

**A Guide to
THE MERRY WIVES
OF WINDSOR**

by William Shakespeare



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Setting the scene

Shakespeare probably wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in 1597-9, when he was in his early thirties. Having started his career as a novice actor ten years or so before, he was by now the principal playwright for London's leading theatre company; his achievements to date included *Richard II*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He and his fellow company members were soon to set up the renowned Globe Theatre on the south bank of the Thames.

The Merry Wives of Windsor was an immediate success with the theatre-going public. The outsize figure of Falstaff, recently introduced in *Henry IV, Part I*, was already a guaranteed crowd-pleaser; and the play's exuberant, farcical nature and cast of colourful characters ensured its continuing popularity.

In 1642, twenty-six years after Shakespeare's death, civil war was looming, and the London theatres were forced to shut down by decree of the Puritan-dominated Parliament. They remained closed for nearly twenty years: many, including the Globe, were demolished. Even then, however, theatre did not die out altogether. Brief, comical sketches known as 'drolls' – usually adapted from old plays – were presented, often surreptitiously, in taverns and private houses. One of the most popular drolls included scenes from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* featuring Falstaff: it was called *The Bouncing Knight*. And when the theatres were allowed to reopen in 1660, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was one of the first plays to be staged.

In some ways, *Merry Wives* is unlike any other play by Shakespeare. The setting is contemporary, not historical; the characters are, for the most part, everyday citizens; and the location is domestic small-town England, not a far-flung city or the court of an imaginary ruler.

“The Merry Wives of Windsor is not one of Shakespeare's greatest plays; it lacks stirring poetry and monumental characters ... However, it presents a delightfully picturesque view of 16th-century rural life. An expertly plotted farce that ranges from gentle charm to high hilarity, it deploys a dozen splendid comic characters in a world of solid virtue that is exemplified by its commendable though understated heroines. As such, the play has been appreciated by generations of theatregoers.”

Charles Boyce, *Shakespeare A to Z*, 1990

A troublesome visitor

Windsor: a pleasant, prosperous small town, twenty miles west of London, surrounded by farms and parkland. For the Pages and the Fords, citizens of the town, life is comfortable and stable. Queen Elizabeth has been on the throne for forty years: and although the Queen and her entourage are regular residents at nearby Windsor Castle, the townsfolk generally go about their lives unaffected by the goings-on at court.

The town's other inhabitants include Caius, a hot-blooded French doctor; his talkative housekeeper, Mistress Quickly; Hugh Evans, a well-meaning but incomprehensible Welsh clergyman, given the respectful title Sir Hugh; and the hearty, affable host of the local inn. Among the town's temporary residents are Justice Shallow, a self-important magistrate from Gloucestershire, and his dim-witted young relative Slender.

One visitor in particular, however, threatens to disrupt the harmony of everyday life in Windsor: an impoverished aristocrat from London, disreputable, gross and utterly shameless, his name is Sir John Falstaff. He and his shady gang of followers, always on the lookout for easy money, have already committed a number of petty crimes. But Falstaff has a much grander scheme in mind to separate the citizens of Windsor from their money: and he is keen to put it into practice as soon as possible.

Curtain up

A lucrative prospect

I, i – ii

In a street in Windsor, Robert Shallow, an elderly magistrate, is complaining to the local parson, Hugh Evans. His grievance is with an infamous debauched aristocrat, Sir John Falstaff.

Shallow is determined to see Falstaff punished to the full extent of the law. He is keenly aware of his own importance in the legal world, as is his impressionable young relative Abraham Slender:

Shallow: Sir Hugh, persuade me not:¹ I will make a Star Chamber² matter of it. If he were twenty Sir John Falstaffs, he shall not abuse Robert Shallow esquire.

Slender: In the County of Gloucester, Justice of Peace and Coram.³

Shallow: Ay, cousin Slender, and Custalorum.⁴

Slender: ... and a gentleman born, master parson, who writes himself *Armigero*, in any bill, warrant, quittance, or obligation – *Armigero*.⁵

¹ *don't try to talk me out of it*

² *the highest, most powerful court in the country*

³ *quorum; magistrate whose presence is officially required at certain trials*

⁴ *keeper of the local records*

⁵ *who can sign legal documents with a Latin title demonstrating that he is a gentleman with his own coat of arms*

Shallow and Slender discuss their family's coat of arms proudly, but their boasts are lost on Sir Hugh, who appears to think that they are talking about clothing. Changing the subject, Sir Hugh offers to help Shallow by mediating in his dispute with Falstaff. However, Shallow is not interested in reconciliation: if he were younger, he claims, he would resolve the matter with his sword.

Sir Hugh, disapproving of violence, steers the conversation to a different topic. He mentions that George Page, a citizen of Windsor, has a daughter named Anne; she would make an excellent wife for young Abraham Slender.

If he were twenty Sir John Falstaffs ...

When *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was first performed, Falstaff was already a great favourite following his introduction in Shakespeare's recent and highly successful *Henry IV, Part I*. He had become a well-known figure both to courtly audiences and to those at the public open-air theatres:

"Shakespeare knew what he was doing in beginning as he did. For an audience familiar with Henry IV, Part I the mere mention of Falstaff in the first speech would have been full of promise, catching their attention at once – a matter of prime importance on the open stage of the Elizabethan theatre, where there were no lights to go down."

G. R. Hibbard, Commentary on the Penguin Classics edition of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 1973

Sir Hugh's heavy Welsh accent and convoluted manner of speaking, along with Slender's slow-wittedness, make communication difficult, but the message is clear. Anne's grandfather has left her a large sum of money which she will inherit when she reaches the age of seventeen:

Slender: Mistress Anne Page? She has brown hair, and speaks small¹ like a woman?

Evans: It is that ferry person for all the 'orld, as just as you will desire, and seven hundred pounds of moneys, and gold, and silver, is her grandsire upon his death's-bed – Got² deliver to a joyful resurrections! – give, when she is able to overtake seventeen years old. It were a goot motion,³ if we leave our pribbles and prabbles,⁴ and desire a marriage between Master Abraham and Mistress Anne Page.

Slender: Did her grandsire leave her seven hundred pound?

Evans: Ay, and her father is make her a petter penny.⁵

¹ with a quiet, high-pitched voice

² God

³ good idea

⁴ squabbles, petty arguments

⁵ will provide her with even more money

Shallow agrees that the marriage would be very advantageous, and suggests that they speak to Master Page. As it happens, the three of them are outside Page's house at the moment; moreover, Falstaff is currently a guest with the Page household. Urging Shallow to keep his temper despite his quarrel with Sir John, the parson knocks at the door.

An invitation to dinner

George Page greets his visitors. Before inviting them in, he mentions to Shallow that he is aware of Falstaff's misdemeanours, and hopes to smooth things over between them. At this moment, however, Falstaff himself emerges from Page's house. He dismisses Shallow's accusations abruptly:

Falstaff: Now, Master Shallow, you'll complain of me to the King?

Shallow: Knight, you have beaten my men, killed my deer and broke open my lodge.¹ ... This shall be answered.²

Falstaff: I will answer it straight: I have done all this. That is now answered.

¹ *broken into my gamekeeper's cottage*

² *accounted for, examined in a court of law*

It emerges that Falstaff's unruly companions have also been disrupting life in Windsor. The three of them have robbed Slender, adding insult to injury:

Falstaff: ... Slender, I broke your head. What matter have you against me?

Slender: Marry, sir, I have matter in my head against you, and against your cony-catching rascals,¹ Bardolph, Nim and Pistol. They carried me to the tavern and made me drunk, and afterward picked my pocket.

¹ *literally, rabbit catchers; con men, cheats*

... *your cony-catching rascals* ...

Crime was rife in the towns and cities of Elizabethan England, and policing was limited and ineffective. Public places such as markets, fairs and inns were plagued by a bewildering array of crooks, fraudsters and thieves, frequently working in teams. The sheer diversity of the criminal underworld is reflected in the vocabulary of the time:

foist: a pickpocket who often stalked victims and used elaborate distraction techniques

nip: a thief who cut through purse strings with a *cuttle-bung* (small knife)

gull, cony, cousin: potential victim

barnacle: accomplice who created a diversion during a gambling session to facilitate cheating

fullams, bristles, cinque-deuces: types of loaded dice

hooker, angler, curber: thieves who used long hooked poles to steal curtains or other items through open windows

whipjack: fraudulent beggar carrying a counterfeit document stating that he had been involved in a shipwreck

The three ruffians address Slender threateningly. Sir Hugh tries to calm the situation, promising that he, along with two other citizens of Windsor, will arbitrate in the dispute. Falstaff asks his companions whether they are guilty of stealing Slender's money, and they all proclaim their innocence. Unable to remember exactly what happened, Slender vows to be more careful in the future. The parson approves:

Slender: I'll ne'er be drunk whilst I live again, but in honest, civil, godly company, for this trick. If I be drunk, I'll be drunk with those that have the fear of God, and not with drunken knaves.

Evans: So Got 'udge me,¹ that is a virtuous mind.

¹ *as God is my judge*

Page's wife Meg now comes out to greet the visitors, along with her daughter Anne and her friend Mistress Ford. Page urges everyone to come indoors and join his family for dinner.

The assembled company enters Page's house: but young Slender, overcome with anxiety at the sight of his prospective fiancée Anne Page, remains outside. Alarmed at the thought of having to make conversation with her, he asks his servant Simple for help. Perhaps a book of love poetry will help or, failing that, a collection of witty sayings:

Slender: I had rather than forty shillings I had my book of *Songs and Sonnets* here.
[enter *Simple*]
How now, Simple, where have you been? I must wait on myself, must I? You have not the *Book of Riddles* about you?

Shallow and Sir Hugh come out of Page's house, and urge Slender to join them inside. They are keen to arrange a formal engagement between the young man and the soon-to-be wealthy Anne Page, but it is not clear whether the slow-witted Slender understands what is expected of him, despite his obedient answers. Sir Hugh's obscure turn of phrase does not help:

Evans: But can you affection the 'oman? Let us command to know that of your mouth, or of your lips – for diverse philosophers hold that the lips is parcel of the mouth. Therefore, precisely, can you carry your good will to the maid?

Shallow: Cousin Abraham Slender, can you love her?

Slender: I hope, sir, I will do as it shall become one that would do reason.

Evans: Nay, Got's lords and his ladies, you must speak possitable¹ ...

¹ *positively*

Eventually Slender promises that he will marry the girl. He suggests, in his clumsy manner, that an affectionate relationship may eventually develop between them:

Slender: I will marry her, sir, at your request. But if there be no great love in the beginning, yet heaven may decrease¹ it upon better acquaintance, when we are married, and have more occasion to know one another. I hope upon familiarity will grow more contempt.² But if you say marry her, I will marry her ...

¹ *increase*

² *content*

At this point Anne Page herself comes out of the house, and asks the three men to join them for dinner. Shallow and Sir Hugh go inside, but Slender again lingers nervously outside the door. He attempts unsuccessfully to engage Anne in conversation. Sending his servant Simple away, he remarks that he has to live fairly modestly, at least until he inherits his parents' wealth. Anne, uninterested, repeats that his presence is requested indoors:

Slender: I keep but three men¹ and a boy yet, till my mother be dead. But what though,² yet I live like a poor gentleman born.

Anne: I may not go in without your worship: they will not sit till you come.

¹ *I have only three manservants*

² *despite that*

Hearing some dogs barking indoors, Slender turns to the subject of bear-baiting, an activity that he loves. Anne does not share his enthusiasm, and is unimpressed by his boast that he has come close to one of the most famous bears in the country:

Slender: Be there bears¹ i'the town?

Anne: I think there are, sir; I heard them talked of.

Slender: I love the sport well ... You are afraid if you see the bear loose, are you not?

Anne: Ay indeed, sir.

Slender: That's meat and drink to me now. I have seen Sackerson² loose twenty times, and have taken him by the chain ...

¹ *bear-baiting arenas*

² *a famous fighting bear*

I have seen Sackerson loose twenty times ...

The Globe Theatre, owned by Shakespeare's acting company, was situated in Southwark, just outside the City of London. The area was home to many taverns and brothels, as well as a number of theatres. Another attraction was the Bear Garden, where bears, usually chained to a post, would be pitted against ferocious dogs, or taunted by men with whips. Occasionally a bear would break free, causing uproar amongst the audience. Some bears became famous for their resilience and courage, and were given nicknames by regular patrons.

Although the activity seems barbaric now, bear-baiting was hugely popular in Tudor England; Queen Elizabeth, for example, was very keen on it, as had been her father, King Henry VIII. When the activity started to fall out of fashion, official attempts were made to sustain it:

"... the 'sport', faced with the new craze of the theatre, was in decline. To support it, in 1591, the authorities decreed that no theatrical performances should take place on a Thursday, to give the bear-pits a clear run."

Nicholas Fogg, *Hidden Shakespeare*, 2013

The awkward exchange is brought to an end when George Page emerges from his house and demands cheerfully that Slender join them for dinner. The young man timidly asks Anne to go in first, while she insists that he should lead the way. Unwilling to cause offence, Slender finally goes in to join the others.

A short while later, Sir Hugh briefly leaves the dinner party to talk to Slender's servant Simple. The parson has thought of someone who may help to bring Slender and Anne Page together. Doctor Caius, a French physician who now lives in Windsor, has a housekeeper, Mistress Quickly: she is a close acquaintance of Anne's, and may be able to persuade the young woman to look favourably on Slender.

The parson has written a note to Mistress Quickly asking for her help. In his usual convoluted way, he instructs Simple to deliver the message:

Evans: ... give her this letter. For it is a 'oman that altogether's acquaintance with Mistress Anne Page, and the letter is to desire, and require her, to solicit your master's¹ desires to Mistress Anne Page. I pray you be gone; I will make an end of my dinner, there's pippins² and cheese to come.

¹ *Slender's*

² *apples*

Falstaff's scheme

I, iii

Despite his aristocratic status, Sir John Falstaff is perennially short of money. He and his three attendants are staying at the Garter Inn in Windsor, and Falstaff is concerned at the amount he is paying for their board and lodging. To help his finances, the host of the Garter agrees to take on Bardolph, one of Falstaff's companions, to serve in the tavern.

The host makes it clear to his new employee that fleecing the customers is part of the job:

Host: ... Let me see thee froth¹ and lime.² I am at a word,³ follow.

Falstaff: Bardolph, follow him. A tapster is a good trade: an old cloak makes a new jerkin;⁴ a withered servingman,⁵ a fresh tapster. Go, adieu.

¹ *make sure there is a large head of foam, to reduce the amount of beer served*

² *adulterate old, sour wine to make it more palatable*

³ *I am as good as my word; I'll keep my promise*

⁴ *jacket*

⁵ *attendant, manservant*

When Bardolph is out of earshot, Falstaff remarks that he will not be missed. As a thief, Bardolph was becoming unreliable, he complains:

Falstaff: I am glad I am so acquit¹ of this tinderbox.² His thefts were too open: his filching was like an unskilful singer, he kept not time.

Nim: The good humour³ is to steal at a minute's rest.⁴

¹ *rid*

² *referring to Bardolph's red nose and inflamed complexion*

³ *the right method*

⁴ *quickly, and at just the right time, like taking a brief pause during a piece of music*

Falstaff tells his remaining two companions, Nim and Pistol, that he has a plan to get himself out of his current financial difficulties. Brushing aside Pistol's jibe at his bloated belly, he explains that Mistress Ford, a friend of the Page family, is clearly attracted to him:

Falstaff: My honest lads, I will tell you what I am about.

Pistol: Two yards, and more.

Falstaff: No quips now, Pistol. – Indeed I am in the waist two yards about, but I am now about no waste: I am about thrift. Briefly, I do mean to make love to ¹ Ford's wife. I spy entertainment in her: ² she discourses, she carves, ³ she gives the leer of invitation.

¹ *pursue, make advances to*

² *I can tell that she responds to my company*

³ *she talks to me, and treats me hospitably*

Ford is a wealthy man, and it is rumoured that his wife controls the family's money. Falstaff reveals that, as the first step in his pursuit of Mistress Ford, he has written a letter ready to be delivered to her. However, she is not his only target. Mistress Page, too, seems to find him irresistible:

Falstaff: O, she did so course o'er my exteriors, ¹ with such a greedy intention, that the appetite of her eye did seem to scorch me up like a burning glass. ²

¹ *run her eye over my features*

² *like a magnifying glass concentrating the sun's rays*

Falstaff intends to pursue Mistress Page too, and has a further letter prepared for her. He revels in the prospect of gaining access to her wealth, as well as that of Mistress Ford:

Falstaff: ... she is a region in Guiana, all gold and bounty. I will be cheaters ¹ to them both, and they shall be exchequers ² to me. They shall be my East and West Indies, and I will trade to them both.

¹ *official in charge of royal estates*

² *treasuries, banks*

Handing one letter to Nim, and the other to Pistol, Falstaff instructs them to deliver the letters to the two wives straight away. The future looks bright for all three of them, he declares excitedly. However, his companions' reaction comes as a shock: they both feel that acting as a go-between is beneath their dignity, and flatly refuse to take part in their master's plan.

Giving the letters instead to Robin, his young page-boy, Falstaff angrily dismisses his two attendants:

Falstaff: Rogues, hence, avaunt!¹ Vanish like hailstones, go!
Trudge, plod away o'th' hoof, seek shelter, pack!

¹ *be gone*

Falstaff storms away. Nim and Pistol, resentful at being rejected so high-handedly, decide to take revenge by revealing Falstaff's plans to the two women's husbands. Pistol becomes poetic as he envisages breaking the news to Master Page, and Nim vows to persuade Master Ford to take drastic action:

Nim: I will discuss the humour¹ of this love to Ford.

Pistol: And I to Page shall eke² unfold
How Falstaff, varlet vile,
His dove will prove,³ his gold will hold,
And his soft couch defile.⁴

Nim: My humour shall not cool: I will incense Ford to deal
with poison, I will possess him with yellowness⁵ ...

¹ *disclose the nature*

² *also*

³ *will test the fidelity of his beloved wife*

⁴ *will desecrate his matrimonial bed*

⁵ *jealousy*

An unreliable ally

I, iv

A visitor has arrived at doctor Caius' house. It is Slender's servant Peter Simple, sent by the parson to enlist the help of the Frenchman's housekeeper Mistress Quickly.

The doctor is not at home at the moment. Mistress Quickly allows Simple into the house, but is uneasy; the doctor is notoriously short-tempered, and is likely to start a quarrel with the young servant. At first, she cannot recall who Slender is, but eventually remembers him, and agrees that he will be a good match for Anne. She promises she will try to persuade Anne to look on him favourably.

The conversation is cut short as doctor Caius comes home unexpectedly. Mistress Quickly hurriedly bundles Simple into a closet and puts on an innocent air, singing to herself as her master comes in. Irascible as ever, the doctor tells her to stop singing, and orders her to fetch a box from the closet. He is in a hurry, and is about to go out again. However, at the last minute he realises that he has forgotten something:

Caius: 'Od's me, *qu'ai-je oublié?*¹ Dere is some simples²
in my closet dat I will not for the varld I shall leave
behind.

Mistress Quickly: Ay me, he'll find the young man there, and be
mad!

¹ *God save me, what have I forgotten?*

² *medicinal herbs*

As Mistress Quickly had feared, the doctor discovers Simple in the closet. He calls furiously for his rapier, but Mistress Quickly manages to calm him down, and he allows Simple to explain why he has come. Hearing about Sir Hugh's plan to bring Slender and Anne Page together, doctor Caius tells Simple to wait while he writes a note for the parson.

It emerges that the doctor himself has designs on the young heiress although, Mistress Quickly implies, she does not return his feelings. The Frenchman is determined to settle the matter by means of a duel:

Mistress Quickly: [*aside, to Simple*] ... to tell you in your ear, I would have no words of it¹ – my master himself is in love with Mistress Anne Page; but notwithstanding that, I know Anne’s mind – that’s neither here nor there.

Caius: You, Jack’nape: give-a this letter to Sir Hugh. By gar,² it is a shallenge: I will cut his throat in de park, and I will teach a scurvy jackanape priest to meddle or make.³

¹ *don’t tell anyone else*

² *by God*

³ *interfere*

The renowned 16th-century French surgeon Ambrose Paré had a major influence on the medical and surgical practice of his day. At a time when medicine was unregulated, unscientific and governed largely by beliefs that dated back to Ancient Greece, Paré was a pioneer of treatment based on practical experience, close observation, and logical analysis. He was particularly successful in dealing with battlefield wounds.

Unfortunately, there were plenty of unscrupulous individuals ready to take advantage of the great man’s reputation:

“French doctors were much in vogue in the 1590s, with Englishmen pretending to be French in order to exploit the fashion, perhaps inspired by the Parisian physician Ambrose Paré, famed for his sensational writings, who had died in 1590. This was also reflected in the drama of the time, with French doctors, usually comic, appearing frequently ... Dr Caius is quite credible as a pillar of Windsor society.”

Kathy Elgin, Programme notes for RSC production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 1992

Simple hurries away with the letter. The doctor turns to Mistress Quickly accusingly: she had previously assured him that Anne would agree to marry him. Sir Hugh must pay for his attempt to influence Anne, he vows. In his letter, he has nominated the host of the Garter to supervise the planned duel. The housekeeper nervously brushes aside Simple's words as meaningless gossip:

Caius: Do not you tell-a-me dat I shall have Anne Page for myself? By gar, I vill kill de Jack-priest; and I have appointed mine host of the Jarteer to measure our weapon.¹ By gar, I will myself have Anne Page.

Mistress Quickly: Sir, the maid loves you, and all shall be well. We must give folks leave to prate, what the good-year!²

¹ *act as umpire in our duel*

² *what the devil, we must expect foolish chatter*

Caius leaves, threatening Mistress Quickly that she will be thrown out of his house if Anne Page will not marry him.

A moment later, another visitor arrives. This time it is Fenton, an aristocratic young gentleman who, like Slender and Caius, has his heart set on marrying Anne Page. He too has been assured by Mistress Quickly that Anne loves him above all other suitors. Fenton asks anxiously whether this is still the case:

Fenton: Shall I do any good, thinkest thou? Shall I not lose my suit?¹

Mistress Quickly: Troth,² sir, all is in His hands above. But notwithstanding, Master Fenton, I'll be sworn on a book she loves you.

¹ *fail in my quest to marry Anne*

² *truthfully*

Fenton slips some money into Mistress Quickly's hand, urging her again to put in a good word for him when she next sees Anne Page. As he leaves, the housekeeper remarks to herself that – despite her earlier assurances – Fenton's hopes are likely to be dashed:

Mistress Quickly: Farewell to your worship. [*exit Fenton*]

Truly an honest gentleman – but Anne loves him not.
For I know Anne's mind as well as another does.