

Merry Wives of Windsor

INTRODUCTION

A LEGEND dating from 1702 claims that Shakespeare wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in fourteen days and by command of Queen Elizabeth; in 1709 she was said to have wished particularly to see Falstaff in love. Whether or not this is true, a passage towards the end of the play alluding directly to the ceremonies of the Order of the Garter, Britain's highest order of chivalry, encourages the belief that the play has a direct connection with a specific occasion. In 1597 George Carey, Lord Hunsdon, Lord Chamberlain and patron of Shakespeare's company, was installed at Windsor as a Knight of the Garter. The Queen was not present at the installation but had attended the Garter Feast at the Palace of Westminster on St George's Day (23 April). Shakespeare's play was probably performed in association with this occasion, and may have been written especially for it. It was first printed, in a corrupt text, in 1602; a better text appears in the 1623 Folio.

Some of the characters—Sir John Falstaff, Mistress Quickly, Pistol, Nim, Justice Shallow—appear also in 1 and 2 *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, but in spite of a reference to 'the wild Prince and Poins' at 3.2.66–7, this is essentially an Elizabethan comedy, the only one that Shakespeare set firmly in England. The play is full of details that would have been familiar to Elizabethan Londoners, and the language is colloquial and up to date. The plot, however, is made up of conventional situations whose ancestry is literary rather than realistic. There are many analogues in medieval and other tales to Shakespeare's basic plot situations, some in books that he probably or certainly knew. The central story, of Sir John's unsuccessful attempts to seduce Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, and of Master Ford's unfounded jealousy, is in the tradition of the Italian *novella*, and may have been suggested by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone* (1558). Alongside it Shakespeare places the comical but finally romantic love story of Anne Page, wooed by the foolish but rich Abraham Slender and the irascible French Doctor Caius, but won by the young and handsome Fenton. The

play contains a higher proportion of prose to verse than any other play by Shakespeare, and the action is often broadly comic; but it ends, after the midnight scene in Windsor Forest during which Sir John is frightened out of his lechery, in forgiveness and love.

The play is known to have been acted for James I on 4 November 1604, and for Charles I in 1638. It was revived soon after the theatres reopened, in 1660; at first it was not particularly popular, but since 1720 it has consistently pleased audiences. Many artists have illustrated it, and it forms the basis for a number of operas, including Otto Nicolai's *Die lustigen Weiben von Windsor* (1848) and Giuseppe Verdi's comic masterpiece, *Falstaff* (1893).