The Merry Wives of Windsor

The Merry Wives of Windsor can only be dated between 1558, the publication of Fiorentino’s Il Peccorone and 1602, when it was recorded in the Stationers’ Register.

**Publication Date**

The play was entered in the Stationers’ Register on 18 January 1602 by John Busby and immediately transferred to Arthur Johnson as:

[SR, 1602] A booke Called an excellent and pleasant conceyted Comedie of Sir Iohn ffaulstafe and the merye wyves of windsor.

Later that year it was published in quarto:


In 1619 this text (with a few very minor changes) was reprinted.


The play appeared in the First Folio (F1) in 1623 as the third comedy, after Two Gentlemen of Verona and before Measure for Measure. Only Love’s Labour’s Lost in the Shakespeare canon uses the same formula ‘pleasant conceited comedy’; the formula had first appeared in 1585 in Fedele and Fortunio, sometimes attributed to Oxford’s secretary, Anthony Munday.

The version printed in F1 is considerably longer than Q1 – about 2700 lines compared with about 1600 lines in the Quarto(s), which is “obviously a garbled and corrupt text.” (Chambers, WS, I, 429). The Quarto, although more correct in several details (e.g. ‘Brooke’ rather than ‘Broome’), confuses situations and mangles speeches, loses jokes and destroys humour, and it has some peculiar stage-directions. Bullough comments that neither text ‘makes a satisfactory play, but they supplement each other’. Summarising the relationship between the two versions, Oliver (p. xxx) concludes: “Behind the Quarto text … there would seem to be a version of Merry Wives that was designed for an audience not aristocratic and not primarily intellectual, whereas the full Folio text has much that would appeal only to the more sophisticated.”

**Performance Dates**

The 1602 Quarto states that the play ‘hath bene diuers times Acted by the Honorable my Lord Chamberlaines seruants. Both before her Maiestie and else-where’. The first documented performance of The Merry Wives of Windsor took place on the
first Sunday of November 1604, in Whitehall Palace. On 20 May 1613, the King’s Men were paid for performing fourteen plays, one called ‘Sir John Falstaff’, usually taken to be Henry IV Part 2, but it might be The Merry Wives of Windsor, since the very next entry mentions another play called ‘the Hotspur’. A Court performance by the King’s Men is recorded on 15 November 1638.

Bullough identifies (apart from the links with the other Falstaff plays) four main narrative elements: the tricking of Falstaff, the wooing of Anne Page, the horse-stealing episodes, and the ‘fairy’ scene. This in itself complicates the identification of specific sources. Muir, after noting suggestions current in 1957, abandoned the search as useless. Oliver “in another sense” agrees, because “for nearly every incident and situation in the plot ... an analogue or a vaguely possible source has been

Sources
found in earlier European fiction and farce or in English stories and translations.”

The main narrative strand and is the tricking of Falstaff and the latest definite source for this seems to be the second novella of the first day of Il Pecorone by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, published in 1558. There was no English translation until an abridged version appeared in 1632. The Anne Page story, with Falstaff disguised as a woman, has some elements in common with Plautus’s Latin play Casina; but "the differences far outweigh the resemblances" according to Oliver. Again, there was no available English translation of this play of Plautus.

There were similar stories in English but not so close as Fiorentino: Barnaby Riche, ‘Of Two Brethren and Their Wives’, in Riche His Farewell to Militarie Profession (1581) and by Tarlton in ‘The Tale of the Two Lovers of Pisa’ in Tarltons Newes Out of Purgatorie (1590). Bullough also sees some resemblances between The Merry Wives and some realistic comedies from the end of the sixteenth century, including Dekker’s Shoemaker’s Holiday (1599).

The horse-stealing episodes have been linked by some scholars, through various mentions of a ‘German’, ‘Germans’ and ‘Germany’ (4.3.1; 4.5.65, 67, 72 & 82) and of the ‘Duke’ for whom they are working, to Frederick Count Mömpelgard, heir to the Duchy of Württemberg. This theory, in the view of its proponents, is reinforced by Q1’s odd phrase ‘cosen garmombles’ (‘cozen-Germans’ in F1; ‘cozen’ could mean ‘cousin’ and/or ‘cheat’): the rest looks like a word-play on the Count’s name. The Count visited England unexpectedly in 1592, met the Queen and apparently extorted from her a promise that he would be admitted to the Companionship of the Order of the Garter. He became Duke in August 1593 and continued to badger the Queen through envoys. In 1597 he was elected Knight of the Garter in absentia – and finally received the insignia, in Stuttgart, in 1603. The connection between the Duke and horse-stealing is extremely obscure, and many scholars, Oliver included, dismiss the theory. But the Duke will reappear in the later discussion of dates.

The fairies’ teasing of Bottom in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the story of Actaeon – transformed into a stag – in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and an episode in Lyly’s Endimion, where the soldier Corsites is pinched by fairies, parallel the treatment of Falstaff by the ‘fairies’ in the final scene. Some influence on Falstaff may have been derived from the character of Captain Crackstone in Anthony Munday’s Fedele and Fortunio (1585), a translation from Luigi Pasqualigo.

Orthodox Dates

Most recent commentators (Wells & Taylor, Craik, Crane and Melchiori, have favoured a completion date by 1597, linking the play to the Garter Ceremony on 23 April. The garter ceremony is an annual event. Chambers linked the play with a garter ceremony in 1601.

By contrast, F. G. Fleay in 1886, followed by Quiller-Couch, the New Cambridge editor, argued that The Merry Wives is a rewriting of The Jealous Comedy, a lost play performed by Lord Strange’s Men in 1593, when they were performing other plays of Shakespeare (Chambers, ES ii 123); Cairncross also proposes 1592–3. Wiggins believes that Merry Wives was composed in 1599 but only “printed in 1602 from a memorial reconstruction probably compiled in or after 1601 by the actor who played the Host,” a version that “has also been abridged and adapted for theatrical use” (III: 395–401).

Possible Links with Henry IV Parts 1 & 2 and Henry V

Most commentators see Merry Wives as linked in the time of composition by “the weight of probability” (Oliver) with the Henry IV and Henry V trilogy. Not only does Falstaff feature prominently, but several other characters (or at least their names) from those plays make an appearance, in The Merry Wives. The connection, however, presents some puzzles: when does the action of The Merry Wives take place – in the early 1400s or in Elizabethan England? And why does Falstaff not know Mistress Quickly? And why does Fenton, who “kept company with the wild Prince and Poins” (3.5.66–7), not know Falstaff?

Although there is no evidence as to whether The Merry Wives was written before, during or after the composition of the Henry IV plays, Oliver places the comedy between the two parts of Henry IV. He accepts the orthodox scheme, which placed 1 Henry IV in the winter of 1596–7 and 2 Henry IV in December 1598. Oliver also
allows the possibility that *The Merry Wives* and *2 Henry IV* were being written at the same time. This proposal explains why Shallow does not know Falstaff in *The Merry Wives*, and accounts for a few words and phrases found in these plays but not elsewhere in Shakespeare.

It is also possible that *Merry Wives* was written first and that when Shakespeare hurriedly needed to rename Sir John Oldcastle (and friends), he transferred names of similar characters from the comedy.

**Internal Orthodox Evidence**

The 1597 date ties in with the theory proposed by Hotson in 1931 (*Shakespeare versus Shallow*) that the play was performed on St George’s Day, 23 April, 1597 for the Garter Feast at Whitehall. The action aptly takes place at Windsor, the normal location of the Garter ceremony. One of the five knights elected that year was George Carey, Lord Hunsdon, patron of the Chamberlain’s Men and newly appointed Lord Chamberlain.

Of particular significance is the speech of Mistress Quickly, disguised as the Fairy Queen (5.v.56–74). She instructs the fairies to prepare “Windsor Castle” and specifically St George’s Chapel, for the installation ceremony, mentioning “the several chairs of order”, “each fair instalment [= chapel stall], coat, and sev’ral crest”, “the Garter’s compass”, and “Honi soit qui mal y pense” (the Garter motto) … “[b]uckled below fair knighthood’s bending knee.” As a construct, Hotson’s theory is ingenious, but (comments Oliver) “unfortunately it falls short of final proof.” Nevertheless, this precise date wins the approval of almost all modern editors.

**External Orthodox Evidence:**

The only ‘evidence’, though well known, is of very doubtful worth. It is the tradition (no more than that – Hibbard calls it “powerful yet dubious”) first recorded in 1702 that Queen Elizabeth commanded the play “to be finished in fourteen days”. In 1709 Rowe elaborated: “She was so well pleas’d with that admirable [sic!] Character of Falstaff, in the two Parts of Henry the Fourth … This is said to be the Occasion of his Writing *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.”

Oliver is ambivalent about the tradition: it is “often repeated as if it were fact”, he writes. Yet he is prepared to assume, in his discussion of the date of composition, that the Queen could have seen *1 Henry IV* during the winter of 1596–7. “She could then have expressed a wish to see Falstaff in love, and a performance of *The Merry Wives* could have followed most opportune in April.” Oliver ignores Rowe’s reference to the “two” parts of *Henry IV* – apparently because it is inconvenient for his argument. Samuel Johnson pointed out 250 years ago that Rowe’s “How well she was obey’d, the Play it self is an admirable Proof” is simply wrong: Shakespeare did not comply with the Queen’s wishes, since Falstaff is never in love, only in need of immediate carnal satisfaction!

**Oxfordian Date**

Most Oxfordians place *Merry Wives* in 1584–5 (Clark, Hess with stylistic analysis, and Brazil) although Ogburn Jr. proposed 1573; Holland preferred 1593.

**Internal Oxfordian Evidence**

In proposing 1573, Charlton Ogburn sees the wooing of Anne Page by Slender as a comic representation of the negotiations in 1568–9 for the marriage of Philip Sidney to Anne Cecil. A formal settlement was drawn up on 06 August 1569, its terms somewhat similar in monetary value to those mentioned in Act 3, scene 4. Two years later the Cecil–Sidney contract was deemed to have lapsed and Oxford became Anne’s bridegroom; Ogburn regards Fenton as a stage representation of the successful real-life suitor. In addition, Ogburn takes it that Doctor Caius “can hardly have had another source than Dr John Caius of Cambridge University … That he died in 1573 is another indication of the early composition of *Merry Wives*.”

The inclusion in the cast of Doctor Caius has intrigued other Oxfordians, especially Anderson: although ostensibly ‘French’, he is a physician. His real-life namesake was a medical scholar, who created Gonville and Caius College and became its Master in 1559. He was president of the College of Physicians from 1555–60, again in 1562 and 1563, and finally in 1571. As physician to the Court and the City, he became rich. He seems to have professionally attended Queen Elizabeth in
1564, but his name is not in the royal household accounts. Religiously conservative, with Catholic friends, he clashed with the increasingly puritan and Calvinist fellows of his College. They burned the vestments and mass-books that he hoarded, and he had his colleagues placed in the stocks, showing the same pugnacious attitude that his stage namesake displays towards his rivals for Anne Page’s hand. But Doran, author of the chapter on ‘Medicine’ in Shakespeare’s England (Vol.1), focussing on John Caius’s academic ability and achievements, calls him “a very different man from his namesake in The Merry Wives of Windsor.”

Most orthodox commentators understandably deny any connection between the two Doctors Caius: when Caius died in July 1573, Shakespeare of Stratford was a boy of nine. All attempts to forge a link through Shakespeare’s son-in-law, Dr John Hall, are far-fetched: Hall did not attend Cambridge University until some twenty years after Caius’s death, and he did not move to Stratford until about 1600 – at least three years after the date of compositionfavoured by the orthodox. Oliver writes that there can be no direct connection between the two men, and Quiller-Couch can make nothing of the attempt to identify Dr Caius with John Caius. Oxfordians who think that there is a deliberate caricature of the Cambridge don point to Oxford’s connections with Cambridge, where he studied, and to his familiarity with the Queen and Court. This leads them to propose, like Ogburn, a very early date for the writing of the play (or parts of it) – namely, before Caius died in 1573.

However, there are problems. Edward de Vere’s name (usually written ‘Dominus [Lord] Bulbecke’) appears in various Cambridge records, mainly at Queens’ College, for a period of only six months – from October 1558 to March 1559; he was merely eight years old! After that he was tutored in Essex under the supervision of Sir Thomas Smith (Nelson, 23–6). So it seems very doubtful whether the young boy had any contact with the real John Caius, not yet Master of his eponymous College nor yet involved in his notorious disputes with the Fellows. One must also question how well known Caius was at Court, and wonder why a supposed caricature topical to the early 1570s survived through various productions to 1623. All the same, those convinced about the caricature have some very recent, incidental support: Nutton, in the 2004 Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, describes Caius as a short man with a long beard and a squeaky voice, as autocratic and overbearing, with eccentric personal habits: “his name, his profession and his oddity were immortalised by Shakespeare in The Merry Wives of Windsor”.

Among the evidence Holland produces for 1593 are (as well as the Mömpelgard visit in 1592) the following words and phrases. “Three Doctor Faustuses” (4.5.65) – Holland misses “Mephostophilus” (1.1.20) – must refer to Marlowe’s Dr Faustus. Its main English source was printed in 1592, and the play is thought by some to have been performed at Court in January 1593 (see Chambers, ES, iii, 422–4 for evidence of productions). ‘Cony-catch(ing)’ is used twice (1.1.116 and 1.3.31) and occurs again in the plays, in The Taming of the Shrew. Greene’s three ‘cony-catch’ pamphlets (on criminal techniques) and a reply using the same term were published in 1592; so the term was current when the play was written.

For a date of composition in the mid-1580s – with some 1590s references added for a later revival – Brazil presents a more recent case. Slender wishes he had his “book of Songs and Sonnets here” (1.1.179–80). This would have been the Songs and Sonnets of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (who was Oxford’s uncle). Published posthumously in Tottel’s Miscellany in 1557 (ten years after his execution), the volume was so popular that it was republished “at least eight times in the next thirty years” (Oliver). After a gap of eleven years, the last two reprints came out in 1585 and 1587 (the next edition was 300 years later). The topical allusion to Surrey’s poems would have been less meaningful in the next decade (and it is missing from the 1602 Quarto).

Some orthodox writers have suggested that Sir Hugh Evans, the comic Welsh parson, was based on a non-Welsh schoolmaster at Stratford, e.g. John Jenkins from London or Thomas Cottam from Lancashire. But Oxford’s theatre-manager in the years 1584–6 was Henry Evans, a Welshman who taught the Children of Paul’s troupe, a section of ‘Oxford’s Boys’ who performed regularly at Court and for private audiences, throughout the 1580s (Nelson, 247–8). Brazil’s claim that the fairies’ song in Act 5, scene 5, with its repeated phrase “pinch him”, was itself pinched from the Fairy
Song in Endimion, the Lyly play from the same 1580s period is debatable: and the borrowing of the pinching could have been in reverse. Endimion was probably first performed in 1588; the text was published in 1591, but the words of the ‘Fairy Song’ (“Pinch him, pinch him, black and blue”) were not included until Blount’s edition of 1632. Hess’s stylistic analysis (adjusting the orthodox chronology to Oxford’s life) places the play alongside 1 Henry IV in 1585; but he and his collaborators accept 1597 as the “latest reasonable date of embedded allusions, assuming [the text] to be a revamp of an earlier version”.

**External Oxfordian Evidence**

Holland, like orthodox scholars, considers that the play was written for an occasion connected with the Order of the Garter; but prefers 1593 when the Order was celebrating its 250th anniversary. He notes than an “exceptional number of Knights of the Garter were installed this year”. Thus Oxford would have been celebrating (or perhaps even satirising) such a conspicuous event.

Oxford’s copy of the Geneva Bible, which he bought in 1570 (now in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC), has this passage (II Samuel 21:19) underlined: “Goliath the Gittite: the staffe of whose speare was like a weauers beame.” In 5.1.21–23, Falstaff reproduces part of this clause and humorously couples it with another part-quotation from the Bible: “I fear not Goliat(h) with a weaver’s beam, because I know also life is a shuttle.” (Job 7:6 reads: “My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle, and are spent without hope.”) Curiously, ‘fear’, ‘Goliath’ and ‘weaver’s beam’ occur together in Pierce’s Supererogation, published by Gabriel Harvey in 1593: “…I feared the brazen shield, and the brazen boots of Goliah and that same hideous speare, like a weaver’s beam…” Harvey’s book is thought by some to be a broadside against Thomas Nashe and Oxford.

Roger Stritmatter underscores the importance of this passage for the chronology of the play:

The concept of fearing the weaver’s beam in The Merry Wives of Windsor but not in [any known biblical text] is copied in Harvey’s 1593 tract. Barring the discovery of a common antecedent source in which Goliath’s weaver’s beam is ‘feared’, the simplest explanation for the known evidence is that Harvey read, or more likely observed, a performance of an early version of The Merry Wives of Windsor.

This would make 1593 the latest date for the play’s first performance.

**Allusions and References**

Those which can be dated later may be regarded as topical additions for subsequent productions. For instance, Oliver is uncomfortable with Q1’s ‘garmombles’ and tries to find linguistic alternatives to the suggestion that it is a joke on Count Mömpelgard’s name; there is, also, a reasonable suggestion lurking in his commentary that Shakespeare of Stratford would be unlikely to make fun of a particular German nobleman. Cairncross, another orthodox scholar (though unorthodox regarding the chronology of the plays), also finds it “rather improbable” that the playwright would ridicule a newly elected Knight of the Garter. He thinks it “more probable that the jest should have been made soon after the visit of the Duke in 1592, while the memory of his peculiarities was still fresh in mind, and before he was elected.” As a courtier, Oxford is very likely to have encountered the amusing German, and he also had a personal motive for making fun of him: like Mömpelgard, he was a persistent applicant for membership of the Order of the Garter (unlike the German, he was never elected). In 1592–3, Oxford may well have inserted into this ‘Garter’ play unflattering topical references to his foreign rival, so recently well known to the Court, and included the jokes about his absence in Act 4, scenes 3 and 5.

Evans sings (with a few variants) lines (3.1.15–25) from Marlowe’s lyric ‘Come live with me and be my love’. Oliver states that, although the words were not published until 1599, they presumably became popular as a song before Marlowe’s death in 1593; Chapman assumes knowledge of the words in a play of 1596. This recent ‘hit’ may have been included in a 1593 or 1597 revival of The Merry Wives, perhaps replacing a previous, less up-to-date song. Similarly, Falstaff’s metaphor: “She is a region in Guiana, all gold and bounty” (1.3.64–5) may date from 1595–6, as Oliver suggests, when Ralegh sailed to explore the Orinoco, hoping to find the mythical Eldorado; his report, The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and...
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Bewtiful Empire of Guiana, was widely read. Alternatively, Holland suggests 1593, when the legend of Eldorado must have been know, because Raleigh sent Captain Whaddon to find out more about the Orinoco region in the spring of 1594.

Conclusion

The play can only be dated between 1558, the publication of Fiorentino’s Il Peccorone and 1602, when it was recorded in the Stationers’ Register. All the main sources for the play were available in the 1580s.

Although there is no evidence as to whether The Merry Wives was written before, during or after the composition of the Henry IV plays, there is obviously a case for linking the writing of this play that composition. The most probable date is 1584–5, shortly before a likely date for the Henry IV plays, with revision in 1592–3. There is no contemporary evidence about whether The Merry Wives was intended to mark a Garter ceremony.

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