroke Castle in Lincolnshire and he put on a festival there – including Shakespeare's 'Henry IV'. He used students from Rose Bruford, and we all got our Equity cards doing that. (At that time you had to do an acting job before you could be a member of the actor's union, Equity.) So - my first gig was a Shakespeare play. The only problem was that on the afternoon of the Football World Cup Final we were doing a matinee!*

*Later that same year I went to do a summer season in Southwold. It was what we used to call weekly rep. You did one play a week, rehearsing the next play while performing in the evening. The shows were in the church hall, and I do remember that there was no way behind the stage to get from left to right. So if you had to make an entrance from the other side to the one you had*

*come off, you had to go outside and round the building - and if it was raining you'd come back on soaking wet.*

*I joined when the season had already started as an Assistant Stage Manager, covering small acting parts. It was very common for young actors to do more than one job in this way. I did have one nice part – playing 'Bentley the butler'. I had to put white boot polish in my hair to make myself look older, and all I had to say was, 'very good sir'. Another good thing about this particular job was that there were lots of glamorous, posh actresses.*

*Then, out of the blue, when I'd only been there a week, I got an audition for a west end musical. At the audition the director offered me the job', so I rang my agent and told her and she said, 'don't be silly dear, you've only just come out of drama school'. But I had got it – and then my agent had the problem of getting me out of the Southwold rep season to do it. Anyway, she did get someone to take my place, and I went and did this show in the west end. It was called 'Robert and Elizabeth' a romantic music. Donald Woolfitt was in it.*

**Donald Woolfitt was a well known actor-manager, famous for Shakespearean roles – especially King Lear. The playwright Ronald Harwood wrote a play called 'The Dresser' inspired by Donald Woolfitt, which was later made into a film, and recently a TV drama with Ian McKellen and Anthony Hopkins. The young actor, Roy Stathers, worked with the great man at the very end of his life.**

*Woolfitt was a big, tired old bear. He used to travel 'incognito' down the street – in a big furry panama hat! I never rehearsed with him. I'd taken over from somebody else, so I used to rehearse with the understudies. We were taken in to meet him on the first night and he said, 'good luck dear boy, and remember to hand me the gloves with the fingers pointing away from me.' It was the last stage show he ever did. He did a television play after 'Robert and Elizabeth' and then he died.*

*I did a year in 'Robert and Elizabeth' and a young actress called Lesley North joined the show on tour in 1967. We'd only known each other three months when we got married and went to live in a bedsitter in Hendon.*

*I'd never really liked my name, Stathers, so when I married Les I decided to take her name instead. Maybe that was unusual, but people in showbiz change their names all the time. The Christmas after we were married Les went into panto in Sheffield and I went to Bradford to do 'The Pied Piper of Hamlyn'. It was harsh winter. I bought a Triumph Herald and rattled the guts out of it on the icy roads.*



*The following year I went into 'The Canterbury Tales' in the West End – and while I was performing in that show I auditioned for the famous actor-director, Victor Spinetti. He was looking for a cast to take 'Hair', the famous American tribal rock musical, to Amsterdam. He said he'd like me to do it, and I suggested my wife, Les. She auditioned and he said he'd like us both to be in it - so off we went. We came back from Amsterdam after seven months and we'd saved a thousand pounds between us. A lot of money. So we put a deposit on a house.*

*The next big thing for me was 'Joseph And The Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat' in the west end - playing Benjamin (quite a starry little part). I had a feeling something could happen and it was during that show I got an audition to be the next straight man to a big TV star of the time – Basil Brush.*



**The Fox puppet, Basil Brush, had been a big hit as a supporting act to a TV magician called David Nixon in the late 1960s. Subsequently Basil got his own show and had a number of human companions, of which Roy North was one. Audiences never saw the actual puppeteer, Ivan Owen, making Basil Brush a very real personality.**

*The Basil Brush Show had been on about 4 years when I got the job. Rodney Bewes (Mr Rodney) did the first series, then Derek Foulds took over (Mr Derek) and it was very successful. I did 4 series from 1973 – 76.*

*It was on after Grandstand on Saturday – a prime time slot in the days when there were only three channels, and the whole nation tuned in together on a Saturday night to watch shows like Dr Who, The Generation Game, and Morecambe and Wise.*

*During my time on the show we got a producer who was more glamour oriented and turned it into more of a variety show. Pop bands and lot of celebs came on. Still the same format, but the producer also did Top of the Pops, so all these pop acts came onto Basil Brush to plug their records.*

**Even after 30 years Roy's success on The Basil Brush Show makes him instantly recognizable to a whole generation who watched him in the 1970s. He is still affectionately known as 'Mr Roy' by many of his friends.**

*I was really keen to be a presenter after Basil, but it never really happened. I did present a show for Granada (ITV) called 'Get it together' – in the late 1970s, and early 80s. I also did some straight presenting – a show about craft, design and technology for kids. I really enjoyed it.*



*Through the 80s I did a lot of commercial touring. There was a company that was really loyal to me and Lesley worked for them as well. Also me and Les ran a guest house in Somerset for a while.*

*Then, in the early 1990s my friend, the actor Eddie Peel, put a word in for me with Barrie Rutter. He was trying to form a theatre company to do a production of 'Richard III'. I'd met Barrie before, when I was on tour with a play in the 1970s, and we were in Edinburgh. Rutter was in 'Macbeth' at another theatre, and I'd gone to see a matinee – he was really good as Macduff. I'd also played showbiz soccer with him in the 70s (when he had a blonde poodle perm). I knew he was from Hull, and we're both fans of Hull Tigers.*

*In 1991 the plan for this Yorkshire 'Richard III' was all coming together, and he said to me, 'if the job's on, you're in'. And sure enough the job was on and he rang me and said, 'you're in'. And that was very thrilling.*

*The company that Barrie formed was called Northern Broadsides. A Broadside is a short sharp shock – and short sharp Northern sounds was what it was all about. And just telling the story, fast and furious, and make it more immediate, and with energy. I remember people saying, 'Shakespeare didn't write that', because we said it so differently, and it was clear.*

*The first production of 'Richard III' had made a big impact, and the company followed it in 1993 with 'The Merry Wives'. In that production I played what I'm playing now, George Page. That was 23 years ago, and I did it again when the company revived the play in 2001.*

**In the time between productions of *The Merry Wives* Roy has appeared many times in Northern Broadsides productions, including 'The Wars of The Roses', 'Henry V', 'Much Ado About Nothing', 'Love's Labour's Lost', 'The Man With Two Gaffers' and 'The Game'. Another role he reprised more than once was that of Peter Quince in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'.**

*For a long time Rutter didn't want to do theatres. He wanted to play a swimming baths in Warrington, a marina, a bus museum in Bradford, cattle markets, stables, tram sheds, mills. It was all 'non-velvet' venues and the costumes were from Oxfam and he'd pick up props from the places we were working. Gritty northern actors swinging chains from mills. It was terrific. Still is.*



**Despite celebrating 50 years in showbiz this year, Roy is still enjoying work and looking forward to the tour.**

*I'm looking forward to it very much. I've got all my digs booked. I try and keep fit, stay well, organise nice digs so I can enjoy the days, when I've got shows in the evening.*

*George Page is such a fun part. He's a kind of feed-man – driving the scenes and making sure other people get the laughs. He's a bit smug, and he's anxious to make sure his daughter marries the right man. But in the end he listens to what Fenton says, so he's all right.*

*Quite a nice chap...*



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### **Some of Roy's previous appearances for Northern Broadsides:**

As Constable Anthony Dull (left of frame) *Love's Labour's Lost* (2012)



As The Reverend (left of frame) in *The Man With Two Gaffers* (2006)



As Peter Quince (centre right) in the first production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1994)

And you can see more of Roy with Basil Brush in the 1970s here:

<http://www.britishclassiccomedy.co.uk/saturday---teatime---laughs---with---the---original---basil---brush>

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## THE MANY WIVES

### Broadsides' past productions

Following the huge success of *Richard III* in 1992, Barrie Rutter and the newly formed Northern Broadsides Theatre Company were under pressure to do another play. In stark contrast to the dark, muscular epic of the hunchback king Barrie chose a populist pot-boiler with two middle-class middle-aged women at the centre of the story.



He dropped the distinctly southern 'of Windsor' from the title and assembled a cast of very fine, northern actors – including Polly Hemingway (Mistress Page) and Elizabeth Estensen (Mistress Ford) - pictured left. Then, as now, Barrie took the role of Falstaff himself.

Of that 1993 cast, two other members return in 2016. Roy North reprises the role he played 23 years ago – George Page; and John Gully has graduated from the hopeless lover, Abraham Slender, to the Welsh clergyman, Sir Hugh Evans.

Conrad Nelson was also in that first company. Now Northern Broadsides' Artistic Development Director, Conrad was the original Host of the Garter. He has composed and directed the music for the 2016 production

The production was a hit and the British Council funded an extension of the tour to take it to India.

The trip to India was a huge success, and audience responses to the play were amazing. Barrie tells a story of one performance in front of an audience of teenage schoolgirls where the subplot of Anne Page's arranged marriage resonated very deeply.

At the end of the play, when Anne has married the man of her choice, for love, the house erupted into cheers. A poignant example of the power of theatre.

The 1992 production of *The Merry Wives* sealed the reputation of Northern Broadsides, and set them on course to be one of the major touring companies in the country.



Jump a few years, and in 2001 Barrie was looking for a companion play to send out on tour with *King John*. Theatre companies are always balancing artistic ambition with financial viability and *King John* is not a well-known Shakespeare play. When putting on an important but less 'sellable' play companies mitigate the loss of revenue by teaming it up with a sure fire hit.

The considerations are not straightforward. Through casting of two plays means that they have to match in terms of numbers and gender/age balance. Happily *The Merry Wives* was a good fit.

*King John* was rehearsed and opened at The Viaduct Theatre in Halifax, and while that was in its first weeks of performance *The Merry Wives* was in rehearsal. Once both shows were open the company took them out on tour, performing both plays in every venue.

Once again Barrie Rutter and Roy North took the roles of Falstaff and George Page respectively. Conrad Nelson polished up his Welsh accent to play Sir Hugh Evans.



Andrew Vincent, who plays Frank Ford in the current production, joined the cast of 2001 to take the role of The Host of The Garter. And Gerard McDermott, who plays Justice Shallow in the current production, was first seen in 2001 as Bardolf. Here he is, pictured left, in his fairytale costume, with Andrew Whitehead as Dr Caius.

On this occasion the roles of the Wives were played by Joanna Swain (Mistress Page), and Maggie Ollerenshaw (Mistress Ford) – pictured below.

Northern Broadsides audiences have seen many actors returning time and time again to perform with the company. With short rehearsal periods it makes sense to have some in the cast who understand the company style and the way of working.



Alongside the experienced actors there is always new, young blood coming through. Those actors whose own process and performance style fit well within the company may find that they graduate, as many have done before, from playing young lovers to filling the more mature roles in future years.

**In *The Merry Wives* 2016 almost all the cast have appeared with the company before. Here's our current cast, with their previous appearances with Northern Broadsides:**

**Barrie Rutter (Falstaff)**

*Richard III, The Merry Wives, Poetry or Bust, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Cracked Pot, The Blood of Dracula, The Passion, Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, Samson Agonistes, The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus, Twelfth Night, King Lear, The Mysteries 2000, Much Ado About Nothing, Alcestis, King John, Oedipus, Macbeth, Henry V, Antigone, The Merchant of Venice, Comedy of Errors, Sweet William, School for Scandal, The Wars of the Roses, The Man With Two Gaffers, The Tempest, Lisa's Sex Strike, Othello, Medea, The Game, We are Three Sisters, Love's Labour's Lost, Rutherford and Son, An August Bank Holiday Lark; King Lear.*

**Becky Hindley (Mistress Ford)**

*Lisa's Sex Strike; Hamlet; We Are Three Sisters.*

**Nicola Sanderson (Mistress Page)**

*A Woman Killed with Kindness; Henry V; The Man with Two Gaffers; King Lear.*

**Helen Sheals (Mistress Quickly)**

*King Lear; The Wars of the Roses; Macbeth; Twelfth Night; A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

**Sarah Eve (Anne Page)**

*This is Sarah's first production for Northern Broadsides.*

**Roy North (Page)**

*Richard III; Merry Wives (1993 & 2001); A Midsummer Night's Dream; Romeo And Juliet; Antony and Cleopatra; Much Ado About Nothing; King John; Henry V; A Woman Killed with Kindness; Wars of the Roses; The Man with Two Gaffers; The Game; Love's Labour's Lost.*

**Andrew Vincent (Frank Ford)**

*Samson Agonistes; Alcestis; King John; Merry Wives (2001); The Cracked Pot; Oedipus; Macbeth; A Woman Killed with Kindness; Henry V; Poetry or Bust; Antigone; Merchant of Venice; Comedy Of Errors; Sweet William; Love's Labour's Lost; King Lear.*

**John Gully (Sir Hugh Evans)**

*King Lear; Wars of the Roses; A Woman Killed with Kindness; Henry V; Much Ado About Nothing; Twelfth Night; The Mysteries; The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus; Romeo and Juliet; The Blood of Dracula; Antony and Cleopatra; A Midsummer Night's Dream; The Merry Wives (1993); Richard III.*

**Andy Cryer (Doctor Caius)**

*A Midsummer Night's Dream; Antony and Cleopatra; Romeo and Juliet; The Passion; Samson Agonistes; Alcestris; The Merchant of Venice; Comedy of Errors; Sweet William; School for Scandal; Wars of the Roses; Othello; The Canterbury Tales; Love's Labour's Lost; The Government Inspector: King Lear; The Winter's Tale.*

**Gerard McDermott (Shallow)**

*A Midsummer Night's Dream; Antony and Cleopatra; Merry Wives; King John; The Bells.*

**Jos Vantylor (Slender)**

*King Lear; The Game; Loves Labours Lost.*

**Mark Stratton (Host)**

*The Tempest, Vacuum; The Wars of the Roses,*

**Al Bollands (Slender)**

*King Lear.*

**Ben Burman (Pistol/William)**

*King Lear; An August Bank Holiday Lark.*

**Josh Moran (Bardolf/Rugby)**

*King Lear, Richard III.*

**Adam Barlow (Fenton/Nim)**

*The Winter's Tale.*



## SECTION 2

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### HISTORY AND CONTEXT

#### NOTES ON THE PLAY

*Dates and sources*



#### WRITING

There is no real agreement on when *The Merry Wives* was written. The play's full title, recorded in 1602 as '*an excellent and pleasant conceited comedy of Sir John Falstaff and The Merry Wives of Windsor*' tells us that Sir John Falstaff was already a star. The character had previously appeared in the two parts of *Henry IV*, and legend has it that the Queen liked him so much that she asked Shakespeare for a play showing 'Falstaff in love'.

This may or may not be true - along with another story that it was written for a specific occasion in 1597 to celebrate the election of five new Knights of the Garter. For many years there has been a consensus that in 1597 Shakespeare broke off from work on *Henry IV Part 2* to write *The Merry Wives* in haste (about 2 weeks). This idea probably stuck because chronologically in the (fictitious) life of Falstaff the action of *The Merry Wives* takes place after *Henry IV Part 2* and before *Henry V*, in which the character is reported to have died.

However, a more recent proposition is that the Queen may have asked for another Falstaff play after the character failed to make a promised reappearance in *Henry V*. This play was almost certainly written in 1599, which scuppers the theory that Shakespeare wrote *The Merry Wives* in 1597 - along with the fact that the title does not appear in an official list of his plays that appeared in 1598.

Moreover, it's not impossible for a writer to revisit the early life of a character they have killed off. For example (spoiler alert) after the latest instalment of the Star Wars films - *The Force Awakens* - there is now a film planned depicting the early life of the young Han Solo.

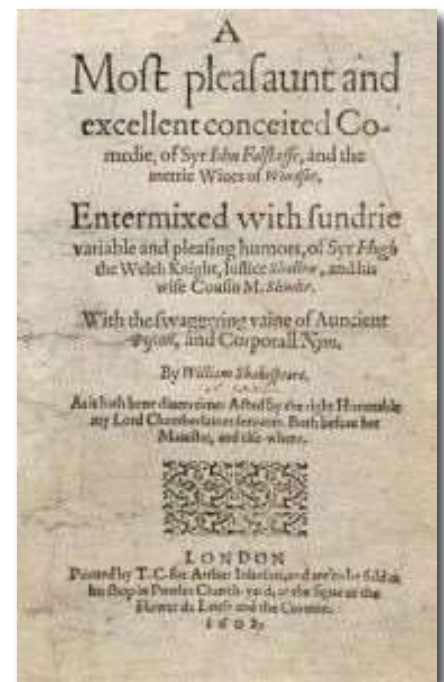
The true date of the writing of *The Merry Wives* will probably never be known, not least because it's quite possible that Shakespeare wrote bits of it at

different times and finally put the whole thing together around 1600. The fact that the play is mostly in prose with snatches of verse here and there supports the notion that there may have been a separate piece written earlier, perhaps to celebrate the induction of Knights of the Garter. This was then grafted onto a longer, earthy, prose comedy at a later date. The story of the publications may bear this out. And if the legend that the play was written in haste is true this recycling of material would be a quick and economical way of producing work under pressure.

## PUBLICATION

First published in a form known as the Quarto in 1602. This text was much shorter than the later Folio of 1623. The Quarto was an individual text of a recently performed new script, whereas the Folio was a collection of all Shakespeare's plays in one volume, published some years after his death in 1616.

In the Folio *The Merry Wives* appears among the 'Comedies', and this text is regarded as the most complete and authoritative - although there are some interesting features of the Quarto that give us clues as to how Shakespeare might have adapted his work for different performances and audiences. He was, after all, a man of the theatre, making a living, and therefore probably not focusing very much on literary posterity.



## PERFORMANCE

The front page of the Quarto of 1602 (above) claims that the play had been performed on many occasions 'both before Her Majestie and else-where'. A play was never published before it was performed, so it's certain that *The Merry Wives* had been presented in some form before the Quarto came out. However, the first exact date on which we can be sure the play was performed was not until 1604 when The Revels Accounts record that the King's Men presented 'A Play of the Merry Wives of Windsor' in the Banqueting Hall at Whitehall on November 4th. The King's Men were Shakespeare's own company of actors. Following the death of Queen Elizabeth I earlier in 1604, and the succession of James I, they now enjoyed Royal patronage.

Records get lost and can be misleading, but it's clear that this was a popular play from the start and the existence of more than one version of the text may indicate that the playwright himself reworked it to suit different occasions.

Notably, *The Merry Wives* was among the first plays performed after the theatres were reopened following the Restoration of Charles II. Oliver Cromwell famously closed theatres as he considered them to be dens of iniquity. The famous diarist Samuel Pepys records seeing the play on 5th December 1660 - though he found it a bit old fashioned. He notes that he didn't like it any better when he saw it again in 1661, and again in 1667 - '*which did not please me at all, in no part of it*'.

Despite Pepys' damning critique, and the divided scholarly opinion on its qualities, the play has enjoyed enduring popularity to the present day. In the 18th Century a 27 year old actor called James Quin took the role of Falstaff at Lincoln's Inn Fields and was so successful that he went on to play the part no fewer than 153 times until his retirement in 1751.

His performance is immortalised in a number of different 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century versions of a porcelain statuette of Falstaff, made in the likeness of James Quin.



## SOURCES

Shakespeare wasn't particularly inventive when it came to plots. His stories can generally be traced to some other source of inspiration. His history plays were largely drawn from a work known as Holinshed's Chronicles - which was creatively composed and historically unreliable, particularly in relation to figures such as Richard III and Macbeth.

The character of Falstaff was inspired by two characters from Holinshed, but more of him later.

The multi-stranded plot of *The Merry Wives* can be traced speculatively to a number of sources with which Shakespeare would have been familiar. He appears to have collated a number of stories under his principle theme of 'the deceiver deceived'.

One of the most likely sources is an Italian novella - the second in a collection known as *Il pecorone* by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino. We know Shakespeare knew of this collection because he borrows from another of its stories for the plot of *The Merchant of Venice*. In this instance the story reflects that of Ford's in *The Merry Wives*. A young student who learns from his Master the art of seduction. His first conquest is a married woman, and when he reports the assignation his teacher becomes suspicious. The master follows the pupil to the house of his lover and, finding it to be his own house, knocks as soon as the young man is inside. The wife answers and the student escapes in a laundry basket. When the student next sees his master he unwittingly reveals how he escaped. On the next occasion the cuckolded husband attacks the laundry basket, but the

student has already escaped by another means. In Shakespeare's play the women keep their honesty, and the jealous husband seeks out Falstaff in disguise but the parallels are clear.

The stories of young lovers who deceive their parents and elope are too numerous to speculate where Shakespeare got inspiration for Anne Page's dilemma. Her many suitors mirrors the situation of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, but there are also similarities with other Shakespeare heroines, including Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*. The happy fate of these heroines might also have been Juliet's, but for the mistiming of a letter.

The characters of Falstaff, Pistol, Nim, Bardolf, Mistress Quickly, and Justice Shallow are all fugitives from other plays. More of them next...

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## FALSTAFF'S FATE, and other stories...



**SIR JOHN FALSTAFF** first appeared in Shakespeare's history play *Henry IV Part 1*. In early performances of the play it is believed that the character was called Sir John Oldcastle – a real, historical figure and a knight who featured in the campaigns of King Henry IV against the Welsh.

Oldcastle was also a member of an early Christian Protestant movement called the Lollards. This was in the 1400s, before the Reformation, when England was a Roman Catholic country. However, Oldcastle was a friend of the new King, Henry V, and so for a time escaped prosecution for heresy. Eventually his actions and the evidence against him caught up with him and he was tried and executed.

It's not clear why Shakespeare would caricature Sir John Oldcastle as a fat and dissolute knight – when the historical figure clearly was quite the opposite. Also, in the reign of Elizabeth, Oldcastle would be viewed as a Protestant martyr. Then again, Shakespeare was never one to let the facts get in the way of a great story, and the position of Oldcastle in the inner circle of the young Prince Hal probably just gave the poet a name and rank for a largely fictitious character. Nevertheless it's clear that descendants of Oldcastle objected to this portrayal in the play and Shakespeare was obliged to change the character's name.

The name 'Falstaff' probably came from an earlier play of Shakespeare's – the first of his trilogy on the life of Henry VI. In this play the English hero, Talbot, asks for the degradation of a knight called 'Falstaffe' recently elected to the

Order of the Garter, but guilty of cowardice and desertion. Although the 'Falstaffe' of Henry VI was not the same character, and disgraced long after the life and death of Prince Hal's drinking buddy, we may assume that Shakespeare's imagination found it as good a name as any with which to replace the offending 'Oldcastle'.

In *Henry IV Part 2* time has moved on and the story focuses more closely on Prince Hal's journey towards becoming King. Falstaff is leading a drunken, dishonest existence amongst the London lowlife. The play portrays Prince Hal's gradual separation from his old friend, and at the end of the story utterly rejects him.



At the end of *Henry IV Part 2* there is an epilogue promising more from Sir John in a future play, *Henry V*. However, when Shakespeare actually sat down to write that play his imagination and his craft took him in a different direction and Falstaff does not appear. His death of a fever is merely reported by Mistress Quickly – 'the king has killed his heart'.

Perhaps Shakespeare was surprised by the disappointment felt by audiences not to see the fat knight in *Henry V*. Perhaps the Queen did ask at some point to see a play depicting 'Falstaff in love'. Probably, he didn't have room for him in *Henry V*, but hadn't finished with him as a character.



**MISTRESS (Neil) QUICKLY** appears in *Henry IV (Parts 1 and 2)* and *Henry V*. In all three of these plays she is the keeper of an inn called 'The Boar's Head Tavern' in Eastcheap, London.

She is close friends with a prostitute called Doll Tearsheet, and whilst she joins in with Falstaff's drunken antics she also complains of the debts he runs up in her establishment. She is married in *Henry IV Part 1*, though her husband is never seen, and then apparently widowed in *Part 2*. By the start of *Henry V* she is remarried - to Pistol. While in France, Pistol receives a letter telling him that his 'Doll' has died of syphilis. However it's not clear whether this refers to Mistress Quickly or Doll Tearsheet.



**PISTOL** doesn't appear until the *Henry IV Part 2*, but he makes it into *Henry V*. He is an archetypal bragging soldier, one of the dissolute rabble that follow Sir John Falstaff, and a drinking buddy of the young Prince Hal. He shares in the fat knight's banishment from the newly crowned King.

At the start of *Henry V* Pistol has married Mistress Quickly – much to the chagrin of his rival in love, Corporal Nim. He follows the King to the wars in France where he finds himself embroiled in a feud with a Welshman called Fluellen - a dispute he loses, and is famously forced to eat a raw leek. He also finds himself pleading for the life of his friend, Bardolf, who has been caught thieving from a French church. Pistol survives the French campaign, but becomes disillusioned and resolves to desert and return to his old ways back in England.

**BARDOLF** is the only other character apart from Mistress Quickly that appears in all four plays, *Henry IV (Parts 1 and 2)*, *Henry V* and *The Merry Wives*. One of Falstaff's entourage, Bardolf is a known thief, and a friend of the young Prince Hal. He is teased mercilessly by all for his red and spotty complexion. It is very poignant in *Henry V* when the King hears that a thief called Bardolf has been hanged for breaking his command not to rob the conquered French people. Henry receives the news impassively, but the audience understands the weight of responsibility that is upon him as King.

**NIM** appears in just one other play – *Henry V*. He has been a rival for the love of Mistress Quickly and is angry at the beginning of the play to discover that she has married Pistol. Nim goes to France with Pistol and Bardolf, where he too is hanged for looting.

**JUSTICE SHALLOW** is a Gloucestershire magistrate, who crops up in *Henry IV Part 2*, where he is conned by Sir John Falstaff. The gullible Shallow is impressed by the fat knight, and lends him a large sum of money on the strength of his connections to the young prince. However, when Henry IV dies the newly crowned Henry V rejects Falstaff, who then doesn't have the means to pay back the money he has borrowed.

## SECTION 3

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### STUDY



### ENGLISH

#### THE LETTER as a narrative device

In our time of instant communication over any distance, the written letter has lost some of the power it once had. We still receive official letters from hospitals and the taxman – but for every day personal communication we use phone, text and email. In Shakespeare's day the letter was the only means of private communication and documents would be sealed with a personal insignia, imprinted in wax to confirm the identity of the sender - and also to ensure that letters could not be tampered with.

In *The Merry Wives* the initial device that sets the story off are the two identical letters. Each letter in itself is insulting enough to a married woman, but the fact that he has sent the same one to two women compounds Falstaff's cheek and disrespect, and justifies every punishment and indignity that the Wives devise for him.

Letters appear many times in Shakespeare's plays...

In *Twelfth Night* a letter is a comic device. Forged by the maid, Maria, in Lady Olivia's hand, this letter convinces the conceited servant, Malvolio, that his mistress is in love with him. The letter instructs him to reveal that he returns her love by dressing in an outlandish way and smiling constantly. The result is highly comic, but the mood darkens when Malvolio's bizarre behaviour causes him to be imprisoned for madness.

In *Romeo and Juliet* a crucial letter does not arrive in time and Romeo kills himself thinking Juliet is dead, and not merely in a deathlike sleep. She wakes to find her lover's body and also commits suicide.

In *Hamlet*, the Danish prince performs a switch – replacing his own name on orders to execute him with those of his companions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In this case Hamlet has a royal insignia with which to authentically reseal the document.

## **TASK - Creative Writing**

Write a short story in which a means of written communication (letter, text or email) is central to the plot.

Here are a few things to think about before you start writing:

- What means of written communication will you choose and why?
- Does your story hinge on communication that arrives, or not?
- Is it a message that is received, but misunderstood?
- How might misunderstanding occur?
- Who is the sender?
- Who is the receiver?
- Who is the messenger, if it's a letter? How do they fit in?
- Are other characters affected by the consequences of the communication/miscommunication?

### ***Is your story funny or sad? A Tragedy or a Comedy?***

You should think about what kind of genre you'd like to write. Here are a few suggestions:

- Romance
- Horror
- Action Hero
- Western
- Family drama
- Historical

### **Consider structuring your story in three parts:**

#### **Part 1 Set up it up**

Introduce characters and the premise for the story.

#### **Part 2 Shake it up**

Relate the impact of the communication/miscommunication on the characters and the plot. Towards the end of this section you should be at the climax of your story.

#### **Part 3 Sort it out**

Now explore the consequences of what has happened and resolve the story (or not, if irreparable damage had been done).

### ***Now get writing...***

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## **TASK - Questions for discussion and essays**

Here are a few suggestions for a more advanced analysis of Shakespeare's play.

- A key theme in *The Merry Wives* is that of the 'deceiver deceived'. How does Shakespeare explore this theme in the play?
  - Sir John Falstaff has been a popular character ever since he first appeared on the Elizabethan stage. What do you consider to be engaging about the way Shakespeare represents Falstaff in *The Merry Wives*? You can consider two or more episodes in the play.
  - What is Mistress Quickly's function in the *The Merry Wives*? How does her character help to move the play forward to its resolution?
  - *The Merry Wives* is most written in prose. Consider the few verse sections of the play. Why might Shakespeare have used verse form for these sections? Were his choices purely artistic, or can you find other possible explanations through researching the background to the play?
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## **DRAMA (Devising)**

### **Exploring the themes of deceit and revenge through drama.**

Shakespeare rarely (if ever) deceives the audience. When characters lie they tell us they're going to do it in advance. Everything is in the words – even the subtext.

If we consider Shakespeare's famous liars – villains such as Richard III, Iago in *Othello*, or Edmund in *King Lear* – they always share their evil intentions with the audience, and then we watch them feign friendship, and lie and cheat their way to their objectives.

In *The Merry Wives*, we know that Falstaff's romantic intentions are never sincere because he tells us what he's up to. Similarly, we are in on the Wives' plot to get their own back. We also know that 'Brook' is really Ford in disguise and that Anne Page is in love with Fenton. In fact all the comedy and

enjoyment for the audience depends on them being completely 'in the know' about everyone.

Modern dramatists rarely use the device of the soliloquy, and use other methods to tell audiences when characters are lying. Some genres, such as detective stories, succeed when the audience is as much deceived as the characters.

This exercise examines ways of dramatizing deceit and how different choices result in different effects for an audience.

## **TASK**

In groups create a scenario in which a deceiver is him/herself deceived – when those who have been victims of the deceiver turn the tables.

**Here are some ideas to get you thinking:**

- A practical joker is pranked
- A thief is robbed
- A backstabber is stabbed in the back
- A gossip becomes the victim of false rumour

Improvise some scenes around the characters and story you have created.

**Depending on the size of your group, here are some things to think about:**

- Who is the main character (the deceiver)?
- Who are the victims of the deceiver?
- What is the nature of their revenge?
- Where does the action take place?
- When does the action take place?
- Are there any other characters in the story?

**It might help to think of your drama as being constructed in three parts:**

- **Set it up**
  - *Depict the bad behaviour of the deceiver, and the scene in which the victims plot revenge*
- **Shake it up**
  - *Depict the deceiver getting a taste of his or her own medicine*
- **Sort it out**
  - *Depict the consequences of the story – which may be tragic, comic or even moral, depending on the choices you have made.*

Share your work with other groups and discuss.

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## **Credits and links**

Production and rehearsal photos: Nobby Clark  
Design drawings and model: Lis Evans

Other Images sourced at:

<http://www.britishclassiccomedy.co.uk/saturday-teatime-laughs-with-the-original-basil-brush>

<http://www.thewonderfulworldofgarybond.com/memories-of-gary.html>

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O165889/james-quin-as-falstaff-figure-william-duesbury-co/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Merry\\_Wives\\_of\\_Windsor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Merry_Wives_of_Windsor)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured\\_picture\\_candidates/Elizabeth I of England - Darnley Portrait](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_picture_candidates/Elizabeth_I_of_England_-_Darnley_Portrait)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_IV,\\_Part\\_2](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_IV,_Part_2)

Recommended reading –

***The North Face of Shakespeare: Activities for Teaching the Plays***

James Stredder (with a foreword by Cicely Berry)

***Shakespeare on Toast: Getting a Taste for the Bard***

Ben Crystal

Information and education pack written and compiled by  
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