

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

William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. London: R. Meighen, 1630. 7 inches x 5 1/8 inches (178 mm x 130 mm), [80] pages, A–K4 (-K4 blank).

THE | MERRY WIVES | OF WINDSOR. | With the humours of Sir *John 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. Dunstons* 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.

Now at the National Library of Scotland, this 1630 third quarto of the *Merry Wives of Windsor* is inlaid and bound with a yellow morocco spine with raised bands and tips and dark gray boards; title, author, and date in black on the spine. The signature "Geo. Steevens" is on the title page. The bookplate of John Patrick Crichton Stuart, the third Marquis of Bute is on the front pastedown; the bookplate for the Bute Collection of English Plays is on the back pastedown.

This second quarto of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was previously owned by George Steevens (1736–1800). Steevens was 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. This quarto was not in the Steevens sale; it was purchased by John Stuart, the first Marquis of Bute (1744–1814). Stuart added it to the Bute Collection of early English plays that was initially formed by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762) and expanded by her son-in-law John Stuart, third Earl of Bute. The first Marquis of Bute notably acquired 39 Shakespeare quartos. The collection contains 1,266 English plays and includes seventeenth- and eighteenth-century adaptations of Shakespeare's plays and examples of the foremost dramatists from Elizabethan, Jacobean, Caroline, and Restoration periods; also included are a number of promptbooks. The Bute Collection is now in the National Library of Scotland, which purchased it from Major Michael Crichton Stuart on 3 April 1956.

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