

A rare quarto third quarto of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*

William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. London: R. Meighen, 1630. 6 7/8 inches x 4 11/16 inches (174 mm x 119 mm), [80] pages, A–K4 (-K4 blank).

The | merry VVives | of Windsor. | With the humours of Sir *Iohn Falstaffe*, |
As also the swaggering vaine of Ancient | *Pistoll*, and Corporall *Nym*. |
Written by *William Shake-Speare*. | *Newly corrected*. | [ornament] | *London*: |
Printed by *T. H.* for *R. Meighen*, and are to be sold | at his Shop, next to the
Middle-Temple Gate, and in | *S. Dunstans Church-yard in Fleet-street*, |
1630.

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

plague years in London when the theaters were closed.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the impecunious knight Sir John Falstaff devises a scheme to obtain money: he will seduce two women, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, to get access to their husbands' wealth. The women, however, compare the identical letters Falstaff sent each of them and decide to have some fun at his expense; both send him encouraging letters.

Falstaff's disgruntled companions meanwhile tell the women's husbands of Falstaff's plan. Ford dons a disguise and, professing to be a prospective lover of Mistress Ford, asks Falstaff to court her on his behalf. Falstaff agrees to Ford's proposal. Mistresses Ford and Page subject Falstaff to humiliations as the "seduction" unfolds, then they share the game with their husbands. The spouses concoct a final prank to shame Falstaff involving the Page's daughter Anne, who will lead the town's children, dressed as fairies, in an attack on Falstaff. (Anne is being courted by three men: her father wants her to marry one, her mother another, but she loves the third.) The disguised children frighten Falstaff and pinch him repeatedly, after which the spouses reveals the game to Falstaff and Anne announces her marriage to Fenton, her love. All are reconciled.

This third quarto of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is bound in brown half calf over marbled boards with gold tooling. "MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR 1630" is lettered in gold up the spine. "George Steevens" on title; Roxburghe arms on verso; "Thos Jolley, 1812" on flyleaf and Jolley bookplate inside front cover. Handwritten notes by J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps on the obverse of the front free endpaper.

This quarto was once the property of George Steevens (1736–1800), an English Shakespeare editor who collaborated with Samuel Johnson in issuing a complete edition of Shakespeare, *The Works of Shakespeare with the Corrections and Illustrations of Various Commentators* (10 vols., 1773). He owned roughly fifty quartos, and his sale (13 May 1800) was the first large Shakespeare collection to appear at auction. The book then entered the collection of John Ker, 3rd Duke of Roxburghe (1740–1804), Scottish noble and bibliophile. His superb collection focused on Shakespeareana and included Caxtons as well as a legendary first edition of Boccaccio's *Decameron*; the collection was sold at auction in May 1812, an event that prompted the founding the Roxburghe Club for rare books. The book was then acquired by Thomas Jolley, whose collection was sold in seven sales over the span of a decade (1843–1853), and sold June 1844. This quarto was given to Edinburgh University Library in 1872 by James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps (1820–1889), the English Shakespeare collector and scholar whose *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare* (1848) was published in several editions. Beginning in the 1870s, he devoted his time completely to the research of Shakespeare's life. Halliwell-Phillipps was instrumental in the acquisition of New Place, the site of Shakespeare's last home, and in the creation of the Museum at Stratford-upon-Avon (now Nash's House and New Place).

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