

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

William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. London: Arthur Johnson, 1619. 7 1/2 inches x 5 7/8 inches (191 mm x 149 mm), [56] pages, A–G4.

A | Most pleasant and excellent conceited Comedy, | of Sir Iohn Falstaffe, and the | merry Wives of Windsor. | With the swaggering vaine of Ancient Pistoll, and Corporall Nym. | Written by W. Shakespeare. | [Heb Ddieu device] | Printed for Arthur Johnson, 1619.

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 second quarto of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was bound by the British Museum Bindery in nineteenth-century green sheep with gilt tooling, which includes the crest of David Garrick on both boards. "SHAKESPEARE. SIR JOHN FALSTAFFE AND THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR. 1619." is lettered in gold up the spine. The turn-ins are gold tooled, and the leaves' edges are gilt.

Now at the British Library, this quarto was previously owned by David Garrick (1717–1779), an English actor whose unaffected performance in the

title role of *Richard III* in 1741 brought him renown. Garrick, both as an actor and theatrical manager, exerted a tremendous influence on stage practices throughout the 18th century; as a friend and classics pupil of Samuel Johnson, he brought reputability to his trade. He began to collect early printed plays during the 1740s, at which time most collectors regarded stage scripts as popular works unfit for inclusion in serious libraries. Garrick, however, recognized their worth and, assisted by friends and knowledgeable advisors, built his collection in the interest of scholarship and the enrichment of subsequent generations. He bequeathed the collection to the British Museum upon his death in 1779.

Octavo code **shamex**