

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

William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. London: Arthur Johnson, 1602. 7 5/8 inches x 5 5/16 inches (194 mm x 151 mm), [56] pages, A–G4 (-A1 blank, except for signature “A”).

A | Most pleasaunt and | excellent conceited Co- | medie, of Syr *Iohn Falstaffe*, and the | merrie Wiues of *Windsor*. | Entermixed with sundrie | variable and pleasing humors, of Syr *Hugh* | the Welch Knight, Iustice *Shallow*, and his | wise Cousin M. *Slender*. | With the swaggering vaine of Auncient | *Pistoll*, | and Corporall *Nym*. | By *William Shakespeare*. As it hath bene diuers times Acted by the right Honorable | my Lord Chamberlaines seruants. Both before her | Maiestie, and else-where. | [ornament] | London | Printed by T. C. for Arthur Iohnson, and are to be sold at | his shop in Powles Church-yard, at the signe of the | Flower de Leuse and the Crowne. | 1602.

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

previously published quarto edition. The quartos were inexpensive to produce and were published for various reasons, including to secure the acting company's rights to the material and to bring in money during the plague years in London when the theaters were closed.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the impecunious knight Sir John Falstaff devises a scheme to obtain money: he will seduce two women, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, to get access to their husbands' wealth. The women, however, compare the identical letters Falstaff sent each of them and decide to have some fun at his expense; both send him encouraging letters. Falstaff's disgruntled companions meanwhile tell the women's husbands of Falstaff's plan. Ford dons a disguise and, professing to be a prospective lover of Mistress Ford, asks Falstaff to court her on his behalf. Falstaff agrees to Ford's proposal. Mistresses Ford and Page subject Falstaff to humiliations as the "seduction" unfolds, then they share the game with their husbands. The spouses concoct a final prank to shame Falstaff involving the Page's daughter Anne, who will lead the town's children, dressed as fairies, in an attack on Falstaff. (Anne is being courted by three men: her father wants her to marry one, her mother another, but she loves the third.) The disguised children frighten Falstaff and pinch him repeatedly, after which the spouses reveals the game to Falstaff and Anne announces her marriage to Fenton, her love. All are reconciled.

Bound in stone-marbled paper wrappers with a plain paper spine and handwritten label with "Merry Wives of Windsor | 1602." A note by Heber on the front pastedown reads "Bindley's Sale Pt. III n. 2045," with Huth's bookplate ("EX MVSAEO HVTHII") and a "HUTH BEQUEST" plate

below. The stamp “BIBLIOTHECA | HEBERIANA” appears on the front flyleaf, along with a clipping identified as “Academy 15 Sept. 1888” that discusses a facsimile of the play that was made from this copy.

Now at the British Library, this first quarto of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was once owned by James Bindley (1737–1818), British Commissioner of Stamp Duties (1765–1818) and a book collector specializing in early English literature. His collection was sold in five sales over a two-year period, at which Richard Heber, whose acquisitions included this quarto, was the principal buyer. Richard Heber (1773–1833), a British bibliophile, started amassing a classical collection as an undergraduate at Oxford, but broadened his collection to include rare editions of early English drama and literature. He purchased both single volumes and entire libraries and did not limit himself to a single copy of any particular book. As a result, he owned at least 150,000 volumes, and his collection filled eight houses. He was member of Parliament for Oxford University (1821–26) and a founder of the Athenaeum Club in London. In 1834 the book passed to George Daniel (1789–1864). Daniel was an accountant, as were many noteworthy book collectors; he was also a poet whose works included *Virgil in London* (1814) and *Democritus in London* (1852). He possessed numerous other choice volumes, especially of early English literature: the finest extant example (the Moore-Booth-Rokewode copy) of the First Folio, copies of the other three Shakespeare folios, and a total of eighteen of the much scarcer quartos, among which this numbers. When the books were auctioned at Sotheby’s in 1864, so esteemed was the collection that the sale catalogue was entitled *The Most Valuable, Interesting and Highly Important Library of the Late George Daniel, Esq.* This quarto was then purchased by Henry Huth (1815–78), a merchant-

banker and book collector who spent the last three decades of his life seeking out rare books, visiting the leading London book dealers daily on his return home from work. Huth's was a general library of manuscripts, incunables, continental literature, and early Americana, with special strengths in English poetry and plays. His son Alfred Henry Huth (1850–1910) retained the collection and enlarged it through judicious selections. On his death the British Museum library was allowed its choice of fifty items, among which, presumably, this quarto figures.

Octavo code: **shamea**