

**The Consistency of the Context:
Texts and Contexts of the
*Merry Wives of Windsor***

James H. Forse

Professor Emeritus, Bowling Green State University

Falstaff plays such a prominent role in 1 and 2 *Henry IV* and the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, that one might call the plays a “Falstaff Trilogy.” His popularity with audiences led to a promise at the end of 2 *Henry IV* that he would reappear in *Henry V*. However, when reading the texts of this “trilogy,” loose ends abound. Inconsistencies exist in time, place, and characters, especially when attempting to place *Merry Wives* within the textual framework of 1 and 2 *Henry IV*.

The chronology and order of composition must play some part in these inconsistencies. Traditionally, scholars place the Falstaff plays within 1596-1598. According to many, the order of composition is as follows: Shakespeare began 2 *Henry IV* while writing 1 *Henry IV* and *Merry Wives*, and then finished 2 *Henry IV*. A widely accepted (but contested) view is that *Merry Wives* was an intrusion between 1 and 2 requested (or commanded) for entertainment at the 1597 Garter festivities, when George Carey, patron of

Shakespeare's company, was invested with the Garter. Others suggest that *Merry Wives* was written later, sometime around 1599-1601.¹

Nonetheless, let us look at an interesting change in Falstaff's circle between part 1 and part 2 *Henry IV*. In part 1, his immediate circle includes Peto, Bardolph, and Mistress Quickly of the Boar's Head Tavern. In part 2 that circle expands to include Pistol, Nym, Doll Tearsheet, and Falstaff's page. Here too, we meet Falstaff's gull, Justice Shallow, who is sent to the Fleet with Falstaff at the end of the play. These additional members of Falstaff's circle in 2 *Henry IV* and *Henry V* first appear in *Merry Wives*, the play believed to be written between the two *Henry IV* plays. The appearance of these characters suggests that *Merry Wives* did influence 2 *Henry IV*. In *Henry V* Shallow is gone, but so too is Peto. And except for Pistol, who returns to England to be a thief, Falstaff and his entire circle are killed off.

Consensus assumes an ur-*Merry Wives* probably was written for the 1597 Garter Feast, and revised, and perhaps re-revised, around 1600-1602 resulting in the quarto version of 1602 and the later *First Folio* version of 1623. The fact that Falstaff originally was called Sir John Oldcastle further suggests an ur-version for the 1597 Garter Feast. Oldcastle was an ancestor of William and Henry Brooke, Lords Cobham, both of whom were rivals at Court not only of the earls of Essex and Southampton but also of George Carey, the legal patron of the Chamberlain's Men. Essex and Southampton seem to have equated Falstaff with Henry Brooke.² The fact that Master Ford masquerades as Master Brook may be yet another poke at the Brookes. Like Master Ford, Henry Brooke was known to have an unreasonable and hair-trigger temper. Either the printer or Shakespeare's partners avoided a possible connection when "Master Brook" was changed to "Master Broome" in the *First Folio*.³

Falstaff's character in *Merry Wives* differs from the Falstaff of 1 and 2 *Henry IV*. He still is a rogue, but a stupid, not

a crafty rogue. Why did Shakespeare lack consistency of character for this audience pleaser? He certainly maintained consistency when crafting Margaret of Anjou as a “she-wolf of France” for the sequence of 2 and 3 *Henry VI* and *Richard III*. Mistress Quickly, Bardolph, Pistol, Nym, and Justice Shallow also are different from how they are portrayed in the histories. If, as is surmised, Shakespeare revised an earlier version of *Merry Wives* after he had completed 1 and 2 *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, why are there such inconsistencies in characters? And it is almost impossible to determine “what time it is” in *Merry Wives*. Is this an episode from the reign of Henry IV, or Henry V? Is this before he collaborated with Shallow to recruit sub-standard soldiers, or after they were jailed at the end of 2 *Henry IV*? The *Merry Wives* of the *First Folio* even seems to create a time warp by placing the action 250 years in the future when a queen is on the throne.⁴

Performance circumstances may help explain these inconsistencies. If originally designed as a one-time performance for the Garter feast, all that is necessary for that circumstance is continuous comedy. One need not worry that in this play Falstaff and Mistress Quickly do not know one another, nor that Quickly is transformed from the hostess of London’s Boar’s Head Tavern into the housekeeper of a French doctor in Windsor. One need not worry whether Henry IV or Henry V, or indeed a queen is on the throne (5.5.46). One *does* need to increase Falstaff’s circle of rogues to give parts to actors who in the histories would be playing lords, soldiers, etc. One does need to create a Master Ford for a tragedian-specialist’s role in a comedy. But one need not worry about whether this play was consistent with the 1 *Henry IV* on the public stage. Lords at the Garter performance would not care about consistency; some probably would not have seen the play.

But an astute actor-author, would observe the impact upon the aristocratic audience of the new characters added to Falstaff’s circle. Why not write them into the

forthcoming *Henry IV*? And if the characters from *Merry Wives* are somewhat different when they appear in 2 *Henry IV*, why would that matter? The public did not see their first incarnation. What I am suggesting is that the Garter *Merry Wives* may have served as a “pilot” for the low-comedy figures in 2 *Henry IV* meant for the public stage.

But our two extant texts of *Merry Wives* differ. The length of the quarto version is only about half that of the *First Folio*. Some suggest the quarto is close to the 1597 Garter performance; some assert it is a pirated, “bad quarto.” Both opinions concur the play was revised around 1599-1602 for the public.⁵ The *First Folio* version, however, differs from the quarto in the delineation of the characters Parson Hugh Evans and Abraham Slender, in the addition of the “Little William” scene, and in the almost total destruction at the end of the play of Falstaff’s image as a resilient, likable rogue. Performance circumstances—what I call the consistency of the context—may give clues here.

Around 1599-1600, playwrights virtually ceased writing and presenting English history plays—probably due to backlash from the Essex episode. If we take Shakespeare’s plays, the loss to the Chamberlain’s Men of his histories amounts to 45% of his repertory. In Henslowe’s Diary a similar hole is seen in the repertory of the Admiral’s Men. This led Shakespeare and his contemporaries to produce new plays rapidly, and revise old ones. We know Shakespeare revised or rewrote an ur-*Hamlet* and a new version of the King Lear legend.⁶ Such circumstances also suggest probable revision of a one-time Garter performance into a timelessly indeterminate, and relatively apolitical, comedy for the public stage.

The *Folio* script represents yet another performance circumstance—Will Kemp had left the Chamberlain’s Men, and, it seems possible, the new Blackfriars Boys had pirated, and presented, a version of *Merry Wives* before the Chamberlain’s Men had gotten it on stage. Terry P. Morris

has shown how the *Folio* text revises the quarto version to mock the two theatrical personalities most likely responsible, Henry Evans, director of the Blackfriars Boys, and Ben Jonson, lately of the Chamberlain's Men, but now an undermaster at Blackfriars.⁷

Morris shows clear links between the *character* Sir Hugh Evans, the Welsh parson in the play, and the *real* Henry Evans, Welsh scrivener and Blackfriars theater entrepreneur. On December 13, 1600, a Blackfriars deputy impressed and carried off to Blackfriars, Thomas, only son of Henry Clifton, Esquire, from Norfolk. Ostensibly, the impressment was to add to the boys' choir and acting company; in reality it probably was to extort money from his parent. Clifton appealed to the Privy Council, and the case ended up in the Star Chamber. Evans was censured and forced to hide his investments in the Blackfriars Boys, withdraw from active participation in the company, and leave London for the space of at least one year.⁸

In the first scene of the *Folio Merry Wives* we are introduced to Parson Hugh Evans who tries to persuade Justice Shallow not to make it "a Star Chamber matter," because Falstaff had poached a deer (1.1.1-41). The attempts of Parson Evans to avert "a Star Chamber matter" may well be a reminder to the audience of Henry Evans's troubles over the Clifton affair, which *was* a Star Chamber matter, rather than an allusion to a deer-poaching incident in Shakespeare's youth. Abraham Slender's last line in *Folio* version, bewailing that he thought he had carried off Anne Page but it turned out to be "a great lubberly boy... a postmaster's boy,"—an identification reiterated eleven lines later—may be yet another allusion (5.5.184, 188, 199). There *is* evidence that Henry Clifton, Esquire, may have been a master of the posts.⁹ That specific information is lacking in the quarto. Slender simply says: "Why so God saue me, tis a boy that I haue."¹⁰

Further details in the *First Folio* version identify Parson Evans with Henry Evans. In Act III, Parson Evans shows his

singing ability with a fractured version of Marlowe's *Come Live With Me and Be My Love* and Psalm 137. The singing Welsh Parson, Hugh Evans, might just remind those in the audience of the *real* Welsh scrivener Henry Evans, who technically was choirmaster for the Blackfriars Boys. Act IV, scene I, again found only in the *Folio*, presents Parson Evans as young William Page's schoolmaster. He quizzes William on his Latin. The reason William is not in school is because "Master Slender is let the boyes leave to play." We now have Parson Evans as a schoolmaster, and a songmaster, functions that were among Henry Evans's responsibilities for the Blackfriars Boys, and here it suddenly pops up that Abraham Slender is his under-master, just as Ben Jonson served undermaster for Henry Evans at Blackfriars. There is no such link between the two characters in the quarto, and nowhere else in the *Folio* is there reference to Evans and Slender as colleagues. The "Little William" scene serves no furthering of the plot. Coming as it does in Act IV, scene 1, it serves to nail down the previous clues Shakespeare has planted in the audience's mind identifying not only Parson Hugh Evans as Henry Evans, but also Abraham Slender as Ben Jonson. And the "Little William" scene may be a theatrical in-joke, referring to Jonson's famous line that Shakespeare "hadst small Latin and less Greek." The scene has bewildered commentators as to its dramatic purpose, and consistency within the script. But if seen against a backdrop of theatre-goers aware of theatrical personalities, the performance serves to poke fun at Ben Jonson and his pretensions, much as Kaufman's *The Man Who Came to Dinner* was an in-joke to 1930s New York theatre-goers. It would be especially ironic, if, as I suspect, the character fracturing Latin into bawdy English Mistress Quickly, was played by William Shakespeare.¹¹

In *The Return from Parnassus: or the Scourge of Simony*, a play written and performed by Cambridge University students in 1602, the character Will Kempe, referring to Ben Jonson, states: "Shakespeare hath given him a purge

that made him bewray his credit.”¹² The play appeared during the so-called “War of the Theatres,” when Jonson, Dekker, Marston, and others were satirizing the writings and *personae* of other playwrights.¹³ Shakespeare seems to allude to the “war” in *Hamlet* through lines exchanged between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (2. 2.362-69). Kempe’s line in *Parnassus* implies that Shakespeare, like Dekker and Marston, publically satirized Jonson, but there is no hint as to where he did it.¹⁴

Slender is a character appearing only in *Merry Wives*. Unlike Justice Shallow and Falstaff’s entourage, Slender does not appear in 2 *Henry IV*. His role in the *First Folio* version considerably expands the role found in the 1602 quarto, and several aspects of Slender’s character seem direct parallels to Ben Jonson’s life—Jonson’s physical appearance, his drinking, dueling, involvement in the 1597 play *The Isle of Dogs*, and his plays *Every Man in* (and *Out of*) *His Humor*.

The name Slender itself hints at the comments by rival playwrights on Jonson’s thinness; Dekker called him “a raw-boned anatomy.”¹⁵ In the very first scene of the play Bardolph and Pistol describe Slender as a “Banbery Cheese” and a “Latine Bilboe”—Banbury cheese is noted for its thinness, latine [latten] refers to a thin sheet of metal and bilbo to a thin sword. Jonson’s drinking was common gossip. Aubrey wrote Jonson was known to “exceed in drinke,” and “tooke too much [wine] before he went to bed, if not oftner and soner.”¹⁶ Drummond wrote that Jonson told him his pocket was picked by a man “who drank him drousie.”¹⁷ Slender complains that Bardolph, Pistol and Nym got him drunk and picked his pocket (1.1.123-26).

Jonson bragged of dueling when he was in service in the Netherlands, and in 1598 he had pled “clergy” when tried for killing the actor Gabriel Spencer in a duel in which Jonson was injured.¹⁸ Slender brags to Anne Page that he bruised his shin while “playing at sword and dagger with a master of fence.” He ends the speech with the seemingly

unconnected and curious lines: “I cannot abide the smell of hot meat since. Why do your dogs bark so, be there bears i’ the town?” (1.1.264). *But* are they unconnected? Jonson only escaped being hanged for Spencer’s death by the arcane, technical plea of “benefit of clergy.” He could read a passage in Latin, hence was not subject to temporal law. But he was branded on his thumb. Hence “the smell of hot meat” is connected to a duel. I can imagine the actor raising a thumb when delivering the line. And what about barking dogs and bears? That reference conjures up images of bear-baiting. In 1595 the Paris Gardens, famous as a bear-baiting arena, was reconstituted as the Swan Theatre. In July, 1597, the staging there of *The Isle of Dogs*, a play by Thomas Nashe and Ben Jonson, offended the Privy Council. All the London theatres were closed down, every copy of the play was confiscated and destroyed, and Ben Jonson and two of the principal actors were jailed. References to the incident frequently appear in rival playwrights’ jibes against Jonson.¹⁹ A few lines later the Paris Garden/Swan Theatre allusions are reinforced when Slender brags to Anne that he has been with the famous bear Sackerson 20 times when the bear was loose, and that he also has led him about by his chain.²⁰ Then, as mentioned above in the “Little William” scene where he associates Parson Evans with Slender as the under schoolmaster who has “let the boyes leave to play,” Shakespeare puts the capstone on the identification of Parson Evans with Henry Evans and Slender with Ben Jonson, and cements it in place with the last scene where the parson directs the boys in the fairy masque and Slender has carried off the postmaster’s boy.

And a reexamination of lines peculiar to the *Folio* in the opening scene suggests that Shallow’s deer-poaching speech may *not* be an allusion to a supposed deer-poaching involving Shakespeare and Sir Thomas Lucy, but yet another allusion to Jonson.

Slender: All his successors (gone before him) hath done’t: and all his Ancestors (that come after

him) may: they may give the dozen white
Luces in their Coate.

Shallow: It is an olde Coate.

Evans: The dozen white louses do become an old
coat well (1.1.14-21).

Sir Thomas Lucy's Coat of Arms included three luces (pike fish), and the word "luces" delivered in a Welsh accent might sound like "louses." Samual Schoenbaum debunks the hoary tradition that the luce/louse lines are allusions to Sir Thomas Lucy, pointing out that there is no documentation about Shakespeare deer-poaching and no evidence of his ill-will towards the Lucy family. Schoenbaum observes: "If this is what the passage in the play is about, Shakespeare, a decade or more after the event, is taking an obscurely allusive revenge upon the county justice." Yet he also writes: "Still, the opening lines of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are clearly allusive." Leslie Hotson also suggests that the lines might be satirical allusions, but rejects Sir Thomas as Shakespeare's target. Hotson opines that if the lines were meant as an allusion, they referred to William Gardiner, a corrupt Justice of the Peace, whose Arms also included luces.²¹

Yet there is another allusion unconnected to Warwickshire politics that these lines may well have. Among many anecdotes about Ben Jonson is one in which an old cloak he had borrowed was returned to its owner full of lice. The comic Welsh dialect of Sir Hugh Evans turns Shallow's "luces," into a lousy "old Coat." Hence, the entire exchange of luces and louses may only be an in-joke about Jonson returning a lousy cloak.²² It is Slender, after all, that first brings up the topic of the luces and the coat (1.1.14-16).

The ending of *Merry Wives* in the *Folio* sets a different tone from the play's ending in the quarto. In the quarto, after Falstaff has been shamed by the boys dressed as fairies, Mistress Ford tells her husband to "Forgiue that sum [£ 20 that Falstaff had "borrowed"]." And Master Ford says to Falstaff, "Well here is my hand, all's forgiuen at last." In the

last speech of the play when he says, “All parties pleased, now let vs in to feast,” it seems implied that Falstaff is to be included in the party.²³ In the *Folio*, by contrast, there is a devastating catalogue of Falstaff’s iniquities. Master Ford demands repayment, saying “I think to repay that money will be a biting affliction,” and that every one will go to their homes “And laugh this sport o’er by a country fire...” Falstaff is invited to dine with Master Page, but the overall impression at the end of the play is that Falstaff is a broken man (5.5.135-71).

These differences may be explained by the consistency of the context. The *Folio* most likely is a revision of *Merry Wives* done after Kemp had left the Chamberlain’s Men. If, as seems plausible, Kemp played Falstaff, further appearances of the fat knight must be choked off. They are in *Henry V*. The epilogue of 2 *Henry IV* promises Falstaff’s death in *Henry V*, implying his presence. That promise is not met. Falstaff’s death is described in a short 41 lines (2.3.3-44). *Henry V* also kills off his entire circle of comedic characters (except for Pistol, essentially written out of further appearances). What this suggests is that the *Folio* version of *Merry Wives* and *Henry V* reflect a need to remove characters from the repertory whose presence depended upon an actor no longer with the troupe—much in the same way that, about the same time, Shakespeare’s clowns begin to sing, reflecting the addition of Robert Armin, noted for his abilities as a singer.

Thus the composition of the “Falstaff” plays reflects what I call the consistency of the context. They do not reflect textual consistency, but consistency with the contexts for which they were written. The probable ur-*Merry Wives* simply gathered characters made popular by 1 *Henry IV* into a situation designed for a one-time aristocratic gala. In turn the response of that audience may have led to the introduction of new characters for Falstaff’s circle in 2 *Henry IV*. The loss (or expulsion) of Will Kempe from the company may have necessitated killing off Falstaff in *Henry V*. The abandonment

of history plays after the fallout of the Essex episode may have necessitated the revision of the ur-*Merry Wives*, itself re-revised to be Shakespeare's version of a "City Comedy" for the "War of the Theatres." The consistency of the context pertains to performance, when audiences move from scene to scene without time to reflect upon what has come before, nor time to compare to what comes after. Consistency in that framework is only necessary within the individual play, perhaps only within individual scenes. Audiences would not have printed texts in hand. For them, and for the author and actors, the only consistency necessary was within the context of performance, and the context of the performances of 1 and 2 *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, and *Merry Wives* changed between 1594-98 and the new conditions and performance demands at the Globe in 1599-1603.

Notes

1. In-text citations are taken from William Shakespeare, *Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). For the several opinions as to the date of composition see Anne Barton, introduction to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in *Riverside Shakespeare*, 286-87. Recently Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich also suggests that the *Folio* version is a revision of the Quarto: see "Pageantry, Queens, and Housewives in the Two Texts of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 63 (2012): 328-54.

2. A.L. Rouse, *William Shakespeare: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 249-50; Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare* (New York: Random House, 2009), 238; Samuel Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 193-94; Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World* (New York: Norton, 2004), 308-09.

3. For William and Henry Brooke, see Julian Lock, "Brooke, William," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/61735> and Mark Nicholls, "Brooke, Henry," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/3543>. For the name change from Brook to Broome see *First Folio: The Merry Wives of Windsor*, accessed December 4, 2107, http://lf-oll.s3.amazonaws.com/titles/1113/03MerryWives_Bk.pdf, 60.

4. Barton, introduction, 287-88.
5. G. Blakemore Evans, "Shakespeare's Text," *Riverside Shakespeare*, 30.
6. James H. Forse, *Art Imitates Business* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1993), 209-25.
7. Terry P. Morris, "Shakespeare Hath Given Him a Purge that Made Him Bewray his Credit," *Shakespeare and Renaissance Association of West Virginia: Selected Papers* 15 (1992): 51-60.
8. Forse, *Art Imitates Business*, 191-204.
9. Forse, *Art Imitates Business*, 193, and "To Die or Not to Die, that is the Question: Borrowing and Adapting the King Lear Legend in the Anonymous *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* and *Shakespeare's King Lear*," *The Ben Jonson Journal* 21 (2014): 53-72.
10. William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Quarto I, 1602), *Internet Shakespeare Editions* (University of Victoria), accessed November 6, 2017, http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/Wiv_Q1/scene/Titlepage/, 31.
11. Forse, *Art Imitates Business*, 78-99.
12. Oliphant Smeaton, ed., *The Return from Parnassus, or the Scourge of Simony. Publicly Acted by the Students in St. Johns College in Cambridge* (London: G. Eld, 1606; repr. London: Dent and Co., 1905), 78.
13. Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1952), 90-119.
14. Morris, "Bewray," 51.
15. Thomas Dekker, *Satiromastix*, in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Fredson Bowers, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 324.
16. John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Andrew Clark, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), 12, 15.
17. William Drummond, *Ben Jonson's Conversations with William Drummond*, ed. R. F. Patterson (London: Norwood Editions, 1977), 54.
18. Drummond, *Conversations*, 23.
19. Forse, *Art Imitates Business*, 167-76.
20. See Elizabeth M. S. Baldwin, "'But where do they get the bears?' Animal Entertainments in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Cheshire," *Société Internationale pour l'Étude du Théâtre Médiévale*, (SITM Colloquium, 2001), accessed December 11, 2017, <http://sitm.info/history/Groningen/baldwin.htm>.
21. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare*, 106-08; Leslie Hotson, *Shakespeare Versus Shallow* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1937), 87.
22. Morris, "Bewray," 55-56.
23. *Merry Wives* (Quarto I, 1602), 31-32.